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Counter Clockwise Culture Shock

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COUNTER CLOCKWISE CULTURE SHOCK

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2013

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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ABSTRACT

Counter Clockwise Culture Shock is a memoir focused the narrator's return to his hometown, a place he barely escaped: drug addiction, incarceration, bad relationships, alienation, an Oedipal mother, and suicidal threats. It is reflection on both culture and self, after I gained an outside perspective from Japan. The narrator is forced to relive nihilism and monotony, and face the troubles of his younger years. It describes the difficult journey of today's youth, in an evermore technologically dynamic world—with few role models able to plot a course through. This is a meditation on past actions that ended in survival. Unlike most books dealing with cultural alienation, it focuses on a reinterpretation of my own culture. The main theme of the memoir is identity. The remnants of adventure, ingrained in the narrator's mind, contrast with a return to the déjà vu of a distorted hometown. Many of the stories cut across time and space to mimic the disorientation of the narrator. The clarity of these cultural distortions emerges when viewed through an outside lens. Not only does *Counter Clockwise Culture Shock* distill these distortions, it uses an Eastern perspective—and language—to better understand the flaws and strengths of indoctrinated cultures. An outside perspective of a different culture expands the narrator's former view of the world. Suicide and depression are destroying Western society, and this is an attempt to catalog stresses of Western culture and help people in similar circumstances.

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CHAPTER ONE: SOOTHSAYER

Old American cars rust because water drips from Japanese roof tiles. In war time, soldiers would bake green noodles on ceramic rooftops—they were sentinels and chefs. I imagine the noodles were better back then. Now, the noodles slurp sloppily—boiled in a bucket in a rustic Ramen shop. I am in a replica town, based on 1950's Japan.

The noodles remind me of the boiled arms of Korean prisoners of war—a rinse-and-repeat cycle of sizzling and freezing—until the skin and muscle becomes gelatinous, then slide off the bone.

The pork-belly squirms between my chopsticks. The machine-gun fire of foreign words hits me—I understand some—but by the time I internally translate, the conversation is two sentences ahead of my cognition. I ignore the words, then look out through the window.

A geezer with a burnt-orange scarf is selling trinkets on the side-street. I'm a foreigner with dreadlocks (I was tired of combing knots from my hair) in the southern island of Japan, so I'm singled out. The vendor says something quickly, but I know he is asking me where I'm from. I tell him that “I'm alright” in polite Japanese. People giggle. 1.5% of the population in Japan are foreigners, but there is only one misfit that looks like me.

Japanese kids are playing carnival games. Metal balls waterfall through wooden pegs. This game is called Pachinko. It's many adults' gambling addiction. Three boys fire toy guns at balloons and cheer when the rubber pops.

A gangly bald man with a silver beard speaks with my boss, a sturdy old lady. Her voice gets higher and quickens pace, but his is slow, measured—he sighs after every thought. She shows him her palm. The lines supposedly are roadways to past and future events. I'm skeptical of anyone who plants their flag in the future. My naivety was broken a long time ago: I grew up with hustlers—showmen that will steal your attention and dazzle you with pill-filled lies—people that will sell you prescriptions of

happiness. I'm not paying. I've never paid for a fortune telling, only for substances that increase the probability of ill fate—sick parties, then hypnotized hangovers. Every high has a low. I don't believe entirely in karma, but I think inklings of it are true.

Silver Beard knows my boss from childhood wartime, and knows how much she enjoys palm readings—so he offers to read for free. I'm still skeptical.

He leads us to a small room in the back of the shop where we circle around a wooden table, and since I'm a foreigner, I get the honor of going first. My boss translates in broken English. He asks about my birthday, tells me I am of the metal element, and born the year of the horse—something I ate raw a couple weeks earlier. I place both of my palms upright in front of him. The lines are pathways to nowhere, crop-circle fingerprints.

I hear gibberish from the soothsayer. He makes more sense than the English translation coming from my boss. She says some flattering things about me.

“You are stubborn, unmoving, persistence, strength, determination,” she says.

I think about late night infomercials with Ms. Cleo, a Voodoo witch-doctor who will tell you bullshit you want to hear. I wonder if my boss' translation tangles the connotations.

“You have a chance to become married soon, or another chance in five years,” she says.

This guy is a fake.

I am not interested in love or marriage. I can easily feed my need for sex online. I have many “friends” that I binge drink with, that supply my social interest. I immerse myself in media: literature, video games, and movies. I am twenty-six years old, and make a comfortable living in a foreign country. I don't need or want a partner.

I too am a soothsayer, but my premonitions don't come in the pathways on hands. They come in To-Go boxes, in songs that I know every note to, in traffic signals, in numbers, in vulnerabilities sprouting inevitability. I don't trust people that say they can predict the future. I don't trust myself.

Six years ago, my friend dug needles into my thigh and etched in an omen. It was a tattoo of god. Not some old man with a Santa Claus beard, it's not a flying spaghetti monster, not a shape-shifter with four arms, and definitely not an annoying pop idol. It's a Japanese video game character named Anima. It's a fanged mummy chained in bandages, a set of small arms choking itself, another pair in a straitjacket, a dangling rosary with the Virgin Mary. It carries a demon on its underbelly. I just thought it looked cool. Video games are the heart of my god. I took a class about video game culture as an undergrad, along with Renaissance English Literature and Law, and other pretentious classes. I learned more about famous philosophers and ideas in the video game class. It is the only artistic medium that combines video, audio, and some sort of control. The player can manipulate the art.

I learned in that class where the god-on-my-leg's name originated from. The term Anima comes from Carl Jung's subconscious archetypes. It is the pure manifestation of femininity.

Eve, Helen, Mary, Sophia.

Desire, Externality, Virtuosity, Wisdom.

I have ventured through the first three stages of the development of the Anima, but the need to grapple with the grand philosophical search for meaning was about the present itself.

I dated Eve in elementary school. She had freckles and glasses, and talked funny because she was from Georgia. We swung over the swing-set bar after school and kissed under the geodesic dome. She died the day I discovered my penis. It was in a biking accident, where she was airlifted to Holmes Regional Medical Center. Helen, I pursued through the ditches of my teenage years. She was the apple of my dick. When I caught her, I realized that things look fairer from far away. Mary was my friend, but our love ruined our friendship, then I fucked over our love. I would find wisdom later in Japan.

When I got the outline of my tattoo, the lymph nodes in my groin swelled, to the point I thought ink would burst through my skin. Strike my lymph nodes with a pin, and ink might spurt like oil. My body was yearning for me to yield attention. I prayed to the god-on-my-leg that it would not take me. I

went to the doctor, and they decided to give me an ultrasound. I thought they were only for pregnancies. Maybe my naive self died, The nurse who was working was British.

“Wee-wee in the cup for me, love.”

I pulled down my pants, pissed in a cup, and handed it back to her.

I had to disrobe a second time so she could rub cold goo on my balls. Thankfully the ultrasound results were benign. But the lymph nodes never shrank. The constant internal pressure is a reminder of my stupidity. Even after I feared for my health, I went back to my friend, and he needled sixteen more hours into the god-on-my-leg. My lymph nodes never stopped screaming.

I have the suspicion that anyone with a tattoo is not a virgin, or soon not to be. Anyone that can take a needle can take or give a dick. In some sense the tattooed are corrupted, marked, or cursed. Maybe my negative opinion and embarrassment about sex and tattoos come from my Judeo-Christian culture, something I don't subscribe to, but can't escape. Maybe I'm ashamed I can't control permanent aspects of myself. In Japan, people think that those with tattoos are yakusa. I have to hide it when I go into the hot springs, because everyone is naked. A lot of people ask why I got a tattoo. I wanted something I could admire when taking a dump. Maybe mine acquires greater meaning. Fate written not in the stars, but in my leg. Hopefully the god-on-my-leg's video game origin gives me some control of my fate. I don't *believe* in soothsayers, but *believe* is a tricky word.

The first definition of *believe* on Dictionary.com states: to accept (something) as true; feel sure of the truth of. The next definition says: to hold (something) as an opinion; think or suppose. The first definition is a definite answer, the second is a guess. The distinction matters a lot because people who are never certain are flaky. There's nothing worse than a lover who can't decide where to eat. But people who are certain can seem idiotically pompous, like a suicide bomber.

Although, there is a lot of power in being certain. To believe something with all of one's “soul” can have miraculous or dire consequences. Is a miracle's dependency on goodness based on the final

outcome or it's cumulative benefit? My psychology professor worked at a methadone clinic in North Philadelphia. Methadone is administered by the U.S. government to heroin addicts. It has mild psychoactive effects, but it mitigates qualms of addicts, so that they can quit shooting up. My professor had a patient that faithfully returned for his methadone each morning. Every month my psychologist administered less and less of the methadone. Enough time passed, and it had gotten to the point where the addict was waking up, bright and early, to receive a sugar pill. He was extorting himself, paying for security. My professor asked his superior why they didn't tell the man he was wasting his time. He was putting his faith into a Tic-Tac. His superior, a well experienced psychologist, advised against it. My professor, being a morally driven man, thought that the truth was more important than tricking a poor addict. The next day, he told him about the sugar pill. The addict relapsed right after. He believed in a false god and became sick after learning the truth. My previous best friend became slave to methadone. I was one pill away from a lifetime of government dependence.

Before I knew that I was healthy, I was too ashamed to go get my genitalia examined. I eventually decided to go see a physician, because I couldn't take thinking I was going to die every day. I got blackout drunk on whiskey, and cried myself to sleep. I was angry at myself because I had voluntarily cursed myself and resented existence for being ripe with decay. In Florida, my old Japanese Honda Civic rusted around the edges of its scars. I was guided to Japan and back to the United States by the final stage of my Anima. I was pursuing meaning.

CHAPTER TWO: LEGALLY OBLIGED

The last thing I didn't remember was I held Ryan in a chokehold in his living room at 3:00 a.m. His house hadn't been remodeled since his grandma died and left it to him, about ten years ago. Rococo ceramics shined in front of the band posters. I woke in my bed, a refuge I didn't usually end up in, after a long night of drinking. I checked my pockets to see if I had the holy trinity: my wallet, keys, and cellphone. If I found all three, I could consider it a good night. No cellphone.

I called Ryan from my house phone. He said he had my phone, but he needed to work, so he left it at my friend Matt's house.

"You don't remember what happened last night?"

"..."

"Pathetic." The dial-tone flat-lined. I had hurt my friend. I almost cried. I was still drunk.

I called Matt from my house phone. He likes strippers and gambling. I drove to his house.

He answered his door in mauve boxer briefs, pizza sauce crusted on the edge of his mouth. I grabbed my cold, dead phone from his hands as I barged into his house and then into the kitchen, where the perpetrators of the previous night's destruction lay on the table—pizza rolls and a big, nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels. I inhaled and smelled last night's Freudian slips made by drunken alter-egos, not canon but having utmost honesty—burping things up like "Stop saying you fucked my sister!" We had horse played—then head, shoulders, knees, and toes into the antique wallpaper. Dust nebulae and picture frames collapsed into the cowlicked carpet.

Matt improvised a country song about all the women that leave the friend that I choked. "She rode off in that Beamer, off into the horizon and another one came on riding, right into my life." Every girl that he becomes romantically tangled with drives a BMW. There's a second verse to that song but it's more stupid. *Stupider* than the first verse. So dumb that I forgot it. My friend, who likes gambling

and strippers, was an idiot savant.

I gagged a little. I asked him for his lucky gold coin—an arcade token with some weight. Heads, a picture of a cowboy—strip club. Tails, an indie race car—sleep.

He flipped his lucky coin, and it landed on tails. The coin was sacred and I disobeyed it. We said our piece, “See you tomorrow,” swigged our poison, neglecting our bodies and abandoning them to a little known neighbor, like a pet owner on vacation. I had disobeyed fate, so it drove me into drunkenness.

First, I drove to Squidlips. I knew a bartender there, and she gave us eight shots of tequila for a small bill, but a large tip. I drove back to his house and took more swigs from the bottle that fucked me over the night before. I decided that we should go to the strip club because I knew Matt just wanted to sleep. I exploited his weakness so he'd still hang out with me. It still took some coercing.

I drove us to Cocoa Beach, but the strip clubs were not open yet. So we went to Coconuts, a trashy college beach bar. I ordered a Miami Vice, as we waited for the other clubs' doors to open. I drove a few blocks over. We made it to the strip club before noon.

The strip club was ethereal. The musk of vomit in an opal aura of spinning angels spread on their poles in black diamond stockings, sweeps of golden hair slicing through the 305 cigarette smoke. Silhouettes spun to the French horns of trap songs, beyond the heavenly gates of the bruised door, the gladiator-like bouncers throw sinners through when some drunk asshole can't pay, or literally can't hold his liquor. One of those previously mentioned sinners was next to me, drunk on dreams of getting laid. The slim limbs are sexy appendages of his God. A G-string guillotine attempted to decapitate him. I slapped him on the back and he turned to me, slug-eyed, with a smug smile—a smile made of childlike, genuine happiness that can only be achieved by receiving a puppy on Christmas at eleven years old or, apparently, Angel clapping her ass like a Bible. I got up to pee but there was a full bar and I hovered to it while a handsome bartender asked, “What'll be?”

“Whiskey.”

DO NOT PASS GO. DO NOT COLLECT \$200.

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Part 3

Item 4.b.

Name: Matthew Mercer

I was arrested for DUI on Sunday February 16, 2014. Apparently, I drove up to a cop car and asked for directions. They had no idea how lost I was. At my disposition, I was charged with Reckless Driving When Reduced From DUI on February 13, 2015. Perhaps I was heartbroken from Valentine's Day weekend. I was sentenced to 50 hours of community service, \$500.00 in fines and one year of probation. My probation was terminated early on August 11, 2015, because I completed my community service, paid my dues, and passed all my drug tests.

My incarceration led to a stall in my indoctrination. My acceptance to grad school was halted. I went across an ocean to start with a clean record. I don't trust my government. I don't trust any government—not because they arrested me, but because of how I was treated in jail.

As people were leaving church on Sunday afternoon, I entered hell. I was handcuffed, sitting in a room with an attractive psychologist. Hell, some might call it heaven. It depends if one is into S&M. All I could think to muster up as a pickup line was “I’m going to kill myself.” It must have nerves. In the awkward silence, I closed with “Do you believe in God?” not because I'm traditionally religious, but for dramatic effect. Nerves, always fucking up a first date. She was into me, she was concerned at least.

“I know what you have to do now,” I said. It was a cheesy porn-esque kind of setting—a cheap scene from an old VHS, marred with fast-forwards and stuttering silence.

“The fact that you said that makes all the difference.” She dipped her razor-blade thin glasses to evaluate me.

“You have to put me in one of those padded rooms, all alone.”

“Honey, I don’t think you understand.”

I stripped naked in front of a couple of nameless guys in cop uniforms and put on a “turtle suit,” which couldn’t be a better way to describe the Velcro hellhole, my new home until my mommy bailed me out. They marched me along, my gawky Moses-looking ass (all barefoot), a long white cinderblock corridor, and at the end an officer with a bulldog chest and a Texan accent (sunglasses inside type) with a handlebar mustache helped me cover my junk, before I entered the main stage. He announced, “Look what I still have to deal with. Gotta see a grown man’s jewels today.”

I was unamused.

I entered my cell, full of turtle-shelled men. I imagined them as low-life, criminal scum, either in here on a failed Ponzi scheme to acquire some alone time—or actually suicidal. I projected myself onto them. They seemed relatively normal. I didn’t care to talk because I couldn’t trust a guy in a turtle suit. I couldn’t trust myself. I was just an animal, someone or something’s pet. I slept on a cold stone floor, in a limbo of drunken stupor and primal alertness. There was a fountain in the corner that stank of sulfur, but a turtle’s got to drink. I felt like I had salmonella. I hoped my owner didn’t forget about me. My God took a vacation.

A year later, my probation officer said I could go on a cruise. Ryan and I had made up from the choking incident quickly. Physical confrontation only made us closer, and he asked me to go on a cruise with Matt and him. No random drug tests for a week.

I was lounging under a solarium in a hot tub on the biggest cruise boat in the world. The atmosphere was of southern accents and fruity cocktails, shrimp buffets, and Jimmy Buffet anthems. A half-tan, half-burnt woman with a full sleeve of wave tattoos and burnt-orange sunglasses—the same color as her Coppertone shine—sat diagonally from me in the large bubbly soup. I don’t trust people in big sunglasses. Can’t see their eyes. She was just a faceless body to me, one of nearly two thousand

bodies (oddly mostly North Carolinians) that I saw throughout the day. (Earlier, I saw a wife shaving her alleged husband's back on their balcony, and a guy whom I couldn't tell was a man or a boy—so I paid as much mind to her a grain of salt in a weeklong margarita.)

I was sickly sober, so Ryan prescribed to me the alcohol package. More specifically the Premium Package, a deal with unlimited access to all exotic beers and top-shelf liquors—the PP for short, as indicated on my room key. I was paranoid. I had visions of my probation officer sitting at the bar, undercover, in a lei.

“Yo, if we get the PP package we don't have to wake up hungover, look up what we spent last night, and be like... ahh fuck.” He had the charisma and logic of a wacky radio host. He could con me into fun, idiotic things—like strangling him.

I'm not an alcoholic, because I can't stand alcohol. I'm a binge drinker because I love the feeling of forgetting, the surge of euphoria when I feel like pure destructive energy. Binging is quicker than slowly killing yourself. A big bang.

Around 10:00 p.m., Ryan busted into the room. “Yo, what are you doing sitting in the room? Matt won a thousand dollars in Texas Holdem, and I'm literally paying four dollars for a little pink lighter. That's how bad I need a cigarette,” he said to me, and handed money to some girl with an Australian accent.

“Check it out. I met a girl from Melbourne.”

“Yeah, but sorry boys, not Florida. The real one.”

Her appearance was forgettable because the next day we drank big bottles of Chimay next to the piano bar where a long-haired, Filipino pianist was entertaining enough to draw our interest from the Irish bar's exotic beer options—with brews I had never heard of, chiseled men rowing in its crown molding, and a five-string guitarist whose jazzy whammy-bar squeals moved me to slam shots of Crown Royal. I went to the side bar to grab a couple of glasses for the beer, next to the hydraulic

elevator bar (there were a lot of bars), and a girl stopped me.

“Hey, you’re from Melbourne.” It was the tattooed woman from the solarium.

“Yeah, Florida not Australia,” I said, reflecting what the pink lighter girl said the night before.

“Never been there.”

“Surf is better in Australia, from what I see in magazines.”

We took shots of shitty whiskey, and she’d insisted we do some awkward handshake with her and her “mates.”

“How’d you know I was from Melbourne?”

She pointed and giggled as her friend raised her hand timidly.

“You’re weird friend bought a little pink lighter from her last night.” I knew I’d forget her.

We chatted for a bit, then I sat with Ryan and listened to old people ruin Billy Joel. She and her friends disappeared into the ship’s chandelier-like shine, tipsily swaying in white caps on the black sea.

The next day, I drank Coca Cola out of glass bottles and ate at a hotdog buffet, on a carousel, in a suit, on the biggest cruise ship in the middle of the ocean. Marinate that in Bud Light for 30 minutes and that’s the American dream.

We drank at the casino next to a velvet-suited man. I never tried my hand. I was too in character, hitting on foreign girls at the casino bar, acting like I was interested in fútbol, and running cigarettes just to flame the conversation.

We went to the club later, and she danced salsa like a tongue licks salsa off a chimichanga. She led because I hadn’t a clue what I was doing. Always in waves, a song played then we yelled to each other, in a fire of foreign accents.

Halfway through, some prick thought it’d be funny to steal a dance from me—he was a better dancer (at salsa) and I was euphoric, standing there smirking, smoking, sweaty like after sex.

“He’s my brother!”

“I figured something like that.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Why would I?”

After the music, we moved to the top deck where her brother spoke broken (yet somehow still suave) English. “Guess how old I am.”

“Eh... Treinta.”

“She tells him my age.”

I was twenty-five and she was one year older, which he teased her about. She was embarrassed so went to get some more of her mom’s Chilean cigarettes from her room, then swayed to the solarium to sit on beach chairs in the moonlight. She was a mongoose. Her viper eyebrows arched over honey hazels, cousins to baby blues. A black waterfall of hair dripped behind diamonds, above soft cheekbones. Her loveliness evoked insecurities which regurgitated in drunken formation.

“I’m afraid I’m going bald. Look at this hairline. There’s a freckle on my nipple,” I said. She sulked in existential angst, something about her brother being trapped in Venezuela. I wanted to confess to her my deepest and darkest fabrications.

Her family was part of the Chilean government. She was a visual artist, and her grandfather was a famous architect. At least that’s who she painted herself as. I kissed her and she pulled back.

“Why do guys want to kiss every girl they see?”

I laughed and said “I don’t.”

I think she meant fuck instead of kiss because she said, “I’m sorry. That was rude.” And we made-out until sunset. She tasted like almonds. I slept until 12:00 p.m. the next day.

I saw her brother on a staircase, but we just exchanged smirks. I can’t remember her name. It’s more romantic that way. She was intoxicating, romantic, and profoundly meaningless. Just like my other binges. My biggest fear was that my relationships were false. They were because I lied every

chance I got. My fears weren't yet as great as my insecurities.

I wobbled my way on deck, and the daylight made me sneeze. I vomited into my black sneaker, hypersensitive to my surroundings, so bright. There was a live steel drum band blasting Caribbean love songs into the abyss of the dark-blue sea. I looked up to see bronze skin and blonde body hair. A man, scanning a newspaper in a lounge chair next to the pool, lowered his paper.

“Sea sickness?”

“Yeah,” and I walked away. I was so dehydrated, lungs dry from smoking, that I could barely see. On the boat, there was a current of bodies pushing and swaying in the pursuit of relaxation. I was looking for a toilet to hold a flush funeral for my puke when I heard a voice.

“Aye, mate.”

“How’s it going?” I hung the shoe behind me on a finger. I couldn’t tell if the boat was swaying, the earth was shaking, or if I was just breathing heavily. Even in life-threatening hangovers, I never forget my manners—*please* and *thank you* mantras and *bless you* after she sneezed. So unnecessary, so annoying, so fake.

“Wanna take a shot?” she asked with enthusiastic eyes.

I shook my head no and told her, “I’m legally obliged.” It was the last day of the cruise, and I soon could be called for a random drug test.

Back in Melbourne, in cold, sober reality, another car grated against mine. Our engines growled, and smashed my cataract headlight out. My car fish-tailed at 4:00 a.m. I was heading to work, the only place I was legally allowed to drive. The radio's jazz music tweeted. The fair moon kept me awake, with misty air. My windows were hazy with morning dew and clouded light on the river dunes. Little yellow flowers speckled before sunrise. As I lost control, the road was wasted, pissing drunk, winding, as I snake-danced with the other car. The road reflectors appeared to steam in one continuous light at a high velocity. I gripped on the steering wheel. The only emotion I feel in the morning is hate

and then this happened.

He slammed into my door again. Metal shrieked. I gained lucidity, and I recited his license plate number like a prayer, my blood cycling and pumping like the pistons of my car. My car seats were sea-stained stale like salty crackers, but my body seeps deep into them. My engine crackled. Time was non-existent, as I revved my pedal to catch him. This had to be some drunk fucker. I stuck behind him, hauling ass as I thumb fumbled my phone, trying to get a notepad to record his plate. Love-bugs spat against the windshield.

I finally cornered the drunk fucker on the side of the road at a closed seafood restaurant, only a couple of minutes down the road since our early morning scuffle. It seemed like a lifetime. The black abyss that was US-1 at 4:13 a.m. One lone spotlight and a whirl of dirt in the back parking lot highlighted our cars, pinned up, pissed-off raccoons, rabid with intent to fight over crumpled cars. Animals without owners.

I didn't know if I could call 911. Had I ever called 911? I was never going back, especially still on probation. Half the license number ran through my head, I'd lost the other half in adrenaline.

Behind the black tint of his or her windshield, the drunk fucker was so close, but only a formless horror, a dark reflection of myself. I don't know its gender and have been struggling to find an appropriate pronoun. In the moment, I wanted him or her to burn in hell—to be locked in a cage like I was. I didn't even hit anyone with my car.

The car crept slowly and flickered its high beams. The receptionist answered immediately.

“Is this a good reason to call 911?”

“What's the emergency, sir?”

I explained, as the car drove off.

My window squeaked down. The sun hung at half mast. Three Brevard County sheriffs loomed,

in forest green uniforms and shiny gold badges. They said they caught the drunk person that hit me by the bits of his license plate number I had recycled in my head. I gave them my license and prayed they wouldn't say anything about my probation.

“Where exactly did they hit your car, sir?”

I asked for permission to exit and did. It smelled like humid sea breeze and musty swamp mud. Gnats buzzed in the high grass. There was a gash above the rear wheel but that one was old, one made from an unlucky coin toss. The new dent was less severe than the previous and a little farther back. It gave me something to compare the old one to, like a veteran comparing battle scars at a bar. I asked if I may, but he had already left without me—no overtime that week. The cops gave me the driver's information and insurance. I scratched it in a rhinestone Hello Kitty notepad.

Even when sober, I never forgot my manners—the *yes, sirs* and *no, sirs*—words with no meaning but an agenda to sedate and seduce the recipient's ego into a false sense of security.

An officer told me to, “Have a nice day” and I told him, “The pleasure was all mine,” (something a rapist would say) and drove home, hyper-vigilant to other drivers. From the late businessman, to the creeping old people—everyone was considered a threat. I arrived in my backyard, released the door, and thawed in the sun's warmth. Out of the chassis of my car, I tossed the notebook in the outside trash can.

I was chained to my house for a year and a half, to an archipelago of work and home. I couldn't drive, unless it was to work—and in wide Florida, that means I was basically on house arrest. I was sober that whole time, except for the week on that beautiful Oasis of the Seas. I got off probation for good behavior, and moved across the planet to flee from my trashcan peninsula.

CHAPTER THREE: WON MAN ROUND TRIP

When I was first offered the chance to go to Korea, I was jetlagged, bloated from eating fast food and candy—that I had hoarded on the plane to Japan—and had no friends. No, this wasn't the beginning of an oddly seductive infomercial, one can't help but watching at 3 a.m. instead of the much more important sleep that should be taking place. These were the conditions in which I chose to go to Busan, Korea, with my boss after just arriving in Japan. Granted, the actual trip didn't set sail for two weeks, but I made the decision hastily. These kinds of decisions often turn out to be either breathtaking or hellish. My experience was limbo.

I showed up at the seaport in Shimonoseki, Japan, at exactly 6:31 p.m. to find I was left behind for being a minute late. I waited for ten minutes and then realized I was tardy because Japanese people “always prompt.” So I tried my luck communicating with charades and broken Japanese to the ticket-master, and she handed me a pass. I shortly found my boss waiting behind customs with a big grin, and I got a pat on the head for being tardy.

We boarded the ship which reminded me of SS Anne from Pokémon Red/Blue, because I tend to put everything in Japan in the context of Japanese role-playing games. I escaped prison into a virtual utopia. Many Korean and Japanese people were boarding. I sat down to eat a Korean dinner with my friendly boss, her middle-aged daughter, and the two fun and lovable elementary-aged children. The food was very spicy. My hosts thought the kimchi was spicy, but it was bearable. They served pork with jalapeno peppers that were a bit too eye-watering if you didn't take a break every once in a while.

I felt dirty from scurrying around to find the port, so I decided to take a public bath. I walked into the locker room and took off my clothes around a couple of old guys, already butt naked. After checking nearly every full locker I found an empty one. The showering room was sardine packed with nude, middle-aged Japanese men with black forests of pubic hair. I had to wait for an open bucket to sit

on so I rinsed off and sat in one of the two giant tubs. At that point, I had to act like my attention was focused on myself, while watching nude men for cues on appropriate technique and etiquette of public bathing in Japan. I saw an opportunity to shower, and as I got up I remembered that I have a huge tattoo on my thigh—so I tried to cover it the rest of the time while showering. As a foreigner, the experience was agonizing and awkward, but at least I became so fresh and so clean.

After the shower, I went to a room full of strangers and slept on a stiff futon and a brick pillow. The lights didn't turn off until eleven, and late into the night, drunk businessmen yelled outside of the room, while cigarette smoke crept in. I couldn't rest so I took upon myself my binge-drinking motto—if you can't count sheep, pound drinks. I got up, bought a few beers, and watched a one-man jazz act on his guitar, and then I sat in the lobby until I was buzzed enough to pass out semi-comfortably on a sofa.

I woke up in the lobby to my cellphone's alarm, set for 6:00 a.m. We ate a brief breakfast, I brushed my teeth, and we went through light security. I exchanged some dollars for Korean won, and I felt like a baller because of the four extra zeros tailed to my bills.

We had signed up for a tour, in Japanese of course. I usually dislike tours, but the fact that I couldn't understand 95% of what the tour guide was saying made it enjoyable. The tour guide's soft voice made my skin tingle. Japanese folk and a gawky gajin headed to Busan Tower. The tower itself wasn't very tall, but it stood on a mountain, and the view was gorgeous. It spanned the mosaic of the city, melding mountains, buildings, and the sea. There was a giant's drum that they bang around sixty times for New Year's, a stone dragon statue, and a fence that surrounds the tower—decorated with locks that people had written love notes on.

After that, we headed to the most logical place to be at 10:00 a.m., a casino. Most of the Japanese people played roulette, but I tried my hand at poker and lost four thousand yen in five minutes. They gave away free samples of soju (Korean alcohol) so I took a couple, and then put my remaining six thousand yen on black at the roulette table. I came out two thousand yen ahead, which

impressed my Japanese companions.

We left the casino and did some duty-free shopping (I still giggle at that and I'm twenty-five) in the subway area in Busan. I bought a silly hat with a Tyrannosaurus Rex on it for five hundred yen, while my boss's daughter was putting foul-mouthed hats on her child. The hats were decorated with things like "69" on them, "Pervert," and the notorious "F" word. We bought some delicious pastries in artsy designs of birds and seashells.

I explored the main shopping area and passed many electronics stores. My companions waited in line for spicy rice cakes at a street vendor's cart. And I had to pee. I went inside the nearest restaurant and used the bathroom. I was unsure of the etiquette in Korea pertaining the use of bathrooms, and I didn't want to be rude, so I grabbed a Coke from a refrigerator and tried to pay for it. The only word I knew how was say "thank you" in Korean, so I pulled out some cash. This is usually a language everyone speaks. When I got to the counter, the woman behind it started yelling at me. I didn't understand what she said, but I felt overwhelming happiness. It felt like I was back in the U.S. In Japan, people were painfully polite. I could never tell if they were sincere. This woman's wrinkled face was angry, but it was real. I put down the Coke and she followed me, screaming at me until I entered the street. I said the only Korean word I knew. "Kamsahamnida."

I asked my Japanese friends why she yelled at me, but they didn't know either. Then we ate at a traditional Korean barbecue restaurant. Most of my Japanese companions gave their kimchi to me because they couldn't handle the heat. I learned that Koreans use metal chopsticks and sit with one knee up while eating. The fried pork we had was delicious, wrapped in lettuce and stuffed with onions and sauces.

We got lost in Shinsegae Centum City, a huge shopping mall. The name means "new world" in Korean. It has fourteen stories and two basement floors which include an ice skating rink, a giant fountain that is synchronized to music, and an array of Italian artwork. I wandered this beast by myself.

I explored it for three hours, and I don't think that I saw half of it. It is the world's biggest department store, which toppled New York City's Macy's for the title. If you like to shop in disarray then this is your place.

After a long day of shopping and eating, we returned to the ferry to set sail for Japan. The stay in Korea was short-lived, but the journey was well worth it if not just for the view of Gwangan Bridge at night. The ferry went under this rainbow-lit bridge, and the view was extravagant. The majority of the pictures I took were different angles of this bridge, with the city electrified in the darkness. It was a tranquil ending to a trip that was manic and hastily decided upon. My boss's daughter let her kids stay up late, and we ate ice cream from a vending machine.

CHAPTER FOUR: HAND GRENADE

Amerika-jin

In Japan, they have swastikas on their maps and some of their street signs. Teenagers regularly end their texts with this symbol. This was unnerving to me as a person whose huge nose is so Jewish and eyes so dark and beady that I'd be the first in the fire of a neo-Nazi revolution. Thankfully, this version of a swastika the Buddhists have been using for centuries—before Hitler hijacked it.

I thought remnants of fascist Japan had been vaporized with the nuclear mushrooms and Geneva Convention, but the remnants of nationalist Japan still ride around in black vans. I was in Kokura, Japan, one of the targets for the nuclear bombs before it was replaced by Nagasaki. I was in the dead middle of the distance between Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I was between endless paper cranes that represent dead children and atop the buried skeletons of radiation victims.

Black Van

My sixty-something-year-old, feisty Japanese boss, her friend, and her son gasped at the black van that had various Chinese characters on it. But these are now Japanese symbols. They blast ideological rants from a megaphone.

“Who is that?” I asked, thinking it was a pop star by their reaction.

“Eeetttooo....” The son was trying to explain politics in another language so he needed a pause to collect his thoughts. “They are a group that fights with the government.”

“So like yakusa?” Yakusa are mafia syndicates, and I am in Kokura, a city with the most yakusa members in Japan.

“Eeeetoooo. Like yakusa, kana.” He was trying to explain neo-nationalism, and realizing connections between Japanese skinheads and the mafia. I was very confused about who they were at the time. Were they striving to preserve their race , their culture, or both?

Mara

I went to a Buddhist temple's junior-high play and understood nearly nothing of what happened. The costumes were very impressive and they constructed a vibrant set. A cute little boy with an attitude problem was shouting to a calm boy. I learned later that cute little boy was a demon that tried to persuade Buddha to have sex with his daughters. After the play, I played Rock-Paper-Scissors with costume-draped students behind the school and then asked what was behind there. And they asked another for the English word and she said “ancestors.” Gravestones hung on the hill.

500,000 Yen

I dropped nearly five hundred dollars in Japanese cash as I was leaving an appetizers and alcohol place. “Excuse me!” I heard in Japanese. And a square looking man handed me the money. He walked away while bowing every few seconds toward us, as I did the same toward him. This was something worth preserving.

Hand-job Shop

On my way to the train station, I took a shortcut down a street with fluffy and feminine bars and pop music permeating, but only men entered. This was a whorehouse? I thought whorehouses would be

more intimidating. I poked my head around the window, and a man gave me an angry look from inside. It looked more like an ice cream parlor. Cute little outlines of bunnies and hearts were on the main sign. What kind of poor helpless squirms would come here to escape meaningless and sexless existences? If they were this desperate to enter this sexual Disneyland, how desperate would they be without it?

Silver Beads

Business in Japan is often very serious. Salarymen wear the same old suits. Companies usually force their employees to strict hours and dogmatic obedience. My Japanese friend told me a story about two businessmen who moved to Tokyo together who played pachinko, gambled together every day and then went drinking and then worked together. They both had wives and children but developed a romantic connection because they became so close. They weren't the type to need the fairy-tale jerk-off shop.

Gajin

The biggest places in any urban outskirts are the gambling super centers where the masses of businessmen go and drink, hoping they would win big before they kill themselves, thousands of kilometers between them and their families. I was often disappointed by seeing a sign saying “amusement park” only to discover it to be another damn casino, instead of Disney World. Nearly all of them are run as war reparations for the terrible sex Japanese soldiers had with Korean war prisoners. This is comparable to Native Americans being able to have casinos on reservations. The rest are owned by yakuza.

Hand Grenade

Another time I was driving with my Japanese boss and her entourage. There was a picture of a general from World War II. I asked who he was.

“He was a true samurai.” They all agreed.

They told me had committed the suicidal ritual of seppuku with a hand-grenade.

Cute

Summer in Japan was as hot and humid as Florida, and many Japanese people wore undershirts. Older women wore big hats and carried sun umbrellas. I was playing Pokémon Go near Kokura Castle, wasting time, and waiting for my friends to finish buying dresses. It smelled like pollen. By the river, a stage was set up with ribbons, lights, and rows of men. I was curious to see what these grown men were ogling over. On the stage was a group of teenage girls in short skirts singing and dancing. I have to admit, the pop music was pretty catchy, but I doubt the music was the flower to which these insects were attracted. There was one man dancing and praying on his knees to the stage. The idea of these loitas brought him to worship. I liked teaching in Japan because male teachers don't have the sexual predator stigma that lingers in the U.S. But that man's conviction, in particular, made me want a stigma. In a culture notorious for its shame, he bore none.

Tree Buddha

My boss drove her hybrid Honda horribly. I don't want to emphasize stereotypes, but I think it's comical in the rare cases when one actually plays out. She was old, Asian, and a woman, but she was

really the worst driver I've ever ridden with. My boss didn't write the stereotypes, but she was surely perpetuating them. She mashed her brakes every time a glint of light hit her retina. She would pump her brakes like she was trying to kick-start a motorcycle. For the record, her son and daughter could drift a van down a sketchy mountain pass with Zen-like control. Maybe this stereotype has some truth to it because she is old, and one's brain tends to slow down towards the end of life. And maybe this stereotype contains some truth because on average, women are more interested in people than gadgets. The Asian stereotype, that states they aren't good at driving, was probably perpetuated because of many Asian tourist that don't know the driving rules in the U.S., not to mention the confusion driving on the opposite side of the road presents. I probably perpetuated some Korean stereotype about Americans being stupid when it comes to bathroom etiquette. A swastika marked the spot on her car's GPS.

On the way back from a meeting, as she erratically braked, she told me that Buddha had grown in a tree at a nearby shrine. And I was confused.

She said she saw on the news that the tree had grown a Buddha figure on it. She was very excited about it, so I agreed to go on our break. I was skeptical, but I thought that a figure that grew naturally from a tree would be artistically satisfying, regardless of the spiritual story associated with it. If something is pretty, I don't care about how it came to be. My boss told me that the monks preserved the figure, and I admired that a culture would preserve natural beauty. We traveled uphill, which eased the spasms of the brakes, until we settled at a small shrine. She squabbled with herself about which tree it was and finally asked a monk. He pointed us to the tree in front of us, a bushy Japanese maple. There was a hole in the tree and a tiny, handmade figurine of Buddha. We were both disappointed. What motivated her to drive up a mountain? The physical object was so underwhelming. I started to catalog which peaks planned my pilgrimages.

CHAPTER FIVE: JUICE

I had no internet, no WiFi, no juice. I went to Japanese class on a Monday night early, because I knew I was going to get lost. My compass was gone. I had a phone but no plan, and no contract yet. It had only been a month since I landed in Japan. I managed to travel by train from my apartment to my government-issued Japanese class, held in the city's tower, Kaikyo Messe. Its tall bulb was visible from nearly all of Shimonoseki, so even I couldn't get lost. I exited onto the train platform and there was the old, brick British embassy.

After a thirty-minute walk, I arrived at the tower. It loomed taller and more ominous as I approached. I took the elevator, hit floor seven, and repeatedly smashed the close-door button. I was told it was noble to close elevator door as fast as possible, possibly to save people's time, but I had suspicion that it had more to do with insecurity. This is a chance to make connections, but I was off to a nervous start. I didn't want to live there alone, even though I was comfortable being a hermit—comfortable seemed like a death sentence. I took the difficult Japanese language placement test and didn't speak to anyone.

I didn't know if there were any Americans. I didn't think this would matter, but I was hungry for some familiarity. It was the first time my oneness, as a foreigner, had really stood out. Of course, I would be a foreigner to Japanese people, but I never hypothesized that I would be a foreigner amongst foreigners. People were speaking unknown languages in small cliques. I didn't even make an attempt to communicate. I was trying to look cool, and maybe arrogantly thought I was, but I was retrospectively just overwhelmed and shy. I learned later that there were two main groups, the Chinese and Vietnamese. The obvious, but shallow, connection was that they segregated by skin tone. But a third group was established, native English speakers.

The teachers spoke all in Japanese, which was needed, but I was clueless. We introduced

ourselves, but it was toward the entire class, and I was so nervous that I didn't listen to anything anyone said before or after me. "Good day. What's your name? Where are you from?" We had to answer these questions in Japanese. I blacked out. Who knows if what I said was understandable? Many Japanese people wear clothes with English words. The meaning is irrelevant. The look is more important.

I left the room dazed and disappointed. I wanted to learn Japanese, but what I really wanted was friends. I compacted into a herd of people speaking English as we jammed into a talking elevator that I couldn't understand. A girl introduced herself. Her name was Unimportant.

"Where are you from?" My question was quick and inevitable.

"Florida," she said like a patch of honor. I said that, too, until people started to ask where Florida was, but this time I answered.

"Me too. Which city?" Florida is a common place to live. That was strange, but not enough to jolt my enthusiasm.

"Melbourne."

"That's where I'm from."

"You're lying."

I and the native English speakers ate dumplings at a little bar that served hot appetizers, boiled radish, and various hot seafood. I ate everything, but was still hungry, so I drank beer. It got late and I added all my new friends on my new Facebook account, and felt new, and lovely, and corny, and it had been so long since I talked to people who spoke native English that it felt like someone was playing a prank. Soon they would all act as if they never knew me.

Wrong. I invited myself to their cookout on Saturday night. I texted a guy from London that I had met at the bar and asked if it was all right if I came. He said that they could "always squeeze more people in, but bring a blanket." He lived in a place that was more rural than my Japanese suburbs. I had worked my excitement up for days, through a rather mundane school week. When I got off at 6:00 p.m.

on Saturday evening, I rushed to the grocery store and bought leftover sushi for lunch and eight tall-boys of Sapporo Black.

I went home and gobbled all the food and drank half the beer, as I planned the trip by taking screenshots of Google Earth from my apartment.

I packed the rest of the beer in my backpack with a blanket. and ran to the train stop near my dingy apartment.

Three trains came, and wasn't sure I'd gotten on the right one. I hopped off one and onto another, and I asked a girl in sketchy Japanese if this was the right train and she assured me, so I cracked another beer. The train ride was exhausting because I had to pay attention to everything, and the symbols made less sense with every sip. It was getting dark. I didn't know how late the trains stayed running, especially in the countryside. I questioned whether I should turn back, but I was stubborn and satisfied just drinking in public and on the train. Truthfully, I wouldn't have been able to make it back. I was disoriented.

I finally arrived in Me-Nay. I asked an old lady which way was north and she ignored me, then sped away. The sun went down. I searched the pictures in my phone and lingered down the train tracks. I crossed a dusty high-school campus when it started drizzling. My backpack dampened and I thought about my thin, cold, wet blanket hugging me in the dirt. The moon was covered in clouds. I about gave up and slept against a pine tree.

I trudged because I was running out of beer and because of the slim possibility of finding friends that I'd only met once. The weather was humid, sticky like Florida. I cracked one more beer and hiked through the woods, down a little path that led to a lonely highway. It started to mist. Raindrops sliced by pine needles.

My phone's battery drained as I tried to navigate myself with the satellite pictures I had taken earlier, with my apartment's WiFi. My phone's flashlight, the holy relic blinding while illuminating dirt

road during night storm bled the battery even more. Dark muck clumped onto my boots.

I arrived at an abandoned roadway. I walked along fields, a few factories, and curved past a bend to a flooded rice farm. A person in a sweatshirt rode by on a bike, struggling against the winds of the storm. The rain mocked us. I passed without saying anything, but desperation compelled me to yell “excuse me” in Japanese, and he halted. He examined the pictures I was using to navigate. He dismounted his bicycle and walked me around the bend. It was an awkward walk. I tried to converse a little, but we both soon realized it was easier not to talk, and when he showed me to the neighborhood, I asked him if he liked beer and gave him one and an apple. I hope he was of age.

The neighborhood was a labyrinth and I wandered the streets, drunk, and trying to locate an address that Google Maps had rounded like a math equation when I entered English characters. A lady walking by insisted that I take her umbrella. Umbrellas were useless in Florida, unless one's goal was suicide by lightning. I preferred a long, painful death. I had seen a tree explode from being hit from a lighting bolt so—*no thank you, lady*—was my first thought.

I made it to the apartment buildings, where I assumed that the single, poor, foreigners would live, and had to walk through four buildings before my morale faded. I had made it that far and still would have to sleep outside. I wanted an adventure, and I was about to get it, I thought, until I heard a bunch of loud voices in the dark from a distance away.

There were people cleaning up their potluck, and I was quickly introduced to ten people and they offered me food and guilt-tripped me with the fact that it would end up in the garbage if I said no. I ate everything offered. I went inside and played Mario Kart for the first time and got first place. They were impressed and thought I was lying about never having played. My life was a video game. I slept in the corner cramped in the comfort of welcoming strangers. My body was disconnected from my consciousness, in a beer- and serotonin-induced third-person perspective.

I woke up early and slightly hungover. I saw the Londoner, who owned the house, cleaning up.

He said he was going to go for a ride. I told him that I'd go with the group of four, because I didn't feel comfortable sitting at his house while others slept. I didn't want to lie there in nausea. Also, it was a good opportunity to better get to know them. A group of four, including the girl from Melbourne, rode through the hilly valleys, rice field after rice field, to the local convenience store for fishy snacks. Where there wasn't forest or a river, there was a house or garden. He then decided that he wanted to go on a hike. Being from Florida, I was used to hikes, but this one was up a mountain. Something completely foreign to me. I chugged water as we slithered in his K-car up the mountain, until we reached a spot too steep to drive up. We made silly hungover jokes and talked about Japanese culture as our group of out-of-shape foreigners slipped down and struggled up the mountain. The Japanese girl with us led the way. When we finally reached the top, the breeze was rejuvenating. I could see basins, grottoes, waterfalls, and gorges. Things I've only read about in books, movies, and video games. The boring scenery of my childhood prison was far behind me. Or so I thought. They sang an anime theme song, to which everyone knew the words. This was a little too nerdy, even for me. This is where I knew I had to be in a simulation. Even though the experience was new and thrilling, I felt pieces of me were missing. I wasn't running to adventure, but running away from a fear of hometown hell. I had to go back and confront the devil on my leg.

After a year of similar adventures, I was accepted into graduate school, and I returned to the same toilet I was born into.

CHAPTER SIX: CELEBRITY

Celebrity: “When I was born, my mom shit at the same time. My head was lopsided because I was suctioned out.”

Interviewer: “And that still bothers you?”

Celebrity: *I lied to him. Well, I didn't lie. I just didn't tell him the whole truth.*

He reeked of molasses as he ticked with tremors from a prior stroke. Maybe he was so mellow because that blood clot zapped half of his brain cells. He told me about how he hates himself for being Baptist, and he told me that he's so old that he doesn't sleep in the same bed as his wife. How lonely, I thought. I never saw his wife, but I knew her frazzled voice. She always answered the door through an intercom. He harped on his time in the Navy and all the Korean whores he bought. He bragged about his successful engineer son. The pleather chair was sticky and dank.

Interviewer: “Next week I want you to think of a topic that is bothering you, or any topic for that matter. We'll take it from there.”

I handed him fifteen dollars. My second fifteen dollars of fame were over. At least he didn't hand me a prescription, like the bastard psychiatrist that I first went to for anxiety.

The first doctor I went and saw only once. I fell for his pyramid scheme in my anxious confusion. I bought the first script that he prescribed. I had a moment, staring at the silence of the pills—moments earlier they clicked against each other, when I shook them and, like an old friend's hand, those clicks beckoned towards seductive potential numbness. I wonder if death will feel as good as abusing Xanax.

Potential re-addiction scared me, but didn't stop me from swallowing. If anything, the potential addiction was tempting. I would no longer have to think.

I examined the pills' label and saw: *Don't mix with alcohol.* At that moment, I knew those pills

weren't for me. Using one bad habit to flee from another is a beautiful thing. Laziness often dissuades me from bad habits. I trashed the full bottle of Zoloft and that "doctor."

Next week on the cover of *Morbid* magazine in my new psychologist's office,

Celebrity: "I want to talk about death." It's all I could articulate.

Interviewer: "I see. Do you believe in an afterlife?" He sipped his tea with a shaky hand.

Celebrity: "I don't know." I didn't want to. Existence was a minimum-wage job.

Interviewer: "Well, what's eating at you?"

Celebrity: *Eating. An appropriate verb, ideas eating me while I didn't eat.* "It's not death exactly but *dying*."

Formulating my thoughts was frightening because I didn't know what exactly I thought. They were all too chaotic, subatomic, whenever I tried to measure a thought's value, my measurement process skewed the results. I was as lonely as celery that supermodels eat.

Interviewer: "You're afraid of the pain?"

Celebrity: "The potential of pain."

The anxiety was like playing Russian Roulette every second of existence, and irrational thoughts of impending doom infected everything, and at the time I barely noticed how irrational it was because the roof was about to collapse on my head, and, if that wasn't fatal, the meteor was projecting towards Earth and might not hit my half of the planet, but then soot would cloud the sky and the sunless torture would starve me. My thoughts circled like buzzards.

Celebrity: "I saw a documentary on chimpanzees. They ripped apart a smaller monkey and ate him alive, chewed his dismembered limbs while he still screamed."

Interviewer: "Sounds to me like you are morbid."

Celebrity: "Morbid?" My surprise at the word was genuine. "I don't think I'm morbid."

Interviewer: "Okay, morbid might not be accurate."

Celebrity: "Let's look it up in the dictionary." *Fuck him.*

Interviewer: "Morbid: —Characterized by or appealing to an abnormal and unhealthy interest in disturbing and unpleasant subjects, especially death and disease."

Celebrity: "I don't think that necessarily sounds like me." *Define normal. Define health. Define pleasant. You're talking all this frilly language but I know one fact,. These "morbid" thoughts lead to my celebrity.*

I was my biggest fan, an unhealthy obsession.

Interviewer: "You had your first panic attack on the way to see your grandmother in the hospital?"

Celebrity: "She had a stroke."

*I was devastated,
guiltily hungover.
On the drive to the hospital,
my fingers
became prickly
and lost feeling, and the absence
scaled the vine
of veins in my forearms,
marked its pillage
into my breast.*

*A second freeze breached
my toes
and bloodless vessels slithered upwards.
My body*

*and thoughts revolved
in a knife fight
of red-eye flight,
while no clear gunman
drew a revolver
in the tumbleweeds
of spider lightning.*

My life had devolved into hippy poetry. I had heard people describe their strokes as a religious experience. The left hemisphere shut down and the ego was destroyed.

Celebrity: “Did it hurt when you had your stroke?”

Interviewer: “No pain at all. I didn't even know I had one—until I tried to get up from my chair. My brain wasn't sending the right signals. I'd tried to speak but gibberish came out.”

Celebrity: How *boring*. “God. That's the sort of shit that freaks me out.” There's got to be some balance between monotonous order and cognitive chaos regarding *dying*. I had to tiptoe on a tightrope, one that would eventually wrap around my neck.

Interviewer: “It was disorienting, but it was calm.”

Celebrity: And since his stroke, all he does is watch people and hit on girls at the Winter Park mall. And interview sad shits like me. He still hadn't figured anything particularly wise, or anything significant about my life. Now he's at death's doorbell and his frail, faceless wife startles him through the intercom. I would become no better if I didn't change. I had become a pompous personality. I had to kill my celebrity.

Chimpanzee: “I like talking to you, but I don't think I need to anymore.”

Interviewer: “Was it something I said?”

CHAPTER SEVEN: HIKIKOMORI OF THE WILD WEST

Dreaming

>Check characters to get new items/effects.
(press enter key)

>Activate items/effects to gain new abilities.
(from the menu)

>Drop items/effects in the door room.
(press 5 key)

I am willingly becoming this little Japanese girl; and since I'm a twenty-six-year-old, white, American male, my girlfriend is concerned.

Madotsuki¹ is a 32-bit (very bad graphics) video game character in a Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG) called Yume Nikki, literally: Dream Diary. She's also a hikikomori. A hikikomori is a person who doesn't leave his or her room. Instead of the outside world, she prefers her room, and the interior of her dreams.

I'm becoming a hikikomori—a hermit, a monk, and a dreamer, all in one. I'm striving to live an existence of solitude, while I juggle international residences. I tell my girlfriend on the opposite side of the planet, Miho, "I'm going to become a hikikomori," and she laughs. She thinks I'm joking. I chose a long-distance relationship. It's more straining than I thought.

She doesn't realize that every day I daydream of her, back in the U.S.A. I've become nocturnal. I binge on blank expression. There's a language barrier between my hometown and me. My return is rewiring my brain back to the original English, but I have lovely memories, like a cancerous appendix, no longer useful and threatening the symbiosis of my sanity. I feel I can't communicate with Floridians,

1

Literally means "widow." 窓付き

my own culture. This psychological isolation scares me. It's so monstrous that I freeze in its presence and give into its demands.

I am hypersensitive to language because, for the last year, I had to speak Japanese with 98% of the people that were around me. The other 2% were a straggle of international gaijin² otaku³ that left to escape the rumors and bullshit of their hometown buzz. Ordering a hamburger in Japan from McDonald's felt like a math problem because I spoke Japanese like a monkey. My brain is still thinking in Japanese, but I am trapped in the storm's eye of Florida's Space Coast pursuing a master's degree in English.

I am sick of breathing. Dust accumulated on my grandmother's antiques while I was away in Japan for a year. Her shit is packed into my kid room. It's a storage unit. Beanie Babies, models of cottages, books about cacti, armies of Irish Santa Claus figurines, and Hummels circle me. I'm at my parents' laundry-scented house, on an acre of bayou, back in the suburban boondocks of Melbourne, Florida.

I've been back for a month. I've adjusted gracefully to the central AC units of the Florida swamps, so much that I've grown pinkish-white, the skin color of my mother's undercooked chicken and her Chihuahuas' stomachs.

My friend Austin calls me at 3:24 p.m. on a Monday. I'm still in a pair of plaid boxer briefs. Creeping past the curtains, the outside light is unbearable, but inside is a tomb of catalogue collectibles. I agree to go surfing. My head loses blood or something when I stand from my bed. I become dizzy, and I scavenge beach appropriate board shorts. I've lost weight so I have to settle on gray Rip Curl⁴

2

Gaijin- Literally outlander. 外人

3

Otaku-Literally nerd. オタク

4

Rip Curl- The two most work-out BRO electric dance music words combined to conceal the shittiest brand.

baggies. I discover a fishing tee and scratched sunglasses, and throw my sandy waxed surfboard in the backseat with the fins peeking out the tint peeled window. I drive to a beach called RC's and park at a Publix Supermarket and burn my feet on the craggy parking-lot asphalt. Beware of the yellow flowers, they have thorns.

The sun is ironic. How can something so horribly destructive, a gargantuan hydrogen nuclear fusion reactor, be the essential reason life is sustainable on this planet? My hikikomori skin isn't suited for this radiation, this *putrid* light. The fastest thing known to man, occupying half the world with constant, cancerous energy, and the only way you can escape it is by sacrificing another object to shield the nasty shit. The slightest second-hand reflections from UV rays off the broken beer bottles on the beach dunes tick my internal Geiger counter and my anxiety levels rise congruently with melanoma. *Locals only*⁵ is cut into a rotting post before the sand.

I paddle out into the cold ocean water. It's browner than I remember. I spear my hands into the waves to propel forward my ghoulish body. The waves are only about four feet high, but they bombard me with white wash. Salt water recursively slaps my face.

Surfing has a lot to do with timing, stealing inhales, powering your board and body underwater before a wave comes— duck diving⁶ a few seconds early can be the difference between dodging a wave or it slamming you into the dark oxygen-void abyss like a shoebee kook⁷.

I struggle to the glassy hills, past the point of breaking waves. Having caught a couple waves already, Austin hunches here on his board, glossy wet, bobbing, breathing lightly, and waiting for the next rideable wave to crescendo.

“So how was J-Pan?” he says. He's twenty-four years old and works for an Anheuser Bush

5

Locals Only Sign- I'm not a snobby local anymore. I am an outlander.

6

Duck Dive- A straight-down dive, like a duck, that allows the wave to pass before you surface.

7

Shoebee Kook- Someone who wears shoes to the beach and gets embarrassed by waves.

distributing company. *Bud Light, great night*, is his motto. He's stuck in the hometown worldview and relationship that I could have been stuck in with his girlfriend's sister—in a worldview concerning “who's fucking who?” and fishing.

“It was sexy,” I say on a distressed exhale. I am gasping to catch my breath.

He giggles and doesn't understand how I don't feel like explaining; how can I explain a year of my life, which I perceived as a video game, to an outdoorsman? As an ex-outdoorsman I could try, but every part of my Japanese experience I contextualize as a JRPG, the Shinkansen super trains, the oddly cute mascots, the misplaced contemporary jazz. And I was the protagonist of it all. The Sapporo⁸ cowboy of the Kanmon Strait⁹. I was the most notorious thing on the streets at night. Moby Dick. The great white beast of the Japanese suburbs. I could be whatever avatar and personality that my mind could conjure and not locked to presumptions of myself. These are things that he has no interest in or conception of. These are things that would take a book to explain.

“You said you got a girlfriend?” he says.

“Her name's Miho. She's thirty-four,” I say.

“Holy shit, dude. Nice. Are you going to break up with her?” he says.

I notice an upsurge that will topple me if I don't turn around. I do and paddle like a sea turtle, hit the timing to stand, bend my knees and squeeze out at a forty-five degree angle, an explosion of water trailing. I try to remain fluid, let the wave do most of the work and guide the board down the line. My surfboard lease snaps when I jump off the crest and I try to tackle my board before it rolls onto shore. I fail and tumble underwater then swim until I can touch low-tide's slimy rocks, crawl on them through the muddled ocean then skim my feet in the soft sand.

8

Sapporo- A beer company from the frigid northern island of Japan. サッポロビール株式会社

9

Kanmon Strait- A connection between the Inland sea and the Sea of Japan, where I lived.

I go to recover my battered surfboard, now drifting in the shallows. There's a pudgy white kid staring at me with his finger in his belly button next to the board. I grab my board and stare at him. A solution of snotty seawater slithers from his nose.

I look over and see his family's campsite of holes, sandcastles, graffiti, and hearts etched in the sand. Yankees. Northeastern Americans. Either tourists or a newly arrived engineer's family exiled to Florida's Space Coast¹⁰. The boy is pale like me, a tourist.

I lie, supine, on the dunes next to the tourist family's dig site. Passing pedestrians must think I'm part of the family, because I am pale. People who don't go into the sun a lot are not a part of this community. Tanned skin builds a resistance to sunshine. The Florida flag flickers in the stinging citrus sun, hung on the overarching condominium, saluting copper skin, and ripping off tourists, at trash heaps like Cocoa Beach¹¹. The sun's rays refract through the remaining ocean beading my tender chicken breast skin, goose pimples, prickling as I'm slowly microwaved. There's sizzling sounds in my head like a rattlesnake's which interweave with the literal squeaks of pelicans. Tanning beds are doing Social Darwinism justice. Killing off the insane or idiotic, tortured souls of media's bronze skin obsession. These people are prone to getting cancer—they are so goddamn grateful for a tan but don't care they are getting fried by radiation. There's sand in my hair and butt cheeks.

I suck air in and wheeze out, off rhythm and flat. I think there's a patch of red tide. Airborne algae drifts from the water in flakes of red-brown muck. My lungs are not conditioned to keep up with the aerobics of wrestling waves, compared to my teenage years. Now, I can feel every webbed crevice of my lungs on bursts of coughing, exhales, gasps. My strained breath mimics the black clouds

10

Florida's Space Coast- Nearby, Kennedy Space center launches rockets, breaking the sound barrier, making gunshot sounds at odd hours, and leaving a sluggish residue of smoke that smears across the sky.

11

Cocoa Beach- Cocoa beach was I once saw a man at Cocoa Beach self-covered in hotdogs and condiments, thus dirty pelicans and seagulls were shitting on and eating off his flabby skin.

blooming over the ocean. Anxiety and blood weave through my heart, causing it to further swell into my respiratory system. My heart beats against my breastbone. Breathing is my number one priority. It should be for all people, but my girlfriend is superhuman. She has the ability to speak for long amounts of time while barely breathing.

“I am Saiyajin,” she says from across the world. Sai-ya-jin, or, Saiyan in English, is essentially the race of the Japanese Superman. 8:34 p.m. Here-- 9:34 a.m. there. I’ve returned to my dusty room after all that sun exposure.

“Where’s your blonde hair?” I say. Saiyans can “power up” into Super Saiyans, turning their hair golden blonde like 80’s glam-rock-stars. The transformation is first achieved in a fit of rage and grief. Example: Emotions felt when witnessing the murder of a loved one.

“I don’t show you,” she says. Her voice echoes on speaker phone.

“What? Why not? You don’t trust me?” I say as my reflection sharpens in the backboard mirror of the glass-paneled cabinet that displays my grandmother’s flashy silverware. The mirror cuts, magnifies, and camouflages the crystal dishes. I am well-done from the Florida sun, but the color of the inside of a raw sirloin. My eyes are bloodshot, little red coral reefs. My hair is matted, a mane of dingle-berry dreads, a style choice I made before we took a trip to Thailand which lingered like trashy souvenirs. Those places are now a part of me, sands of full moon beaches, mud from the rice fields, the stray dog’s fur that fluttered as it shook off drips of Singha, all these things embedded in my cobwebbed hair. I don’t recognize myself. I look like a demon.

“Of course, I do trust you. But it is secret,” she says.

She’s playing her games while I’ve got my video games. I have no interest or willingness to attend school or work. Dream Diary, sadly, replaces those sun-hammock-days and ping-pong-pussy¹²

12

Ping-Pong-Pussy Show- A major tourist attraction in Bangkok, gassy girls who will blow you away.

nights we spent together around the cerulean Gulf of Thailand—filled with Aryan vanilla mustaches, Speedos, and animal print bikinis. Ko Samui¹³ had a backdrop of palm-treed mountains behind our glassy infinity pool that seemingly poured into the sea. Beauty like this is immaculate evil because it is addicting like drugs. We skinny-dipped.

Dream Diary is arguably the nerdiest thing anyone can ever play—lightsaber larping in Batman whitey-tightys, cosplaying as Spock from *StarTrek*, and playing Quidditch in a Chewbacca mask being its main contenders. Alternative realities in my sleepless, hallucinogenic realm of a computer screen. Video games tell narratives, that have become my scripture. I faithfully immerse myself in these stories like rituals, and I portal into the glowing paradise of pixels.

“Hello, Matthew. Can you hear me?” she says.

Disclaimer: If you thought the Superman part was nerdy, well, let’s just say you’re in for the tears and sweat of my childhood dreams. I warned you.

“What are you doing?” says Miho on the phone, but I ignore her and continue to play Dream Diary.

The little Japanese girl that I am becoming is a character made by a strange internet figure with the screen-name of KIKIYAMA¹⁴. I didn’t create this little girl, but I get to control her in her bedroom. The game mechanics won’t let me exit her room. The little girl’s name is Madotsuki, and I have pigtails and little red squeaky boots. I stay in the cubic room, centered with a square red rug, embroidered with totemic faces. The room’s tatami mats are horizontal and give the room a Zen balance, even the scattered silk sitting-pillows can’t ward away the feng-shui. The pink video game console and its controller lie in the corner in a toddler-esqe tangle.

13

Ko Samui- The Eastern replica of Cozumel, cheap beer, pad, resorts, and battleships in the Gulf of Thailand.

14

KIKIYAMA- Says on their website that the game is meant to be an exploring game with a "dark atmosphere" but without plot or purpose.

Nothings on T.V.

It's all static and stripes of the primary colors.

There's a rainbow of books, assorted by hue, huddled on shelves. The game won't allow me to read them. I'd rather go on the balcony.

Miho continues to talk about her frustrations at her social work job.

The real sky is mauve and maroon, the color of organs. The full moon is shrouded in a cloudy puzzle. Fuzzy outside slippers lie between two rickety AC units. A clothesline rattles in the whistling gust because Japanese people believe electric dryers are the devil. The only thing out of place is a broom whose bristles look like they have hat hair; it upholds the duty of cleanliness so it is exempt from the formalities of grooming.

She looks down on the street from the thirty-fourth floor. She wants to be out on the sidewalk but she can't relate or communicate with people. She doesn't want to. She's not yet brave enough to take the plunge.

I return her inside, and the sliding glass door suctions from the evening breeze, and I turn off the reading lamp next to her bed, slide under sheets, and slip asleep.

I awaken in her dream, standing in the middle of a near replica of her apartment. The faces on the red rug loom. When she goes to turn on the television, a large image of a black eye appears on the screen and the T.V. hisses in malfunction.

I switch it off.

"I feel so bad for all these kids," says Miho.

"Uh huh," I say. My attention returns to the video game.

When she's awake she sometimes stands in front of her bedroom door and shakes her head no. The game won't allow you to exit when she's awake. I guess the door isn't intimidating in her dreams.

I open it and find her in a nexus, her dream-room where twelve eccentric doors form a circle.

The doors are designed with number, neon, shield, candle, eyeball, graffiti, mural, snow, dark, puddle, block, and forest themes—each corresponds with the world beyond them.

I get bored and switch to another video game with an online component. Even a striving hikikomori sometimes longs for social interaction.

A private server is basically a big fancy box that beeps and sparkles sometimes. It is not illegal to have one, just don't use it to send classified information. It's black, sleek, and this particular one hums in another mega-nerd's house in Pennsylvania, or one of those northern states.

In that black metal casing is a game world far greater than Earth. It is the realization of Studio Ghibli's landscapes with eastern archetypes like ninja, samurai, and monks mixing with paladins, dragon-knights, corsairs, and mages cloaked and variegated: this angelic glow from my HDMI-capable TV-screen can be accessed from any computer in the world, except for *them* communist computers in China. Macau was a hellhole. I tap some keys as the dead skin builds on the grimy wireless keyboard. The white plastic underneath resembles teeth under plaque. I'm in my bed, lights off.

"What's that noise?" she says.

Termination of Disclaimer: Nerding-out crisis averted by distracting girlfriend.

"Huh, what noise?" I say.

"The clicking," she says.

"Wha," I say as she says, "It's like click, click."

"I'm talking to you. That's what I'm doing," I say. I look down at my skin as it glows like the screen is a black-light. I realize it's 4:00 a.m. And I haven't eaten in twenty-four hours.

"I hear some noise," she says.

"Okay, fine. I'm doing homework." I say.

"Oh. Okay, that's good. So you're a good student."

"I am."

The reason I lie to her is so she doesn't get jealous that I am wasting time on digital girls and worlds that aren't hers.

I tell her I love her, I miss her, and I want to kiss her. This corny ritual I say before we hang up. I feel like I've turned out to be everything I despised about this capitalistic cult of romantic love. Next thing I know I'll be calling her "babe" like I had a love-doctored lobotomy. I hang up and sigh. This will all be solved when I become a full-time hikikomori.

A few years ago, there was an Asian girl with a nose stud and cinder-toned hair from high school that used to say "babe" a lot. Her name was Sandy. I used to go to high school with her. She was friends with my younger sister and had moved to California, and I saw her one night at a puke and pine chips scented, bar in Downtown Melbourne when she returned to live here. Our eyes met for a sentimental nostalgic moment, as if each other smelled rotten, a memory remembered in picturesque silence. The next day she killed herself. I heard she drowned herself in a bathtub, but my high school sources can rarely be trusted. Maybe she was feeling the same counter-culture shock that I am. I saw Sandy's best friend in another pseudo-Irish bar downtown, on the anniversary of the suicide.

"I hope she just ran away, made up the story about her suicide and disappeared to L.A. because she was tired of all the people in her life," said Sandy's best friend.

A faked death conspiracy, that's fucking brilliant, the greatest witness protection. At the time I didn't think of it in an optional way. I saved up a lot of money, and I'm slowly wasting it the longer I don't work.

If you disappear and fly away from everyone you know, don't ever reappear. When you disappear, you cocoon into a sticky chrysalis then reemerge, and when you reappear you see old friends from aged butterfly eyes, you smell childhood gardens with new antennae. You're wispy and they are unmovable, petrified statues in the swamp.

One of the conditions to be medically declared a hikikomori includes that the duration of

solitude is at least six months. So I haven't quite reached this benchmark, but hear me out. Is it only I that have changed, or are they treating me differently too? I made the mistake of returning to Florida, but I can't make the same mistake twice by returning to Japan. I physically abandoned my girlfriend, and now just linger here like the echoes of the five o'clock news in the next room—unwillingly rewiring my social programming, so I'm going to disappear in my room. So, I'm working towards complete nothingness. There are absurd moments in my life that grant me the willpower to cloister in my bedroom. The awkward social situations I have tripped into lately have been especially traumatic.

A few days after surfing, my friend Austin calls me again in the middle of playing Yume Nikki, Dream Diary. There are birdlike girls in the game that refuse to talk to Madotsuki/me. Maybe it's a bitchy way of bullying. There is no dialogue in the entire game. I am in complete control of the little Japanese girl but for these chicken-heads chasing the character. I'm controlling Madotsuki in her dream-world's nexus, a revolving chamber of doors. She/I picks the purple door where her/my viewpoint narrows scope then expands into a neon background of an embryo of a chicken with a horrid green eye in the center of the venous nucleus, encased in mutated organelles, mingled with squiggles of DNA coil. The eye leers at me/her as if she's/I'm intruding on her own thoughts. She walks over ronin¹⁵ organelles, little lifeforms with no nucleus that squirm and croak when tread on. She finds a bicycle in the eerie abyss. It's one of the twenty-four items that need to be gathered to complete the game. I bicycle through the cellular world, but some harpy bitch knocks me down a hole from which I can't escape. God dammit! I have to "wake Madotsuki up" which means start over all the way from the bedroom again. I throw my keyboard off the bed, a loose ctrl key chips off. I have no choice but to forfeit immersion and teleport her back into her bed in the "real" world. I'm so pissed about Madotsuki that I decide that I'm going to go out and eat chicken wings with Austin, his wife, and their three-year-

15

Ronin- Stray samurai warriors who lost their militaristic lords. 浪人

old daughter.

We get to Frankie's Wings and Things and order fried pickles, pitchers of Yuengling, and three dozen spicy #4 chicken wings. They have a sauce that is a mixture of blue cheese and ranch that gets all over the place and is grossly delicious. It's the type of place where they lay out a giant piece of construction paper over the table, because the amount of spilled sauce is depressing. Cayenne war-paint commemorates each crippled napkin.

Austin's head is dark and scarred from surfing. His shaved head shows a receding hairline which makes me conscious of my own Braveheart¹⁶ -wild hair dropping in my field of vision.

His wife has tanned skin, slick brown hair, and an impeccably white smile. Her manicured fingernails are inspired from Pinterest¹⁷. . She has a small lump in her pregnant belly. Their bunny-haired, Band-Aid-patched, daughter keeps kicking me under the table, and I fake howl feigned pain, as she squeals in schadenfreude¹⁸.

"Are Japanese girls kinky, Matt?" his wife says.

"You can't group them all together," I say.

"Ooo, that means he had more than one," she says.

I blush because that's bullshit. I met a girl who is fun and she just happens to be Japanese because I lived there. She implies I have some fetish. But I prefer a mature partner who knows herself and how to have fun and not tie herself to the slavery of parenthood, no matter what age.

Austin laughs. "He's got a girlfriend now," he says.

"A girlfriend? Matt? Is she kinky? Ever stick it in her butt?" she says.

16

Braveheart- Mel Gibson plays a thirteenth-century Scottish martyr in the 1995 film.

17

Pinterest- Website for "artsy" types to spread ideas, and other deceases.

18

Schadenfreude- Enjoyment of another's suffering. The sadist's fruit of choice.

I don't mind the question. Their young daughter probably has no clue about what we are talking about and hypothetically if she did, does a crude sexual question break childhood innocence? In Japan, there were "nude" magazines at every convenience store, but they were absurdly censored with blurry pixilation. Japan's work obsessed and sexually oppressed people are scarred from war. The cicatrix of Genbaku Dome, Hiroshima's half vaporized building, is a reminder of the fragility of humanity. Some places in Japan hold penis festivals to promote fertility. They have a problem because more people are dying in Japan than being born.

Austin's wife and I have a peculiar, platonic relationship. Her personality is a paradox. She is endlessly fascinating, because she breaks sexual taboos before her kid—to the point I squirm in the booth. But she is utterly boring because she is obsessed with appearance, and her vanity has evolved from a fixation on physical aesthetic into a conspiracy of housewife stratagems aimed to preserve a respectable family image. His wife's conspiracy is logistically handled in the form of blacklisting some of Austin's friends from his phone, a domino effect of unanswered texts when he's drinking at the pool hall, and the relationship whip: the guilt of his fatherhood, verbal images of his daughter irrationally losing and suffering in his absence. I am so glad that I do not have Austin's life. I love the guy.

Warning: Classified evidence beyond.

Operation Codename: Baby Daddy Control.

Objectives: Keep Austin isolated from his friends and all forms of liquor.¹⁹

*Will self-destruct in ten seconds.

I became aware of his wife's existence in my junior year of high school when both she and her older sister confessed I was cute on the same day. I clearly like older women so I frequented her sister's bedroom, a gossip haven, where I learned Austin's then girlfriend showed her younger cousins hardcore

19

Conspiracy Note- Will self-destruct in ten seconds.

porn when they were prepubescent. It would be the same setting where they would debate whether a guy cumming inside them felt good or not, an argument that would make me puke a bit if disputed with my sister. Their arguments would lead me to resort to picking the dirt out of my fingernails and flicking it in her bedsheets as an incognito protest to smut talk. This could have been my life but thank God I got out of Melbourne. What was I thinking? I was programmed with western fairy tales like Cinderella and The Cosby Show. Not anymore. Miho and I will never become this cartoon. Do I have to live up to Prince Charming if the shoe fits? Do I have to live up to the family man through psychological sedation?

My discomfort is an elephant in the room, and she prods it. The torment she provides is purely physical, but his wife's torture has an evolved expertise, sexually emotional degradation. His wife is cunning.

I later return to the comfort of my bed. My girlfriend calls at 9:32 p.m. Here—10:32 a.m. there. Speaker phone enables.

“You have to tell me truth,” she says.

“Hey. What are you talking about?” I say.

“Did you re-make your Tinder account?” she says.

“Oh. Of course not. Why do you ask?” I say.

“You did. I re-made mine the other day to look at our texts. And your picture changed. It's the picture of the guy in the captain hat from Thai,” she says.

I forgot that I reactivated it. I shouldn't have lied, but she wouldn't understand, and I wasn't cheating or even flirting. My friends all joined a group in the Tinder dating app, and I felt excluded. I uploaded a picture of an advertisement of Mr. Tu's fishing charter, a shirtless, middle-aged, mocha-skinned Thai man with Ray Bans, a captain's hat, and droopy man tits. It was just a ploy to troll²⁰. The

20

Trolling- I'm not proud of this.

reason was not to hit on them. I swear. It was all to reconcile with the rudeness of the West, this foreign casualness towards strangers. I later confessed to Miho and felt a release even though she cried, because my greatest fear is that my relationship is not real. The only way to fight this fear is to be completely honest, no matter how ashamed and vulnerable this makes me, so I realized I had to tell her.

The verbal dancing one has to do to achieve politeness in Japanese is treacherous. Even though I've returned to The States, the same amount of constant Japanese still conjures in my mind, coordinating with and branching from physical stimuli. Words are bound thus silenced in the depths of my subconscious because if I said thoughts like, "*Ara, onara suru sumori data kedo, unchi ga de chata*²¹," it if wouldn't make sense to the average American. Isolated in my head, those words lose their meaning, here, in the U.S. my friends all live in a different linguistic and technological world than I'm used to. A world full of Uber drivers and chips on credit cards. Hell—even Pokémon Go was released in the U.S. well ahead of Japan. Trivial things, like fork-usage, are irritating but manageable. Driving on the opposite side of the road, the automatic fork versus the precision-based manual chopsticks, the East vs West apocalypse, and my left-side sidewalk stride—something that takes a little American joyride to readjust—are irritating but manageable. The tough part is just thinking in English small talk. Why can't I assimilate into my old life?

I am deleting my Facebook and it has the audacity to flash selfies of girls from my friends list. "Valerie will miss you," the computer displays.

"I'd rather jerk off," I say and double click confirm deletion on my HP American-made laptop. The only reason I *had* a Facebook was to keep in touch with international friends and now that I've decided to become a hikikomori, I don't need them. They eventually let you down. They eventually let you jump.

21

Poop Joke- Literally—"Damn. I thought I farted, but I pooped my pants." A phrase that I say when around drunk Japanese people because it is a good way to meet friends, I think it is an integral reason I have Miho.

Andy explained how he let his female coworker jump. I first met him at 10:22 p.m., last summer in Japan, at a fireworks festival in Kokura that I went to with Miho on the Moji side of the Kanmon Bridge, a hulking metal connection that joins the central Island of Japan, Honshu, with the rustic southern island of Kyushu. There were fire flowers in the air, combusting swarms of gunpowder, and smoke from both sides of the black mirror of the Kanmon Strait. Rippled reflections mimicked the heavenly illumination.

I first saw Andy in his red Michael Jordan Bulls jersey, sliding through the fluttering sea of floral yukatas. The smell of grilled squid swirling in saltwater breezes floating from the river made my mouth water. My stomach growled. I could taste the steamy butter that was dripping from them as they sizzled on grill grates in the festive food stands, Japanese scribbles overhead 漢字. Miho greeted and hugged Andy then introduced me to him, the Asian Chicagoan that could have passed as Japanese if he wasn't wearing the basketball gear.

Andy's female coworker jumped from her high-rise apartment in the neighboring city of Fukuoka, and he went to her funeral earlier that day. It was all that he could focus on.

"I just had to get out of that suit. It's too depressing," he said.

"It's too humid to wear the suit," said Miho. Her makeup was running down with sweat and heat from her kimono, patched with images of pink cherry blossoms on an opal cloth with orange pinstripes.

"I texted her the night before she did it," he said and pouted. "The night before," he said.

Miho patted him on the shoulder.

"Here. Take a beer, man. You look like you need it," I said and handed him one.

"Thanks," he said.

"*Kanpai*," we said, clacked our aluminum cans together, clicked them open, and swigged.

"I can't wait until winter, coming home after a long day of work, popping one of these babies

and eating some stir-fry under my kotatsu²². My kotatsu, that's the last thing we talked about. And you know what she said?" he said and squinted his eyes at something behind Miho and me. He was still obsessed with his co-worker. "She said that that was the Japanese dream. To be single, no romantic stress, just yourself to worry about, you could snuggle alone in your apartment, not having to take orders from bosses or significant others or, better yet, not have to speak to anyone at all."

Miho and I looked at each other, and she raised her eyebrows, then we returned to our empathetic act of concentrating on Andy, maintaining our socially conscious personalities. I got the sense that he wanted to date this suicidal co-worker. Man, could I have some comfort food. In Japan, that meant squid on a stick.

"No more annoying small-talk about the weather. No more romantic gossip at work. No more bullshit, you know?" he said.

I went to the kiosk and ordered roasted squid²³. I chewed and swallowed half of it, then walked to the river and flung it into the marbled water.

The only reason I remember is because I had to fake listen and care but somehow I subconsciously remembered the Japanese dream, in the cool shadows of a musky marsh.

In my room that night, I teleport Madotsuki back into the nexus and drop all twenty-four items that I acquired roaming the dark cobwebs of Madotsuki's dream-world. .Why twenty-four? Why these particular items? Nihilism would say there is no meaning. The programming plays a cutscene. Madotsuki takes control of herself for a few moments as she awakens in her bed, goes to her balcony, and jumps off. Her shattered remains are a smear on the sidewalk. Ripe-red humanoids loiter, ignoring the girl, and meander about the bloodstain while the credits materialize in MS Mincho font.

22

Kotatsu- A wooden or plastic folding table that has electric heat pads to warm the user. 炬燵

23

Roasted Squid- It was too rubbery to chew the whole thing.

The next morning, I'm listening to my latest music obsession and the indie pop song sings over a thumping bass-line. My girlfriend calls. I am still surprised by the ending scene to a game that I invested so much time wandering. We argue about the concept of fate and Madotsuki's. She thinks that things happen for a reason. And I'm a heretic. I bring up death, because it's on my mind, because the game's unexpected outcome.

"You can't die before me. It's not allowed," she says.

"I thought I would be dead by now," I say.

"What are you saying?" she says.

"I never really thought I'd make it back to Florida," I say.

"You have a lot of time to be dead. Enjoy your life," she says.

"Yeah, I was already born. I might as well ride it out, huh," I say.

"Plus, I think you are too pussy to kill yourself," she says.

We laugh because it's true. When I got into this hikikomori business, I didn't see the contract had a marginal note: 腹²⁴. The outside is unbearable, but the inside is a tomb.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SELLOUT

A couple of years ago, I had long hair and head-banged in the front row to a local psychedelic rock band. Swimmm. I don't know how many m's exactly. They were brilliantly mediocre, and I was just really drunk and taking the greatest advantage of having long hair, swooping it through the air to music. I admired the singer and drummer because they were hip, socially elusive, and artistic. They both have hair like Roman sculptures, curly and smooth. I went to a couple of bars after the show and ended up at my friend's giant house that she rents with a couple of friends at 3:00 a.m.

The golden angel-haired singer was in the corner, trying to romance a crying girl who just got divorced, and she seemed lonely. It turned out the singer was in his early thirties, and I could tell in the light, he was ashy, malnourished, and wore skinny jeans. They looked younger on stage. This irked me, but I was too busy arguing with their older-looking guitarist about music.

“Metallica sucks! Listen, I love metal. I mean luuuuuuvvv metal. And Metallica is shit. The guy's voice sucks. Drummer sucks. Their guitar work is good; I'll give you that,” I said.

“Were you alive in the 80's? You have to realize that there was nothing like them, the impact they had.”

“What about Death? They're from Florida and heavier. Metallica is like buttrock metal. Don't get me started on that dumb Napster lawsuit.”

He looked like he could have strangled me, like I drew a picture of his messiah and shit on it.

I went to an art festival the other night in Melbourne, which is rare, and the band I had backstage access to was headlining, Swimm (with an undisclosed number of mmm's). The exhibit was at an unopened rock-climbing center off US-1 and included local acrylic, graffiti, murals, sculptures, local

shops in retro-vans that had been artistically refurbished.

I hadn't been in the Melbourne art scene in a while because I had moved away and cut my hair. It was great because I didn't have to talk to many of my old acquaintances. I played dead. I interrogated some of their conversations, by matter of chance, but I had forgotten how nice it is to be unknown in a place of familiarity. While we were waiting for the music, a girl who I remember dancing with pretended not to recognize me. She was dressed in a captain's hat, trying to stand out. We had smiled at each other and that was that, short and sweet.

A guy that used to hit on me was there sweet-talking a pretty girl in her early twenties. Was he hitting on me? Maybe he's bisexual. Whatever. He used to buy me drinks and say, "Let's get out of here," and he even bought me chicken nuggets once. It was the most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me. He owned the big house that I had the Metallica argument in years ago.

At the rock-climbing gym, the music halted because they had a hip-hop dance battle. I felt like I was in that weird couple of years of the new millennium, where it was cool to battle, but with dance moves learned from *You Got Served*—starring the renaissance man, Nick Cannon—and Step it Up. They all stemmed from *Bring It On*, oddly enough. I liked *Bring It On* more than I like Metallica.

My opinion has been sharpened by years of not listening to Metallica, and I was ready to troll Swimm's guitarist if I saw him. I don't even know if I meant it when I said Metallica sucks at the house at 3:00 a.m. after ingesting shoe-fulls of Irish car bombs and only my credit-card statement knows what else.

But I do mean it now. After years of thinking about it. It's true. Metallica is the worst thing to happen to metal, since its invention. I was going to tell him. He needed to know. He needed to know for his own good, his music, and his loved ones that Metallica highhandedly brought metal to the mainstream, and they are aren't sellouts because they originally had nothing interesting or genuine to sell. People just like them because they have metal in their name. It is a stupid name. I needed to tell

him that it is a stupid name. They were most likely influential in the naming of newer elements on the periodic table. All those scientists were listening to Metallica, and are being brainwashed to perform lazy nomenclature, by just adding suffixes to places where they were discovered. Example: Nihonium, Moscovium, Tennessine. Metallica is a plague to science.

Metallica tried to monopolize music with the Napster lawsuit. They were too stupid to understand the internet. Metallica is stupid, and I'm going to tell him.

Swimmm came on, but it was only the two baby-faces that I remembered. The bassist and guitarist were replaced! I rejoiced in the pleasure of winning. But it was sad, like the guitarist had forfeited. I like to think that he hates Metallica now, and is smoking cigars and laughing at how stupid he was.

Does one have to respect an artist to respect his or her art? I think I am humble enough to recognize greatness—even if that greatness is a turd with Michelangelo's *David's* physique, and was flimflammed from a loose asshole. I think Metallica relatively and objectively sucks, because they are corn-nuggets in a toilet of talent. Any one of those talents should have been the Kurt Cobain mainstream suicide of metal, instead of Metallica.

That being said, I had a lovely time at the fart festival and saw a lot of inspirational garbage. One year, there was some sand and some sticks in it, and some girl tried to sell it as art. I hope she sells it next year.

I had become bitter. I needed to kill myself. The next time Miho visited I decided to push the knife in. So I sacrificed myself, cut my throat to commitment, and proposed marriage on a beach as sea turtles hatched on the shore. My long-distance relationship drew a little closer.

CHAPTER NINE: THE GAY NINETIES

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Back in Japan...

“Vous êtes des animaux,” is sung to the kick. Snare. Kick. Snare of an electronic drum. The sound resembles a baseball card clicking in a child-sized rear bicycle wheel, as the snare machine-guns in transition into the dramatic kick. Snare. Kick. Snare—like the firing of a 12-gauge shotgun click. Boom. Click. Boom.

Planting poppers louder than a Bastille Day parade. The black leather no-sleeve jacket is sweat slick wet like globs of Vaseline. The dingy, white trash T-shirt translucent—people oscillating as tentacles in a black pit. Lasers carve neon rays into the dry-ice smoke. My mouth is so arid, yet I'm so wet. I'm glued with sweat to the animals in front of me, a dude with a mustache and an obscure wardrobe, kaleidoscopic goggles, and a bushel of hair.

Zig-Yag papers are miraculously passed around, along with a stranger's red hot butter knives; someone is in the corner with a George Foreman grill and a resin-blotted two-liter top. The dance floor is a pit of colors pasted together, sticky and spent and broken and entranced; Oscar Wilde probably would have enjoyed a gritty French-electro disco.

There is so much sound that it leads to the absence of sound. The distinction between sounds

gets so narrow that they deafen. I picture hell and heaven are all noise.

The bowl-cut kid behind me now has something sandwiched between my butt-cheeks, and with each communal wave the crowd whips. It's gunmetal warm. I try to turn around but another current pulls everyone towards the stage, in a chain reaction of domino groupies, red tide of veined eyes, burnt from the Vicks VapoRub. It's attached to his hip. It's steel. It's a pistol. A pistol is being whiplashed into my backside and I couldn't care less if the safety is on.

I met a celebrity without a name, a subconscious memory, unfocused, unframed. The car wreck was minor, but worth it. It made us mannequins for a moment. But we went fast and didn't care.

Between the grape vines, after the show, we flung gravel off pavement, in a rose Testarossa. Snap back cap, scratches of tattooed stop signs in a beehive above my knee cap. Laughed like we were dying mummies because it was the last summer I'd be in Japan. The lust of sparkling skin on the sand of a faraway beach was the only memory when we came down, and we woke up to an auburn sunrise in the onyx sand. The wavy mirror, the face of the Atlantic is far away. The Pacific reflecting into my tender newborn eyes from the baptism of uppers and the ocean ice-cold seeped into our naked skin—washing off the sticky orange soda from last night as we lick away the salt and crusty archipelago of sugary stains. The sand itches our noses, dusty from the smoky barbecue. Pork crammed between my canines. We cuddle like sewer rats on the beach, but I've known rodents warmer than some people. The seagulls cry, and, when they open their old eyes, the saltwater breeze of the seaside sizzles at their sinuses. There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Suicide to end our high. We shoot up and go under. Where the nearest plateau leads, we hope there's a ledge. We need somewhere to park the car, and you find a garden where the stems of the flora never reached puberty because they were cut from the stem. Trophy roaches buried in the glove compartment. This is how I thought life would end.

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“Vous allez crever.”

CHAPTER TEN: CROSS-DRESSING AS A CHRISTIAN

Anyone with the will to live is an intrinsic masochist—burning in their primal breath.

The only utopia is death. I'm floating, bloated, in a backyard pool, swirling through an algae colony, staring into the sun, holding my breath until my head turns maroon. Chlorine cracks bloodlines in my eyes and sings my sinuses. The seductive tingle of my limbs falling asleep signals that my blood is hungry for oxygen—craving to catalyze the chemical reaction from violet to red.

My fiancée's face is timid, framed in the sun-shower sky. My head bobs. My ears muffle to the gurgling underwater pump, only to bubble up into the atmosphere of her burbling. The clouds sprinkle cool droplets in sweeps of wind. Goosebumps live on my soggy skin.

“Matt, I can't wait. We'll have a little house, and a little dog, and a little Matt.”

“You *know* I want to adopt.”

“I don't know if I can adopt. I don't know if I could love them.”

I can understand her doubt. If one of my future children had my DNA and the other was adopted, I would constantly second guess if my love was biased.

Fuck God, whatever it is, with its laws of physics and the nature it has sewn inside me.

I split, submerge and spring off the wall, breaststroke, eagle-eyed until I close them—exchanging my sight for faith in my swimming ability. The insides of my eyelids darken like raspberries when my nose smashes into the concrete side of the pool. The aftertaste of snot and metal confirms the substance trailing, melting candle-wax red from the collision, is my blood.

I can't even stand the sight of it. I don't know if I could face my own blood.

I can see the silver streaks under wise men's hair, when all they see is the unknowable. Nevertheless, the religious got something right.

Life is suffering. I think of the world having some kind of natural justice. In my preteen years, I figured it wasn't karma, but revenge. I could understand revenge, even rationalize it. Like there *was* a conscious deity with an all-seeing sniper scope, which trumpeted holy bolts at sinners for sick fetishes. For every euphoric high, an empty equal low. Some orgasms come tied to a tombstone. What's the difference between a parent and a murderer? Parents pray they don't experience their victims' death.

Don't think too hard. You won't be able to cum.

I lost my faith in God when I was a teenager because of no particular persecution, just the lack of empirical evidence. I spent many years mocking religion and using various forms of sedatives to not think about meaning in my life. I wanted to live like all my favorite music-stars that died at twenty-seven like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Elvis, Hank Williams and so on. And so at twenty-seven, I came awfully close to destroying myself before seeking a reason to live.

How can I bring a child into this world with no absolute justice? I work at a non-denominational Christian school for socially, behaviorally, and intellectually disabled children—a modified house where the kids recite The Pledge of Allegiance to a dusty American flag, the Christian flag, and the Bible each morning. I listen to their lazy version the State's love song slip out of sync and into slur. I'm half-baked, with my dutiful arm across my chest—the same awkward arm that camouflages the pentagrams on my T-shirts, when I see students' parents in the Walmart pharmacy line. I'm now in a collared shirt, in a classroom run by Misses. I am cross-dressing as a Christian, just lacking the crucifix.

Ms. Sally is leading today's "Devotion," thirty minutes of parables to help the kids with moral paradoxes. I drink water out of a milk jug. The blonde bowl-cut kid with glasses dabs and still hasn't

outgrown fidget-spinners. I teach high school, but most of the children have the social maturity of a ten-year-old. My co-teachers are genuine people and some of the older kids toss paper planes over their heads. Ms. Sally tells a fable about how violence is wrong. I zone out from lack of sleep. The kids zone out from lack of sleep and ADHD stimulants.

“So... Okay. Is it okay to hit others?” says Ms. Sally.

“Yeah!” says a kid. His enthusiasm makes others snicker. He doesn't pick up on social cues and therefore regularly sings “Bohemian Rhapsody” on blast in the bathroom. Nietzsche said vanity was the opposite of creativity. This boy is truly creative because he sacrifices vanity, fixing his cow-licked hair, for rock n' roll. The Misses make a kid with a skull on his shirt flip it inside out while the creative kid openly wears a shirt that says “*Chill*” in Netflix logo font. Death is hidden. Sex is subtle. The paper planes pile up.

“Violence is *not* okay. What did Jesus say? Turn the other cheek,” says Ms. Sally.

“Violence is okay, if it's self-defense,” says a smart-ass kid. I agree with him on this. But revenge is not self-defense. Revenge is personal, sneaky, defenseless. Revenge can only be committed by a conscious being.

There is a childlike scribble on the raisin-textured wall, “God is **NOT** dead.” It was chiseled in like the Ten Commandments.

If I don't take the commandments literally: Can I take them seriously? Can I have any goddamn respect for these evangelicals? Can I translate this into tolerant meaning if I take “God” as a metaphor for nature? Can I frame this as fiction instead of nonfiction and extract a practical sense of truth? Certainly, I am not interested in the metaphysical evidence (an oxymoron) of “God's” existence. I have to do this or I can't live while working here. I have to rationalize this or I'm going to intentionally get fired, go nihilistic psycho and unleash my faggot passion like the hot feet of Joan of Arc.

1. Thou shalt have no gods before Me.

Nature's laws are objective.

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| 2. Thou shalt not make unto thee graven images. | <i>Don't worship people.</i> |
| 3. Thou shalt not speak the name of the LORD in vain. | <i>Cursing nature is unproductive.</i> |
| 4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. | <i>Take a break from work.</i> |
| 5. Honor thy father and thy mother. | <i>If they are around.</i> |
| 6. Thou shalt not kill. | <i>Killing only leads to more killing.</i> |
| 7. Thou shalt not commit adultery. | <i>No one likes a cheater.</i> |
| 8. Thou shalt not steal. | <i>People won't trust you.</i> |
| 9. Thou shalt not bear false witness to your neighbor. | <i>Be truthful to yourself.</i> |
| 10. Thou shalt not covet. | <i>Be satisfied with yourself.</i> |

This modified version I can live with. I'm just sick of living as a spy, as a fucking Judas, while none of these sinners love thine enemies.

Ms. Jackie says the ending prayer and quotes, Lecrae, a Christian rapper, an abomination to musical theory, but at least he's not referring to girls as chicken heads, or flexing guns, or hitting licks, or cutting cocaine. "If I'm wrong about God then I wasted my life. If you're wrong about God then you wasted your eternity."

This is much better. Instead of promoting sexism and gang violence, this Christian rapper is justifying all shitty behavior with the illogical promise of an eternal afterlife.

Some kids subtly mock her. Even some children realize the hypocrisy.

When will they become aware and realize they are smarter than these adults? Will it crush them or empower them? When will they realize, at lunch when the Misses disappear, they are chiefting cigarettes? Maybe they smoke to calm the anxiety of their hypocrisy.

I have heard Ms. Patty say "I don't like kids." I don't take revenge and get her fired. I am jealous of her authenticity. I imagine how she would have reacted if I said "I don't like God." Would I be hell-

fired?

There's a sign hung above the school's toilet that states, "Don't believe in miracles, depend on them." Best believe I want to aim my piss a little higher.

When will they realize humanity has no answers, and they will have to make their own fucked-up decisions about who lives and dies, and they will ultimately die and no one knows what happens after? They are "Gods in ruin," as Ralph Emerson said.

When I was the children's age, my silver-haired, suit-clad, eleventh grade English teacher asked me what Emerson meant, and it was a question I couldn't answer. Asking a question that I couldn't answer within a couple of minutes was rare in high school. I'm not particularly intelligent. Most of my friends dropped out from boredom, rather than difficulty. I pictured Greek gods dramatically arguing with each other—like a daytime soap-opera on *Telemundo*. He was an authentic teacher, but I got caught laughing during his speech on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. He asked me what I was laughing at (usually something idiotic at that age, like buttocks), but this time I was seeking nihilistic revenge. I was jealous that this man could get excited over anything, much less a silly play. He was rightly angry and sent me outside to sulk, but all that's real now is that I'm the only one sulking. Why would I want to summon another sassy kid from my balls, when I am still subconsciously suffering from jealous revenge I committed ten years ago?

I'm twenty-seven now, but in the 1990's and early millennia, we would choke our friends out of consciousness by strangling each other until we passed out. The pause between my breaths felt like we could pause time and halt boredom for a second. I never saw a white light.

Nowadays, I am the one testing kids, giving them the option of a lollipop now or two in an hour. Surprisingly, most can sacrifice the moment for future gain. I like to know where their priorities lie. I like to discover the dirt in which they bury their dreams.

When will these kids truly realize life is a suicide mission? Will they resent their gods like I have forsaken mine? I do believe the sacrifice of crucifixion was a worthy death because, hell, Jesus' spirit (metaphorically) is still here today. Do I believe in God? That depends on what one means by God.

I believe in death.

Without its finality, life's meaningless. I believe that an afterlife is impossible to confirm until one dies. The idea of heaven bores me to death. A little suffering spices things up. I have no respect for things that can't die.

A popular response when I ask the meaning of life is, “happiness,” usually with a glint in the eye and a sparkle between the food in their teeth. I ask parents what they want for their kids, most say, “just to be happy.”

I wish my baby to suffer. I want it to awake, gasping, from a wet nightmare, drowning in an embarrassing stain. Sound sound?

Of course not. I want to seal it in a bubbled prison. I won't let it leave until I suffocate it in baby powder, until it drowsily drowns, supine, on the puke carrots I lovingly flew into its mouth—before it does it on whiskey twenty years later.

Is this what postpartum depression is like? I'm a male who, as far as I know, never fathered a kid. Fucking prepartum depression. I have as much right to make up a diagnosis as these priest-like psychiatrists pimping out pills to get paid. “Comfortably Numb” is an ode to Syd Barrett. It's a dream for Charles Manson. Wouldn't catch me dead in no death cult. But here I am, suffocating in this classroom. I am just as bad as the Misses—a Mr. Hypocrite, if not an infiltrator. I see all my students ordered in rows. Some are passed out from last night's parties. Some are high on weed and Ritalin. I picture their corpses hanging off desks, bruised and bloody—red stains soaked into their algebra books.

My sperm is going to crust up and die eventually. Should I preempt my offspring's death?

Should I cut them from the stem? Is the suffering worth the experience? I think I know the answer by not pulling my own trigger. Why would anyone want to be the reason someone dies? Does anyone think while they fuck?

At work, I turn around and a pimply-necked boy is facing the corner, his head corkscrewed, his chest facing me. I call his name, but he doesn't respond. For a second, I think he is just being socially peculiar. He has severe autism. I realize he is having a seizure and call Ms. Josephine for help. This happens every couple of months. His skin turns pale. I am always off-guard and terrified when it happens. It's what I think about when I wake up in darkness, paralyzed, I hear the thunderstorm and imagine fiery mushrooms, and think there is no way I am creating another human being. There is enough suffering. Stuff me with scissors at a vasectomy clinic, or maybe I'll just masturbate as a personal eugenics program, and stroke my way out of submission to God. I have a dream where I go to school and my student doesn't recognize me.

Am I supposed to have a euphoric religious experience—when my child pops out from under pubes, and I automatically unconditionally love some wrinkly baby? Am I to resist jealousy when it starts to suck on my wife's breasts? Oh, now I have to cut off its foreskin? Make it more numb. Makes perfect sense.

I am sitting in the Florida humidity, alongside the pool I'd wished to drown in, with my aunt's longtime boyfriend, Barry. I am venting a long week of study and teaching. Orange and pink light leaks from the clouds cuddling the horizon. Second-hand cigarette smoke mixes with the flat pilsner, giving me flashbacks of waking up in a doghouse, after a blackout in the bar.

Barry says, "I remember when I was in school the teachers would paddle us. Sure kept us in line. I had this one old English teacher. The only thing I respected about her was she'd hit the girls just as

hard as the boys.” How far we've ethically grown in a few decades.

Some purists think social equality will be complete when all of humanity is voluntarily sterilized. Men become succulent castratos, sacrificing their stems and sacks—and women will snip off their own clits with hedge clippers. That will clear up the sexual frustration.

No. Others will force all the people with dicks to pump up veins, and all the people with pussies to paint their faces, and use their sex drives to fuel the procreation—feed the bloodshed. Some people think they can force others to love.

The world is every extreme. It inspired the hope for heaven. It created the reality of hell.

A stick-bug fidgets on its back. I deem myself an insect paramedic and try to scoop the injured party on the backside of a package of oozy caterpillar tire plugs—before Barry squashes it out of dizziness, or anger, or disgust. I successfully get the bug on a cardboard stretcher, and fling him into the yard—in half adrenaline and half disgust. As my aim fails, he falls into a patch of brick rocks. I cringe, thinking about how I'd be dead, if I had fallen an equal distance relative to my body size, but then remember and rationalize—he has less body mass so it probably didn't hurt as bad. I look at him and he's covered in ants.

I let him be eaten alive, and it is all a selfish test. I am testing the boundaries of my moral equilibrium. How do I feel, now that I had let another suffer? Should I up the ante and play Russian roulette with a baby? If I'm passive, the suffering continues. If I act, will I create more suffering, or relieve some? The only rational choice I have is to try.

If there's no God, there can be no revenge upon Him. It's like being in a relationship in which you deeply care for someone and they are toying with you. You try to seek revenge against them, when you figure out your dreams of being together are forever futile—because the person you love doesn't exist, and the relationship wasn't one, and you feel ashamed of being so stupid, because you fell victim to your own flowery fantasies. Joke's on you. The joke is that there isn't one. It's the cruelest joke ever

played, because no one is playing it. I fell in love with an idea, and barely escaped death, for the moment.

To that stick-bug, I was not its paramedic. A paramedic is ultimately unaccountable for the death of its patients. I was its God. Infinitely more complex. I need to take responsibility for my power. I held its frail frame and tossed it into hell with my afraid right hand. If I can play mind games to justify the Ten Commandments, then I can jump through hoops to justify the absurdity of my cross-dressed existence.

Natural selection is the most divine right. We will keep blindly fucking to God's overbearing light until we evolve into beings that, as of this moment, we would consider God Himself. The distance from stick bug to human is trillions of years, but it's only a blink in the eye of eternity. All we have to do is faithfully blindfold, fuck, and not drown ourselves in doubt. The only utopia is nonexistence, but I'm going to fire cum so close to God's right hand—a utopian asymptote—that the line between moral standards melts, and He has to concede the boundary a nick higher.

Art is my religion. Writing is my afterlife. My spirit will live through the thoughts in old books. Music is my soothsayer. I can tell what note will play next in all of my favorite songs. I can tell the future. But I never saw this conclusion.

Some of the greatest achievements in art came from religion. I can see morality being played out from *Gilgamesh* to the very words I currently write. My bones still resonate to ancient epics. My flesh reverberates the truths of extinct societies whose scribbled specters haunt my conscience to this very day.

Show me my fucking soul. Is my spirit coded in my DNA? I always thought of ectoplasm as jizz-esque. Is life's purpose to inject and infect my soulmate, until our distant spawns mutate into Roman statues of David? Am I destined to a Darwin fantasy for evolutionary perfection? Maybe, if we don't annihilate ourselves into atomic oblivion. Maybe then viruses become angels.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: AFTERBIRTH

In the darkness of my childhood room, in a syringe of meaningless pain, I decided to tie myself to Miho. I was told by society that marriage and childbirth are supposed to be some of the most important decisions; I didn't realize that meaningful things take self-sacrifice. I thought sacrifice was a metaphor. When people experience depression part of the brain dies. It was up to me to rebuild myself or completely die.

Will I awake to the next life—born-again—a morning's end to endless nights of a sobbing wife? Question the coroner, postmortem: “Excuse me, perv. Mind clothing my lil wiener, sir? Did I OD on hors d'oeuvres? Pour liquor down the wrong pipe? Pretzel in a pileup? Worship the wrong Christ?”

The thing that I want to carry to an afterlife is a feature film of my death, so I can play it on *America's Funniest Home Videos*, with a laugh track—of only my own voice. Pass the popcorn. Oh, and I can't forget the stillbirth. Need to mop it up so no one notices. Stillbirth has “birth” in the word because suffering is born.

I always find it frustrating that the most pivotal moments in my life are unremembered: the demonic summoning of my poopy birth, childhood train-wrecks, backyard bludgeons from baseball bats, glass fragments spiraled like disco ball light, clean K.O.'s from the BMX stunts on dirt-jumps at the Bum Trails, Crisco off a linoleum kitchen floor, reawakening from a blackout with a couple of chipped front teeth that I found the pieces to, but then lost. I would record all my embarrassments and flash them like holographic Pokémon cards—my grimacing mugshot on the cover.

I want to remember all the stupid shit I self-censored as a teenager—because I'm recurrently forgetting. Since I've become old and crazy—the days come in cold-waves, heat-strokes, and holy-flashes that could freeze hell over—so cold it feels sticky hot, static as cicada cries, my brain is Baker-acted, sizzled like bacon fat.

Proselytized in front of an ornate TV, where they replay episodes of *Leave It to Beaver*, I win-back in a rematch for all my lost passwords. *Is this what goes through the old people's head's who spout nonsense after their fourth stroke?*

~~Scratch that~~, the burden of remembering for eternity is too great in our ever-expanding understanding of the cosmos. The eternal embarrassment of an ancient error would be branded into one's social status among angels. It would be like *Mean Girls*, but in *like* heaven.

Maybe I am saying that I want to remember, but I want everyone else to forget. There's power in memory, but there is also pain. Even the joyous moments are distilled in my memories, are never again be obtainable, and it wasn't probably as perfect as I remember anyways—they are bittersweet.

Why am I so foolish to ever assume I am to be fulfilled by paradise in the first place? The best one can morally muster is not always enough to satisfy. I am doomed by my own primal digression. I'll lick a bus floor for twenty bucks.

I can't stand another spoonful of sappy syrup. The syringe is so I can't taste it.

I knew it from *the moment* Santa Claus and the *fucking* Easter Bunny became fictional. Everyone's lying about demons, because they are them. Semen and period blood are what people are made from. It's boogers, lice, and everything vice. We are not carnival caricatures. We're carnal, blood, and guts. The only thing a stork brings are regurgitated fish to its fledglings. Maybe I don't want some fairy-tale bullshit. Maybe my idea of a good time is bleeding.

I have fallen. I am no longer among the lambs to slaughter. Euphoric in their goddamned gratuity. Drunk cats in barnyards, off jiggling udders, fiends for the next white fix.

Dear father, forgive me—for supper has spilled.

These bisques are stale, a frozen salt mine, dandruff dry—a stick of chalky deodorant in the mouth.

This wine is spoiled, squeezed from dingle-berries, dirty devil raisins with no spread.

God leaks from his overworked corporate dickhead. He was married to his heart, but it attacked him in a domestic dispute. The rib cage was too tight. But during the mid-life crisis he conceived a lovechild. Busted in a virgin from Nazareth. The result of five Quaaludes, a few wise men, and a bottle of gin.

I'm sick of all this love. It's servitude. I swallow vomit, so as not to come off rude.

I feel safest when I'm alone, when no one knows where I am—my loved ones especially. Father foremost. ~~X that.~~

Widow centerfold.

It's funny how there's a word for widows but none for mother's of stillborns. ~~Hilarious.~~ Late night, cradling dead organelles, ethereal midnight cartoons, or epileptic hallucinations, like her eyes were stamped by the blue light from the television screen, and make-believe whistles go off somewhere in the space, but it's only noise damage from graveyard days, when we were trying to overhear grownup talk. We wanted to dig a hole in the sun with our eyes. The blotches and blisters were worth the ability to sense less. We have to bury our child in something overbearing.

Pagan satyrs.

Saturn, Deus. Tie the knot. Rope the noose.

Lucifer—frozen in his parents' basement.

Except there are no dungeons in Florida, well, maybe in the north. Have you heard of the aquifer?

The deep south.

It's frozen solid now, but I have a pint of whiskey, whips and chains.

Shit, I remember when this place was full of blood, rain, and rapid veins. Boring. Maybe I'll kick my own ass, and post my goose eggs for extra likes. I'll block my locale because I wouldn't be caught dead in a broken home.

Marlboro stains, spotlight sunburns—on my terrace, smoking a cigarette while chewing
Nicorette, balding, kerosene lean, lemon trees, pot sticks, and the sea breeze.

Doomed to always endure love notes floating onto a burning hourglass bottom that, when full,
signals devils to serve scrambled eggs, peppered with the char. This is where he is most beautiful, when
it hurts. Where the ~~child~~ ~~lives~~ in the afterbirth.

CHAPTER TWELVE: TO SCRUB THE DOG PISS OUTTA WHITE TRASH HEART

Before Japan...

One appeal of digging yourself into a hole is the illumination of a clear path upwards. I have dug so deep that the sun peered only through a pinhole. I'm straining to swim upstream, so the purebreds pissing down my well—can't pin me.

I'm of mutt blood.

I am dating a girl who thinks she resembles Zooey Deschanel—she turns out to have an equally annoying personality. She guilt-trips me into paying for formal dates and orders certain desserts that she knows I hate—*I see you, Strawberry Tarts*. But she always offers me some anyway. Even so, we kindle over a common love of anime, and her knowledge is vast and hot. She is an intellectual nebula.

We go to Downtown Melbourne, the only place in The Harbor City where we can barhop. Downtown's streets include art galleries, a bouquet of florists, a worldwide variety of restaurants, puke, and bums. This particular night, we start on the second-story balcony of Mainstreet Pub, an Irish-themed bar, which feels more like a hoarder's house, full of my—now in their mid-twenties—high school alumni. A cackling train whistles over the drunkenness, and the anchovy smell of low tide compliments the taste of my draft.

There's an old engineer-looking man—the sand of Florida's Space Coast—with a pink leash attached to a Pomeranian. I'm not ageist, but he certainly doesn't fit the demographics of the bar, and I don't particularly pay attention to him, but my girlfriend merges into the cloud of women patting his pooch.

Why would anyone bring a dog to a bar? I forget the question, burn a cigarette, and bullshit with a friend. For a blur, we freestyle rap as our brain cells swirl in an alcoholic whirlpool, spitting silly rhymes to offbeat rhythms.

My friend barks.

“Is your dad mad? Let me find his G-spot,” he says.

I don't nearly laugh like I used to—laugh until I throw-up and shake like a cumming cock, overstimulated by a friend's tongue. This time is a small exception. I can taste my gut.

I will laugh over the course of two months, because I imagine the confusion and cringe of an already ornery beer-chugging Buffalo Bills fan coming to terms with the shameful fact that his prostate exists, and it's buried in his butt-hole. His football team loses, and his testosterone plummets. Finding his G-spot will certainly appease his anger.

My girlfriend returns, shoulders perched high, as if she's seen a roach.

“That guy over there is gross. He asked if his dog could buy me a drink,” she says.

As her “man,” I am wedged underneath the ruby heel of her pride.

I am no knight.

Chivalry is dead.

Maybe. I'm a deadbeat.

I don't know. I do know that I can either confront the old man or let it pass. He is already fleeing from his gimmick to woo younger girls by wobbling downstairs. I choose my battle carefully, change the subject, and strategically chug my drink. *Who am I joking?*

I'm no knight; I'm a trickster.

That would explain my enthusiasm for poop jokes. Native American myths resemble Asian ones. Perhaps because of the ancient migration across the Bering Strait. In a Winnebago Trickster Tale, the trickster meets a plant that anthropomorphically warns him, “If you eat me, you will defecate!” Because he is defiant, he eats the shrub, and excretes until he's sitting on a pile of his own shit—so high that it reaches the canopy of the trees.

The Jameson, Guinness, and Baileys, curdling in my stomach, warn me, “If you drink more of

me, you will defecate!” Nature's rules are absurd but real. An Irish Car Bomb is about to detonate in my drawers.

We opt to go to Off The Tracks, a disco bar with a white-guy reggae band.

My fondest memory—there—is when I dressed in drag and was waiting in the bathroom line when a hefty ebony beauty—exiting the bathroom—gave me a high-five, and whispered, “I didn't wash my hands,” then winked and strutted away. I was grossed out, but at least it wasn't boring. I try to laugh at life's travesties. Lots of times, I'm dry. I'm attracted to dark humor; on one level, it turned me on. But I hope she was a fellow trickster, because I'm a bit of a germophobe. I miss my sparkly clutch, carrying my cigarettes, and hooker-red lipstick.

In another Winnebago Trickster Tale, he begins this story by creating female parts for himself, and becoming a woman. Upon doing so, he allows the fox, the jay, and the nit each to impregnate him before finally donning female apparel, and going to the village to court the chief's son.

Tonight, we don't even make it halfway until we see the same low-luck Casanova with his leashed cupid. He's charming women on the brick bank, where local bands busk. It's the same blowhard that tried to hit on my girlfriend, the creep that slaves a dog to get ass.

I camouflage myself in my dog-loving persona—easily, because I too love dogs. I grimace, and squat next to another sphere of women circling the poof.

“He's so cute. Where did you get him?” says a woman.

“I wanna fuck this dog,” I say.

Chivalry revived in the form of a bestiality joke. The women scatter, and I feel bad that the dog lost its affection. At least these women aren't kneeling to this dude. My friends are foaming, rabid, hysterical. We feed off each others' immaturity. I'm a drunken dog. My relationship eventually fades away.

I don't fuck dogs, though—sorry for the disappointment—or relatives, for the record. I can't

really recall my thought process sometimes when drunk, but I'm sure a pop-punk song had influence on my actions.

(Instrumental Break 8 Beats)

One of my dogs is bisexual and incestuous. I hate to kennel his sexuality, but the black Chihuahua once had sex with his chubby sister, and his penis got stuck inside her as they both screeched. He enjoys humping my other male dog, which is twice his size—not penis size—in body weight. I can't imagine how horny he would be if we didn't castrate him. This paragraph is absurd. Discussing a dog's sexuality is absurd. It's like I've constructed a dog fence, and then claimed to have bounded the universe, licking wounds while I drool.

There's a meme that depicts a couch, with the curves of The Venus of Willendorf. It hits a little close to home. I lost my virginity to my couch when I was ten. In the land before Time Warner Internet Cable, the fuzzy static of a channel—with three digits—flashed of brief boob, dick, and butt. Testosterone is a hell of a hormone. Dat ass doe.

In another Winnebago Trickster Tale, the trickster has a hundred-foot-long penis that he keeps coiled in a box. He uses it to, literally, prop up a tepee. Maybe that's why I like sex jokes. The Japanese represent the trickster as the tanuki, otherwise known as the raccoon-dog. It's so tricky that it can't be pinned as one animal. It has golden testicles and uses them to shape-shift.

I am a sexual joke.

I've been called a faggot more times than I have kissed a girl. The first time was the only time it hurt, in Mrs. Boone's seventh-grade class. She had a big leg. The kids said it was elephantiasis. They called her Big Legged Boone. Some preteens are such shitheads. But now, so am I.

I was a *good* boy when I young: attentive, quiet, studious, but passively curious—all the things teachers wanted me to be. I had a late birthday. I was younger than most of my classmates. Teachers would pat me on the head, but none showed me any heartfelt hugs. I think attention is synonymous

with love. Or it's—at least—a milestone to measure affection.

“What do you do to that boy? Beat him?” my teacher asked my mother.

The *bad* kids got all the hugs. After all, love is the antidote to *badness*, right?

The need for love detoured me into deviancy.

This freckly kid, with a French last name, called me a faggot because I joined The Pen-Fifteen Club. “To join, all you have to do is write *Pen-15* on your arm,” he said. The permanent marker smelled of seductive fumes. The smell is putrid, but enough of it will get you high.

But I learned from *bad* kids. Later that class, I folded up a paper wasp, wrapped it around a rubber band—stretched it between my fingers—and slung it at his forehead. It hit so hard that he leaked red. Mrs. Boone finally gave a fuck. She made time for a full-course interview—with a side of detention.

I saw an interview with John Mongrel, a general of the 28's, a South African prison gang. He revealed that he rapes men face to face. The kicker is: He claims he's not gay. Is he proposing that his sexual drive is so strong that it is not a part of him? Or is this a tactic to keep him out of a label box? He is pure evil, but the most devious tyrant is almost always too complex to be a dunce. Is this trickster trolling?

By eighth grade, I took a non-violent tactic.

“Fucking faggot,” he said.

“Yeah, I'll suck your little dick,” I said, and I coiled him into an uncomfortable closet where everyone laughed at his attire. No—its not his dress they were laughing at—it was how unnerved he was, shaking in the shell of his sports jersey.

Kids salivated, like hounds, over the thinnest slice of sweat.

I'm not in the closet; I'm in the water supply. Or maybe the water closet.

My favorite lyricist, Adam Green, made a movie on his I-Phone, titled *The Wrong Ferrari*. It's

an hour on seemingly nonsensical lines, as the main character is thrust into a video game view of his European tour, all on ketamine. “I’m the King of the Faggots,” he says as he prances around, and claims the word that others used to try to dominate me. I crown myself as “The King of the Faggots” and use my title to cut them with the edge of their tongues.

Sometimes I feel like Mary Shelley made me, dug me from graves, and patched me with dog-tags. If I’m not embalmed in fire, then I’m not doing my duty as a Romantic. I’ll dig a lock-pick in my nerve and open the ache. I’ll dive the musty caves of my mollusk desires. I wanna reek like the devil’s dildo. I want to suffer the intolerance to offense, until I’m the martyr of its death. I want to burn out like Lord Byron, with a little more class. As Oscar Wilde said, “I would go to the stake for a sensation, and be a skeptic to the last.”

This is for my forefather faggots, matriarchal misfits, who suffered state persecution. They bled so I can openly sin. It’s my duty, and the least I can do.

Not all taboos should be trifled with, but some hold my hollow heart in the mud of their mires. I am constantly trying to offend myself. I’m testing boundaries. I’m expanding a fence. There’s nothing anyone could do to me I wouldn’t do to myself. Some taboos are too savory to be only worshiped through tongues. I will devour them and roll in the flaming altars of my doo doo.

I’m in Raleigh, North Carolina, for New Year’s Eve.

I dance in a stranger’s sweat, in the rain, on a rooftop.

The stranger whispers *you are sexy* in a foreign language. I can’t hear the words—but I feel them—reverberating on our pressed lips. It’s the way the tongue rolls.

The stranger tells me to call, but I know that the more I know, the more this little snapshot will smolder around the edges, until the smokescreen dissipates to reveal the nothingness of my ideal. So I leave.

I sneak onto a free bus for drunk NC State students. It's so packed that we have to stand.

"I'm the King of the Faggots. I'm The King of the Faggots," I say, fishing for a frat-boy fisticuffs. I hook a monster, first cast.

"Shut the fuck up, fagit." a burly guy says, and bulls his chest against mine.

Our nipples are practically neighbors.

"No. I'm King of the Faggots," says a random guy. He wiggles between the breath of our nostrils and steals my chance at martyrdom.

We play Rock-Paper-Scissors to settle our royal statuses. He rocks my scissor hands and I lose my crown. A girl pampers the nipple guy into sitting down.

The next day, my friend's sister—who she tells me is a lesbian—pours us a shot of moonshine their dad brewed. It tastes like peach nail polish. We're meeting for the first time. She looks like Britney Spears, a country girl who likes to break the law. She has three pending DUIs and a fashion degree. She's not that vigilant. She tells me that she will sew an American flag on my jean jacket as an ironic gesture. A *when in Rome* kind of role-play. Florida's technically southern, but Melbournian culture is a mix-match of Cuban, Parrot-head, Dirty South, NASA nerd, snow bird, tourist town, old people, and beach-bum cultures. Even the name Melbourne is a facade, because if I say I'm from there to any foreigner, they think Down Under. Sometimes I talk in a bad Aussie accent when people ask, "Australia?"

I help Britney move thrift-shop furniture in her living room, ornate couches that smell sour, and have little spiders on them. The more I drink, the faster time feels, until after midnight, we end up in her roommate's bed. We just kiss. Later, according to her sister, she really liked a photo of mine on the internet—one of my friends lifting a potato chip bag with his butt-cheeks.

I'm at Runaway Country Festival in my local park. All of the musicians here, I hate. Most

contemporary country is just shitty pop songs with a southern accent. I love the old stuff—when they sang deeply about love and pain. Now it's all pickup trucks and beer. The reason I'm here is to make like a redneck, black out, then wobble back to my house. I bought a hat that says “Kiss My Bass” on it—some real white-trash, mud-wrestling shit. I used to shoot empties with a twelve-gauge in the backwoods, aluminum crypt, adrenaline blush, numb shoulder, solid grip, scattershot dust pluming over our spray-painted bikes. A great actor lives his roles. At what point does acting in real life become real life?

My friend and I faux argue about NASCAR.

“Dale Earnhardt died a loser! Couldn't even finish the race!” he says. He pushes me.

“Fuck off. Dirty lung Jeff Gordon breathes Dale Jr.'s burnt dirt,” I say. I had practiced this line in my mind like a catchy lyric.

We toss our BBQ stained T-shirts aside and grapple. I bite his pectoral, because my head is wrenched too tightly in his armpit. Our bodies constrict, knot, and snake in beer and body odor, hands grasping hair. I misplace my sense of direction, then his weight orients me towards hell, gravity grounding me into dirt. We tumbleweed in the mud.

His stubble prickles, as we latch mouths like Velcro. His tobacco dip is evergreen, spit gooey as motor oil. A pack of roughnecks wrap, whistle, and horseplay around our rodeo. They applaud. Another friend sticks the filter-end of a lit cigarette in my friend's ass-crack. It is the angel to the Christmas tree, that he branded on his butt-cheek.

I'm on a porcelain cheetah, in a suit, on a boat, in the middle of the ocean. I'm on the carousel of *The Oasis of the Seas*, the sister-ship to the biggest cruise vessel in the world. After coalescing with tequila and singing “Cheeseburger in Paradise,” a group of relative strangers crowded around the rotating animals. We were all bound to *The Oasis*.

“Man, I feel like a woman. Dernt dernt...de dernt de dernt dernt.” I said.

People catch my pseudo-southern reference. Or maybe they just like laughing at a man saying frilly things. The moon is curved, *or is it my intoxication?* The waves rock us, turning us tipsy as toddlers in the dark. There are no insects at the center of sea—so instead of fireflies—passengers swirl around the corona of the merry-go-round. I'm crimson from a day of *Sol* and sunburn.

“I'm the King of the Faggots,” I say.

There's a guy in a Guy Harvey shirt with a shark tracking a swarm of fish.

“Don't say that, man. I have a gay friend,” he says.

My friend, the one that I made-out with at the country festival—the friend that is eager to investigate the location of anybody's dad's G-spot—looks at me, and we laugh. This was our fatal error. We judged too quickly.

Guy Harvey snarls.

“A friend?” I say.

“Me.” His frumpy buddy looks at me with a frown. He's pinned my sexuality, while asking us to not piss on his. Dismal hypocrisy. Words are only as powerful as the hate *or love* behind them, furthermore, whom they are projected towards. This is just another paper wasp, now aimed at myself.

“*I'm* the King of the Faggots,” I say, staring straight through him, like a succubus. I want to eat his soul.

“You're a bad joke,” he says.

Life's a bad joke. You want to ban living? *I wish* I say.

They storm away. I see the true colors of his intolerance, underneath a rainbow flag, but a flag nonetheless. He's like the blind difference between the modest believer and the militant religious. Deaf dogma.

I can empathize with insecurity, but I will not again sink to its undersea level. I offer little life-

jackets to those drowning in this *Oasis*. The struggling—are so dehydrated that they—perceive my rescue as a weapon. It is a weapon, but its grip is towards them. My hand bleeding on the blade. They are so thirsty that they lose sight, headfirst in the shallows—and they can save themselves by simply sipping. Sip the water supply.

The next day, I pass Guy Harvey at breakfast. I give him a wink. Next thing I know, I'm sporting a British Speedo on a foreign beach, tanning nips with my peeps. I apologize. I'm sorry for his insecurity.

Back in Japan...

It is 4:00 p.m. at Tokyo station, on New Year's Eve—the only day that the trains run all night. In The States, drunk people yell Jesus at me. In Japan, I'm just another fucking foreigner. I rotate through Tinder profiles, foreign faces revolving like a slot machine. *Come on; **Big Money, Big Money***. I hit jackpot, with the profile pic of a French girl in Rococo stockings, sunning on a waxed racecar.

“Hey. What do you like to do for *fun*?” I text. This is a classy way to summon sexual deviancy.

“Hi. I like to have sex with my socks on,” she says.

My brain goes bingo. Bulls eye. Vineyard binge drink. Royal flush. Cocaine. A fat ass with the roll of a freight train, a pair of opals rubbing rust off a dumpster. Reckless lust so sensuous, I think I might have caught tetanus.

Night falls. I am ashamed of my lack of self-control. After I shower off the shame, I go—solo—to a nightclub called Ageha, which means *swallowtail butterfly*. The blur of bass quakes my brain, raving, soaked in cheap champagne. I whirl through my Tinder matches and a New-Half pops up, the jawline shark-like, the egg in the throat. An array of our previous casual texts appear. The last one was at 2:00 p.m.: “What's the best place in Tokyo?” Now, my drunken self is in the mood for deviant texting.

“Hey. Do you have a penis?” I text. I get lost in hallways of transient bodies—entangled elbows, lavender musk, noir lights, haystacks of suspect needles lining the balcony pool, slicks of neon sliding down the backdrop, erotic dancers on chandeliers, ebony hair, plum lips, phantoms of a soap-opera.

Tokyo's a clean city. But through the black gates of the *swallowtail butterfly*, in the dead of morning, I have to ask a bouncer where the exit is—in kindergarten-level Japanese. The New-Half texts back.

“Hahahaha,” s/he texts. Dick-pic after dick-pic floods my stream, and then s/he blocks me so I can't text anymore. *Was this trap just trolling?*

Is Admiral Ackbar a Catfish? It's a trap.

On the train ride back to my hotel, another girl messages me on Facebook from Melbourne, twelve-hour time difference. I never met her, but she added me, and I have a self rule: I have to add everyone who friend requests me. *I'm weird, I know*. I like to set little arbitrary constraints in my life, like stepping on a crack will break your mother's back—like not clipping my nails on my right hand for six months and no sane reason—also like pooping in the ocean for a week, which I learned takes Zen concentration.

Most of the people that add me from Facebook are housewives from my hometown. I inspect her pictures. She looks like a junkie, empty eyes, with oily facial fissures. She smells like a junkie. I can smell her pheromones in the texts of our conversations. It's probably something serious like Oxycontin, something that could fuck her up for life. She says she is a sex addict. I rarely think of it as a disease. Has our sexuality been so caged that natural urges are now considered addictions? I've arrived at the terminal.

It is 4:00 a.m. at Tokyo station, on New Year's Day. The only day that the trains run all morning. Two young Japanese guys speak to me in English. The conversation is lackluster, but I'm thrilled to

speaking in my native tongue. They whisper in Japanese and giggle between each other.

“What is it?” I say.

More giggles.

“We were wondering if you're gay,” the tall one says.

“Depends who's asking,” I say.

Just imagine giggling after everything I say.

“I am,” says the short one.

“Ehhh, not so much,” I say.

We walk for a little more and the tall one says “*sayonara*.” They hug goodbye.

“How about just a handjob or blowjob?” the short one says, as we walk out of the station.

My sexuality is some backwards God; but a God nonetheless. If I have to shuffle it into a box, below The Surgeon General's warning, the label would read: Dog.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ROYAL FLUSH

After Japan...

Before I started my own family, I had business to settle in my existing one. As long as I was trapped in hell, I might as well sweep up a bit.

Our family didn't have reunions, only hurricanes. We hunkered in my parents' citadel and feuded like proper kin. When I heard the news that Hurricane Irma was whirling towards Florida, I thought, *Nice, I can lock myself in a room for a couple days and worship video games.* I'd distract myself with entertainment to forget that I exist and pause the pain of missing Miho.

PITA defeated that ideal. She showed me an ideal's lack of worth.

The price for vacation was that I had to board up windows, but it was typhoon routine. I'd been screwing up walls since I was a kid. I gathered my paintball gloves, the drill batteries, and a bitchy alter ego. I was an eccentric handyman: hot, sticky, salt-scaled.

“Wear shoes, Matthew, because, God forbid, one of those shutters slips from your hands, and slices off a pinky toe.”

I took orders from Momma Dukes, had the shutters suctioned to chalky stucco. The neighborhood of twisting screws made squawks like rare birds, whippoorwills of bad weather.

Revolution. Spirals. Whirlpools. Flushing. Crop circles. I imagine the aftermath of the hurricane.

When half the windows were boarded, Dad was out of breath. I told him to take a break, but I think he felt he had to prove himself. I don't want to use the cliché of a midlife crisis, but he had all of the symptoms. He ordered a new granite Dodge Challenger. that conveniently wouldn't arrive in Florida until after the storm.

“Good thing. Better it break in their hands, than mine,” he said.

It didn't have a hemi, but it had a shaker. I didn't completely understand what that means, but it sounds pretty cool. I realized I didn't know him well enough when he started drag racing randoms at red lights.

We didn't always have money, but he quit his unappreciative job to work at NASA. And I am grateful, even stupidly proud of something that I didn't accomplish. Material wealth is nice, but I don't believe any of that shit will save me. NASA is the kind of name-drop that holds water across the world, and you know the first thought is: *Wait. Your dad's a rocket scientist?*

Not quite, but sounds nice.

He showed me pictures of the car that he's soon to receive.

I felt bad, because I was as curious as a cat—underwater. I felt like he wanted me to pop a boner over the car's candy curves. I just wasn't really into cars.

“I never thought, ever, ever, that I would get this car, Matthew,” he said. I thought he was about to cry. I hoped he was at least this emotional when I was born.

I gave up on trying to prove myself to him a long time ago. I love him, but I don't owe him shit. When does an accident owe its victim?

Did I give up on my dad when I didn't make the high school basketball team, or when I started skipping class? Was it when I spray painted an airsoft gun's tip black, or when I got a real pistol? I forgot when he gave up on me, but I remember him saying “You're shitting on me, Matthew.” I remember laughing, but it hurt.

After the hour of Do It Yourself Home & Garden bullshit, I felt pretty sure we'd survive. Dad and I somehow managed to squeeze three cars into the garage. I was satisfied with muscle aches and endorphins. Just sitting down felt like chewing Xanax, bittersweet. Speaking of drugs, I stashed a bunch as hors d'oeuvres for our hurricane party. Well, I had them hidden there before. That became their newly appointed niche. I was *clearly* responsible and well prepared.

Mom made us egg-salad sandwiches, boiled chicks grounded into paste and mashed between two wheat slices. It was delicious, because she adds mayonnaise. I was unworried about the incoming natural disaster, but then I realized I had forgotten about *PITA*.

She was tall, bony, gawky, wore all black, a lot like myself in appearance. Except she had an aura. It's what the weather forecaster's Doppler 9000 detected, sonar waves of rain-bands. It was the feeling animals get before going to high ground because there's the taste of foredooming sprinkle in the air.

She slammed the door to the mudroom behind her and serenaded the two chihuahuas with baby talk. The squeals were so shrill it made me wish sound didn't exist. Think about your favorite song erased from existence. Yes, that bad.

PITA was my little sister.

Well, now twenty-five.

I'll tell you how she acquired this nickname later.

1. It wasn't because of pita bread.

If you can call that flat-shit bread. I like my bread like I like butts, with dough-boy puff.

2. It wasn't because of PETA,

but it's pronounced the same way. It's just as unfocused. Let's save killer whales—that mangle baby seals for sport, while not worrying as much about murderous puppy mills. Clear evidence for cute aggression. All jokes aside, I heard Sea World was inbreeding the whales; what the fuck? No one deserves to be that close to a relative.

3. It wasn't because she was cute as a kid.

Every year, I wrote letters to go with my parents' gifts. I started to inscribe the salutation,

Love your favorite child,

Matthew

My parents thought it was funny, because it was absurd, but I think she thought it was true. I wish I'd told her the truth, but it was entertaining to watch her tantrums. She started to end her cards that way too. She failed to realize that creativity is when a person is the first to do something. I stopped writing it, but she continued to. Was she looking for a prize for last place?

I have to admit that she was cuter than me. I thought that this was a strength, but maybe it was a handicap.

There's a psychological phenomena that occurs in human beings, where they like to cause pain to things that are cute. Previously living in Japan, I completely empathize. It's probably why grandma pinched extra dimples into my cheeks.

I play a game in my head. I create contexts for common phrases. "At least he was doing what he loved." Sometimes I like to think about when we die, what if we get stuck in the last moment of our lives forever? Our final mindset is the setting in which we have to spend eternity.

Perhaps cute aggression is why "*the pleasure was all mine.*" A semantic cocktail of schadenfreude and cute aggression? Maybe. This salutation sounds like something a polite rapist would say, but it's normalized within English, and even more—it's a top-tier compliment to depart to.

I like to think that this awkward phrase was derived from selfishness. An ego. Everyone is defined by their desires. People roam in packs because they've got a taste for the same throat. Few are on separate diets, chasing deviant delicacies.

"We all act on selfish needs, no matter which act." I told Dad this selfishness revelation, and he was offended.

"So people that take bullets for others are being selfish?"

"There's always a motivation." That, he could agree with. It was a straw man; I didn't care.

Why does selfishness get a bad reputation? People act like being selfish and selfless are mutually exclusive. Maybe selfishness is a prerequisite for kindness. Got to have something to give

something.

I won the argument, but then I ran my mouth for too long. “The person who took the shot was probably just trying to get laid.”

“You're being silly.”

“I bet at least fifty percent of the people that take a bullet do it because they are horny.”

Okay. I am being silly. But I am trying to cheer him up.

He is still on edge.

Probably because *PITA* is home.

She is ever-consuming. 1. Buys exercise equipment consistently, and uses it privately once, before it corrodes on the back-porch from the ocean air. 2. Cops a skateboard and rides for one day. 3. Gets a guitar, never learns how to play.

Just like Dad. To his credit, he taught me how to play Bad Company on guitar, when I was a jitterbug. They're a band that is like Jon Bovi, but good. At least that song.

I'm like Mom.

My sister used to call me a “son of a bitch.” I told her that means that she would be the “daughter of a bitch.” She said she didn't care. I kind of take it as an emblem of pride. I am a bad bitch. Anyone that knows and still talks shit about my mom, I'm going to psychologically meat-grind.

Including myself.

I saw my mom's high-school photo, and it looked like me, but with straight hair. It was horrifying. When people say you might turn out like your parents, I never expected to mirror her. But maybe it's for the best, because she runs our household, always has.

King Louis XVI had Peyronie's disease, painful scar tissue on his penis, and couldn't consummate. Marie Antoinette pleaded for him to cut the tissue. In a time without modern anesthesia, I

would be hesitant too. It took him years to agree, but he did, and she birthed an heir to the throne. She was later accused of incest by her son, and both parents were executed. When does a prince owe his victims?

When my parents visited Japan, my old boss said Dad was weak. I laughed. I thought that she might have got the connotations of the word confused, but maybe she was right, in a sense. He's been taking supplements of Reishi, cute mushrooms that look like Jupiter's eye. They're suppose to make you feel better, or something. They don't even get you high.

Dad will cry before Mom will. In fact, I don't know if I've ever seen her cry. The clouds circled to weep.

My sister got the nickname *PITA* from my parents. I got the name Woogs. I don't know what mine means. You know how sometimes sounds just represent people precisely?

Her name is an acronym for *Pain In The Ass*. A royal fucking pain in the ass—it fit her, but did she grow into it? Was *PITA* her conch shell? The pastel interior with its oceanic howls protecting her from the possibility of universe without Prince Perfect. Was the pseudonym a mold to grow into?

Sometimes I feel like we would be closer if she were a boy. Instead of pretentious passive aggression, we could just choke each other out until we're best mates. We were very competitive with each other, but being different sexes complicates how we step on each other. All in good intention, of course. That's what I used to convince myself of.

She loitered in the shadows of my childhood. I have always been tough on her.

I once stole the remote from her, I didn't care what was on T.V., just cared how she would react. I just wanted her attention. She was focused on stupid shit—chasing a feeling of superficial wholeness from a phony reality show about some characters that were sixteen and pregnant. These are dolls—dingle-berries that MTV primed from their Benjamin-wiped asses. If the girls were poor and

impoverished, that would be a better sample of kids with kids, statistically. I learned the hard way that reality shows “try” to represent Newtonian truth. Darwinian truth is abandoned.

In times where I agitated her, I would calmly repeat punk song lyrics. Subliminally conditioning her to disobey her idols, setting the seed of nihilistic unrest. She tried to ignore my words.

“Gimme the clicker!”

Eventually, the punk mentality of Patti Smith got to her. Visions of a beautiful girl washed up on Redondo Beach. Only young girls die—diva intact. She was no longer young.

When *PITA* showed up to the party, she always brought friends. This time it was Miller Lite and her boyfriend. I rarely talk to her without the presence of him. It's not like I hated him, but we were on different wavelengths. He was chasing a buzz, while I was after enlightenment.

I listen to Boosie rap about being high when he dies, contemplate the existence of an afterlife.

I don't think I'd smoke weed if it were legal. I like the rush of doing things that could get me in trouble. Maybe I'm just lying to myself and was chasing the same high as her boyfriend.

When I was high, I was the reincarnation of Rasputin, wandering aimlessly through the Siberian tundra of the dark web, a prophet of death lying hungover against a slender pine. Soothsayer to a headless throne.

Birtherd me on the dusty love seat, to a silent movie that runs in daydreams, sweet layers in the memories of birthday cakes, a baby assembled in a back seat.

The clouds spilled their bowels. The storm cried outside.

I wandered through myself, until I heard screams.

It was raining pussy and wiener dogs. Wet foliage flapped like broken VCR tape. Circular, winding, relentless.

I tried to ignore the screaming, because with *PITA*—I'm not sure if she was just crying over spilled Starbucks.

I heard her boyfriend's baritone voice become angrier. I feel like all her boyfriends were off-brand versions of me. I feel like they were watered-down reflections. They were like me, if I was a reality star. I tried to kill my celebrity, but its zombie still haunts me. I'm realizing it will be an unending inquisition. Her boyfriends were barriers between us. I couldn't talk to her in front of them. They all skateboarded. But I used to BMX. Skateboarding was too mainstream. BMX was the bastard son of extreme sports—skateboarding was the Justin Bieber.

The Japanese have two words that describe one's real thoughts, and the persona one puts on for the sake of order. Their view of the persona is positive. That without it, society would collapse. I think there is some truth to this, but I've always despised personas. I have failed my sister in this regard. I should have told her boyfriend to fuck off. I suppose I was afraid that this would create a divide between us, but I was losing her either way, so I might as well have spoken up.

When most everyone publicly agreed, I got a stomach ache. I imagined everyone masturbating into each other's ears, spunky loads spurting out of and into every orifice. It was gross. But I joined in. Lie after lie. Leaking manners. I politely came in others' ears. The sky shot a load on the rooftop.

I let them battle it out in their bedroom. It got so bad, that I feared that the fight became physical. I heard shattering glass.

“What's going on?” I asked.

My parents were clueless. We barged into her bedroom. We boarded the windows, but were unprepared for the leak in her room.

“I don't know what her problem is. I was just sitting here,” said her boyfriend. He was sipping a beer.

“You turned off my show!” PITA wouldn't let up.

“Are you serious?” said her boyfriend.

The foamy shards of a beer bottle lay in the corner. Everyone yelled at each other, but finally

my mom isolated PITA in her bedroom and seemed to settle the distress for the moment.

“What was that all about?” I asked her boyfriend.

“I don't know, man. One minute she was fine, and another she just freaked out,” her boyfriend said. He seemed sincerely clueless. Either way, he was unfit to handle his relationship, and he drove off in the middle of the storm. The sound of his old Ford pickup was muffled in the rain. I let him go, because if he was willing to give up on my sister, then he was already dead to me.

PITA emerged from her room, dried tears on her face.

“Where is he?” she said. When she realized he left, the screaming began again. I was prone to panic attacks, the feeling of needles all over my body. I couldn't feel my limbs. I went back into my room to calm down.

Nuggets of marijuana were calling me. I wanted to forget what just happened. I wanted to fast forward through the storm. Then, I heard my mother and sister outside. My sister was allowed to endanger her own life. I used to think the laws against suicide are stupid. If someone wants to kill themselves, why should we stop them? Are we going to lock lifeless bodies in jail? As I matured, I realized that ending one's life doesn't stop the pain of living. The pain just distributes to the dead's loved ones.

I chose not to smoke. I had to confront her. I saw my mom and her yelling at each other, as branches sprang through the air. PITA threatened to walk to his house in the middle of the hurricane.

“I want to kill myself! I want to kill myself!” This was the sound of Hell. I helped raise Hell. I didn't change Hell's diapers, but I was its role model. The diapers were my parents' deal. I went to the mental institution of college, she was still enrolled. I sold drugs when I was younger, and then she sold Adderall. I wonder how many people abuse Adderall? Abuse it, then sell it to buy clothes from Plato's Closet, to attract Prince Charming, to cripple laziness, to Band-Aid a bullet-hole? Adderall is one methyl group from being meth. It killed my aunt. How do you save someone who wants to drown?

I couldn't call 911. I would have if I could, but I'm glad I couldn't because I didn't really want to have her locked up.

I sneaked behind her and put her in a full nelson, dragged her through the muddy front yard. We soaked in rain and sweat. Grass stuck to her skinny legs.

“Matthew, stop!” she yelled, but I tread on. I wouldn't not let her do it. She was too drunk. Maybe the law should allow suicide, but the person should have to be sober, and they must do it by a knife to the gut. None of this cowardice.

I finally dragged her into the garage. She tried to grab on the hood of Dad's truck, and she cracked the plastic sun visor, and slightly cut herself. She cried. “Look what you did to me. I'm bleeding.”

“You want to kill yourself? Then fucking do it.”

She became silent.

“Do it, you fucking pussy.”

Don't think I didn't think about the ramifications of my statements. In that instance, I saw the bluff. It was a tough bluff to call, because if I was wrong I would spend the rest of my life washing her blood off my hands with teardrops. The fact that she was crying over a paper-cut put the suicidal threats into perspective.

It was an even shittier bluff to deal. Especially when she knew Pop's parents spilled themselves, deep-throated the barrel of separate pistols, eighteen years apart. And she knew that he thinks his mom did it because of him. Because they weren't speaking at the time. Because she thought he needed to toughen up.

I knew how to call the bluff because I had dealt it before. It was the ultimate leverage. The victims will fall to their knees. They will begin to believe that they deserve it. One little threat could get me anything I want. Money isn't an issue, it's only finite. I could force my weak parents into slavery for

the rest of their lives, praying for the mercy of God. I could put their generation in the kind of debt they put mine in. The label of baby boomers is a cancer. These labels place the blame on the wrong level, so individuals can scapegoat selling out their offspring. Luckily now, I don't treat individuals based on a stupid label society. Fuck the label of millennial too. We've been mollycoddled into thinking we're weak. Fuck all these brands. We are not cattle.

I don't know if she was aware of what suicide would mean, how much it would have hurt me, how it would have destroyed our family. In the moment, she seemed to not care.

I went inside, and eventually so did my sister. She wouldn't even look at me. I think it's because she knew that I wouldn't fold to her bullshit. I could see right through her. In my family room, my whole body was numb now. My thoughts steered toward scenarios of impending doom. The roof collapsing, the windows blown out, the ground eroding. The wind's howl was shut out for a moment. I saw visions of Mother Earth eating all alive.

“Can you just talk to me?” I said to her.

At first she ignored me, but after I begged to talk to her alone, she eventually agreed. We went into my parents' bedroom, and we sat on their flowery bed.

“What is going on? You know I love you.”

“No one cares about me.”

“I'm here, aren't I?”

In her drunken stupor, she leaked some key information. She mentioned her failed marriage with a reality-star wannabe. The first boyfriend that drew her apart from me. I hadn't seen him in years, neither had she. I had last seen him in the background of a famous Youtuber's videos. He moved to L.A., and was apparently living in Team 10's house. But he couldn't even make it into the official team. He was a failure to a fake lifestyle.

“What does he have to do with this?”

She never gave me a direct answer. It had been a long time since we had a serious discussion. We ended the conversation with a hug. I thought I had talked some sense into her, but she was driven by unending desire. I'm beginning to think that most things pronounced publicly are becoming less honest. It was one in the morning. The power went out.

“Drive me to his house,” she said to Mom.

After ten minutes of begging, as always, my mom gave in. She went to get her keys. My sister kept indirectly threatening to kill herself.

“If you don't take me, I'll walk,” she said. Ten miles in the middle of this hurricane was a death sentence.

I stood up from the feeling of catatonic despair. I had to do something. Dad was just sitting there. He had given up on her, just like her boyfriend. Dad just wanted her out of the house. Three hours of yelling in the middle of the storm was enough to drive anyone insane.

“You're just going to let them go?” I said to Dad.

He looked at me, and I saw what my old boss saw in him. Pathetic.

“If you let them go, I will have no respect for you,” I said.

He kind of shrugged, and made some shitty excuse about fearing becoming a tyrant.

“You're a pussy,” I said. I had never called Dad a derogatory term before. I was disgusted. My ideal of him, getting shit on by reality. I felt like a germophobe, forced to roll around in shit.

There was no balance of power within my family. My mother was risking her life, and the life of her child, because she loved too much. For what? To ease a second of suffering. Too much love is smothering. We had been conditioned to become adult infants. It's hard to remember that I am a monkey. The voice in my head sounds so sophisticated. “I'd fuck him,” it said.

Excuse me?

“Would it be incest, if you uhh...

you know—

fucked yourself?” it said.

Probably.

My sister was driving me insane. I was talking to myself. My personalities split.

I was the product of countless retarded monkey babies fucking. Born from a bunch of Neanderthals, savages, barbarians. Just like everyone else. Am I the first of my family to graduate from this realization? My belief in evolution created a paradox within my faith in humanity. I do not judge by genotype; phenotype is fair.

Through the bullshit and the rain, the grass grows greener. Even cow patties grow tumors that will terapixel one's perspective. Some hypothesize that psychedelics might have been the catalyst to human consciousness. Some monkey ate a mushroom. As a kid, I hated that my mother lied to me about Santa Claus. When I found out he was fake, I never truly trusted her. How could I trust a lying monkey?

Reindeer eat red and white mushrooms in the snowcaps of northern Europe. Nordic shamans drink their piss and fly. Amanita Muscaria are swirls of candy canes. The Christmas Yggdrasil was taller than I thought. Little elves don't seem that bizarre when I'm tripping balls.

All this family baggage isn't mine. I don't believe in original sin. But it doesn't matter what I believe if it still weighs me down. I'm going to drop that shit off at an airport, until the staff gets suspicious, then blows the shit up. I buckle and spark up, because I have a flight to catch. Selfishness is a positive trait when it cuts you from an umbilical leash. Revolution. Spirals. Whirlpools. Flushing. Crop circles. This will not become the aftermath.

Mobs in the French Revolution beheaded religious innocents because of their association. Seems like all that murder sinkholes the hill of moral high-ground. I can't live if I can't sleep. If I use

the tactics of my enemy I am my enemy, just less creative. Reform, not revolution.

I grabbed the keys from my Mom. I wanted to punch her in the face and show her the monster her love created. I was a rabid animal, forced into a corner. I didn't hit her. I didn't want revolution.

“You're literally about to drive through a hurricane,” I said to mom. “For what?”

Mom was speechless.

I lay in a dark, humid room. I reflected on my actions. I hoped I did the right thing. I was tired of letting my life go to hell, and watching it like a shitty Netflix tragedy.

Eventually, PITA and Mom lay down. The next morning, I pick up the debris with my family. My clothes smelled like mold because they hadn't dried.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MELT INTO THE ARCHETYPE

Angry

I don't know if Dad would like to talk to me about his parents' suicides. I am too afraid to ask him. On rare occasions, his deep scars display themselves with quirky outbursts and slight autistic-like tantrums. Ex. Getting overly sympathetic as childhood nostalgia scenes appear to play like one of those old movies with trumpets and an MGM lion, at embarrassingly arbitrary places like restaurants and bathrooms. Ex. Cyclically, he yells at the crooked referees on the TV screen like he is about to cum, as an orange and blue offensive line crumbles. He worships a team from a school that he never went to.

Boy

He never told me the details about his mother's death. He did tell me that he joined the football team so he could fit in. He told me about the boys who beat the shit out of him on the way to school. He told me his mother wanted him to join the Army to toughen him up. I prodded him once with various curious statements. I can't remember what I said because he blurted these through the years. "My mother shot herself in her room." "My mother was a very vain person. She had a huge vanity." "She shot herself while my little sister was in the other room. She knew she would find her body."

Details

I don't know the details but I imagine them. I don't know that she stood in front of a white oak vanity mirror every night mascara drained on her desert skin. Cigarette smoke and frazzled hair. Vomit

and whiskey, a bottle of Quaaludes upon her altar. She's so fucked that she doesn't care about her daughter. Cold pistol and the linger of perfume, of puke, then blood.

Sober

That's how I want to imagine it because the thought that she was sober when she did it makes me physiologically nauseated. I'd rather be psychologically nauseated because if my thoughts are scrambled then I can't think about how she could lucidly abandon her preteen daughter, to leave her with a brain-stained bedroom and a disfigured faced corpse that had her mother's slim figure.

Whisper

My dad is getting old. There is a part of me that wants to know because I am morbidly curious. Part of me wants to know because I want to exploit the story. Am I exploiting the story now? Can I exploit something that I know personally nothing about? The answer is, of course I can. I do know how it makes me feel. But feelings aren't concrete slabs. Feelings are whimsy like words. Can you even exploit someone with just words? They are only given meaning by those who interpret them. Can we effectively communicate what happened, even if we remember it? Whose irresponsibility is a miscommunication, the speakers' or the recipients'? None of me wants to hurt my dad.

Ω

I hear that suicide runs in my family. I am glad I heard that because I am so stubborn, when it comes to vague statistics, that I will defy them. My dad told me his dad killed himself when he was so

young that he has no recollection. I can exploit that story too, if I please, because fuck them both for abandoning my dad. These people I've never met deserve to melt into the archetype and remain nameless. In loving memory: Grandpa, Grandma.

P.S. Thank you for not abandoning me, Dad. I'm sorry for giving up on you too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: CRUSADER

I meet all the shallow criteria for being a school shooter. I'm white. I'm male. I'm socially wormy. I have a bad haircut. I've practiced firing slugs into skulls—the gristly guts of pumpkins, laced with seeds, and lined in the mud. I've shot the smile off of a Jack-o-lantern. I'm a xenochrist in the only backwoods I've ever known. I get told I look like a Byzantine depiction of Jesus when I'm in the United States.

I wake up every morning, thirty minutes before I have to teach at a nondenominational Christian high school, an odd place because half of the kids have learning differences and disabilities, while the other half have purely behavioral issues. The conditions aren't ideal because kids mimic antisocial behaviors, which spread like the common cold, but the owner of the school has a heart too big to sustain its own size.

For me, public school was a prison, a state-run institution, a place where kids ate muck next to an Illuminati food pyramid, where children played dice to gamble for Doritos, fucked over skid-marks, snorted pills to the smell of piss—anything to escape the monotony of their indoctrination. A place where I didn't learn shit. But I did learn common sense, unlike some “journalists.”

I watch media outlets claim that they don't understand how someone could commit mass murder. They write off white murderers by saying that they are just crazy, that they are all the same. I understand why people kill. I've wanted to murder people before.

Resurrecting from sleep in my dream-ridden bed, I check my phone for some sort of motivation to move, no text messages, a bunch of advertisements—Groupons, dead-end job requests, spam, and Ponzi schemes—posing as personal emails. My body odor is pungent because I stayed up too late and my body is in fight or flight mode. Somehow I chug caffeinated cola, slap suds against my face, flop in

my car, one hand on the wheel, another to shield the morning star. There is a young man in a hoodie at the end of my driveway. I don't know if he has a pack of Skittles in his pocket or a nine mm. I get out of my car and lock the side door of my house. He's white.

At school, there is a white fifteen-year-old boy who dabbles with Satanic symbols on dingy T-shirts. He boasts about how bad he is. His aspirations are to become a professional skateboarder, which I encourage, but I also forewarn him, to succeed he will have to dedicate his life—rust his bearings in the rain—grind twenty stair rails with pinned and plated bones. I question how bad he wants his dream. Would he kill for it? “Don't talk about it, be about it.” I say.

He quotes Sound Cloud rappers about the inability to keep his dick in his pants. He lists metal bands that I find as radical and masculine as My Little Pony—one of these being Avenged Sevenfold. I tell him to grab one of the ragged Bibles and open the first page of Genesis. The band took their name from the biblical verse called “Song of the Sword.” He is disgusted that he likes something from the Bible. His only idea of Jesus is a virgin hippy. Looks like he never read the bloody judgment in Revelations.

The boy is expelled from our school—Molotov cocktail of pubescent angst. Other teachers said he had lip. Kid is full of fiery potential. We lock the doors when we hear he's been kicked out of the same public school I graduated from.

“He drove the resource officer's golf cart through a glass door,” says a teacher. Shards paraded in dissonance. I wonder if it is the same cart I used to joyride—the one we ghost-rode in curbside ditch water—the one that a chunky teacher used to chase us, as we jumped some fences, past third period purgatory. I was a fifteen-year-old boy with no direction. Inserted into Godless insurrection. Guided not by wise elders, but rampant erections, but never scored—a magnetic needle scatterbrained in a field of iron ore.

Sitting in a renovated home that was converted into a school, I have fantasies of the fifteen-

year-old boy bashing through the side door, AR-15 shouldered, about to unleash mass murder, as I peg the steel stapler, and sunder his temple. Break open the place where he holds his god and scoop it out. Pull out the seeds like a pumpkin. Trick or treat? Brain matter splattered between the bare bones of my knuckles, as bullets rip through my guts. Berserk at work.

Maybe fantasy is the wrong word. Maybe it's more of a daydream drill, like a tornado drill, like a shooter drill. Maybe fantasy is the right word. Maybe modern English is too morally correct for this particular nightmarish lust. A daymare, perhaps. Do I want this heroism, or do I need it? Maybe it's not so binary. Listen kids, you can waste your life at a job you hate, or you can become a martyr and become a god, be worshiped forever. Am I trying to convince the kids, or myself?

I use the dirty bathroom at school. After a morning of attentive and youthful eyes staring back at me, the bags under my eyes seem to hang in my reflection. I can't tell if the gray hair sparkling from my head is actually gray, or it's the distortion of the florescent light. I wash my hands to rid myself of inconsiderate sneezes, and walk back into the classroom. I'm a math teacher, but I volunteered to teach a writing class.

A boy argues, "Why do we have to study English? We already can speak it." It's a thought I had ten years ago.

"Shut up. At least we aren't doing math," says another.

When I was in sixth grade, two airplanes flew into The Twin Towers. My math teacher, who later committed suicide, let us watch on TV. I was glad that I didn't have to do math.

Now, a boy reads a story he wrote about a rapper that just died from an overdose of Xanax laced with Fentanyl. I am familiar with Lil Peep. I tell him the story is well-written, but that Lil Peep's music is trash—that Peep was an ideologue—that I know because I was an ideologue.

Ten years ago, I liked silly music as they do. I liked lost rappers with the "Lil" prefix before their names. I can empathize with their attraction to the raw masculinity in rap music, because theirs is

constantly suppressed. They are, and I was, comfortable with the idea of popping pills because most of them take Ritalin daily. It kills their urge to talk back and critically think. They sit sedated.

I remember the feeling of an infinite amount of energy. I would bang rap music from my rusty pickup truck about Oxycontin, Xanax Bars, Percocet, Lortab, Valium, Morphine, Codeine and Ecstasy. I would get high and go to hardcore-punk shows, after a drowsy day at school, and get punched in the face just to feel alive. It was an awakening.

I got a black eye from dancing at a Casey Jones show. They were straightedge, which means that they don't do drugs, have promiscuous sex, or drink. They put X's on their hands. I went to the bathroom to examine the warm blood that ran down my face. I wiped it off and went back into the dance pit. I never became straightedge, but I grew to admire sobriety. It was just enough to keep me from getting seven counts of manslaughter charges from Broward County, for running a pill mill, like my former best friend. Now I'm reluctant to take aspirin. I've seen too many drug lords become chained to methadone clinics.

If these kids only remember one thing from what I am teaching, I hope it's not about English. I don't care if they remember that a comma comes before the closing quotation mark. I don't even care if some creative spark is lit. I want them to learn that the pain of living is a worthy price for the joys of life.

They mention the singer from Linkin Park committed suicide. It's sad that he never outgrew his nihilism. He looped a noose around his childish neck and died. His housekeeper discovered his body around 9:00 a.m. Even people who gain fame and wealth can resent life. Maybe they resent it the most. For the record, I never liked Linkin Park.

After volunteering for an hour of creative writing, a curly haired coworker, one who wears jean skirts, starts preaching. She's a Bible humper, although most things she argues make sense, if I decode all the Biblical rhetoric. It's annoying that I have to translate her concrete language into a more abstract

language, or else my angsty-teenage-self broods evil Newtonian criticisms. It's like she's speaking Old English, but I think in math. Things we can't articulate, we tell as stories.

Her husband is a teacher at another school and they are having shooter drills. A suspicious person bangs on the doors, rattles the windows, and exposes himself—just kidding about the latter.

“Are you paying attention, kids?” says another teacher in the lunchroom—the kitchen of the former house.

“They won't tell the children that this is a hoax. They can't tell the parents because it will compromise the experiment,” says the Bible humper.

“Oh my God. Why don't they tell them?” I say.

“Every time that they tell them, no one takes it seriously. The kids play on their phones. They want to see the kids' genuine reactions.”

It is less a drill and more of a test.

Setsubun is a Japanese holiday/test where parents dress as bald demons and stalk elementary school students. Between the winter and spring seasons, cute little kids with black bowl cuts and mini uniforms cry—an ankle-weight to elders. Other kids throw soybeans at the demons with arched eyebrows. The beans are suppose to ward away evil spirits. Another group of children bask in the chaos, laughing until they tear.

My first reaction is amusement, as I empathize with their frantic emotions.

My second reaction is understanding. Maybe it's more a drill—to strengthen children against evil. The Japanese see demons as complex characters; demons can sometimes be virtuous.

Once upon a time, there where two demons, and the red demon wanted to be friendly with children from a village. The red demon tempted the kids with cakes, but no one would bite. To help his friend, the blue demon pretended to terrorize the children and the red demon came to their “rescue.”

After his heroism, the red demon made many friends with the children of the village. The blue demon left because he knew if people found out that the demons were friends, they would no longer let the children play with the red demon. The red demon wept.

I think it is interesting that people think of demons as strictly angry. I always took Lucifer for a joyous soul. When I listen to Scandinavian Black Metal, I get an overwhelming feeling of happiness, a surge of demonic frolicking, imps giggling as they shove pine-cones up Mao's, Stalin's, and Hitler's asses. A sadism that progressed past rancor. As a teen, I grinned when I heard that the bands I listened to burned churches—how they sewed necklaces from the skull of their suicidal band-mate. When the singer stabbed the guitarist twenty-three times, I thought—now this is authenticity.

I always think it's funny when people say my writing is angry. I'm literally laughing out loud at my thoughts, an introvert's intoxicants. I elude the anger aisle by an S&M side-street. I take pleasure in pain. Submission to the realization of pain and anger are necessary for pleasure and happiness.

Walk alone at night in Florida, along a ditch with no streetlights. Three people will throw empty beer bottles from a Cadillac then circle around because they missed, and throw more. Crack. Bang. Flick them off, because of pride.

Get jumped, chip a front tooth, get robbed of an empty wallet and of a smile. Break a nose, deviate septum. Deviant step-son. Get baptized before the knowledge of right or wrong. Get a couple of punches in then run into the woods. Bring knuckles to a glass fight.

There was a time when I hadn't suffered maliciousness. I thought I was harmless, when I buried my brutal nature in the cracks of my unconscious. I ignored my evil nature, and it seeped like mudslides in my veins. The great murderers of humanity thought of themselves as harmless, even beneficial.

“Mr. Matt, you okay?” says a student as he pokes me into reality, another daydream.

The kids recite their morning pledges, then I make a triple-decked peanut-butter sandwich. A

boy asks if I can help him with a math problem. I spin the knife in my hand, so that the blade is facing behind me, icepick grip. My stomach feels as if it's eating itself—the cavern is caving in. I wish death on everything when I'm hungry. It's an evolutionary advantage. Snickers understands this.

The boy is just looking for a distraction from indoctrination.

“Mr. Matt, do you know I killed a cat?” he says, as I try to explain the formula for the volume of a sphere. This kid often says ridiculous things to flash bang my attention. He's fourteen, skinny with curlicue hair, and I don't think he could beat himself up, much less kill an animal.

“Do you know what it's like to watch your best friend get his face pummeled with a baseball bat and go into a coma for a week?” I don't say.

“Do you know what it's like to have a gun barrel in your face because you got caught slipping, selling pills?” I want to say.

“Do you know what it's like to make someone kiss your feet by threatening to beat them?” I wish I say.

If I were not his teacher, I'd play The Who's Badder Than Whom Game. Not to terrorize him, but to put things into perspective. To make them aware that danger exists. To make him stronger.

“Volume equals four-thirds pi-r-cubed,” I say.

Turns out he didn't kill the cat, he just threw a rock at it, and it ran into the woods. I'm not sure when to break his ignorance of the world. If I do his parents' job, they will probably report me. I am hungry to break his innocence, for his own good. I like to break things. Hunger makes me ornery, but other things also.

Stupidity makes me angry, but naivety more so, and malice the most.

A girl I help with geometry asks me to reassign her math quiz on the computer. I did so five minutes ago. One in ten people have an IQ below 83. This is the point where even a bloodthirsty organization like the U.S. military won't even accept someone so low. This is the point where the risk

isn't worth the reward. Intellectually disabled people are some of the most smile-ridden people I've ever met. I would gladly spend my time with someone who has learning disabilities over someone who has a high IQ and an infectious ideology. I think she is worth the risk of my wasting my time, for the reward of a smile.

An autistic boy says, "Sieg Heil," as he passes down the hall. I tell him that is inappropriate. Out of context, he quotes cartoon conspiracy theories from the early millennia. When we go to a local farm for a field trip, he eats the old bread that he is suppose to feed to the pigs. He told me he is learning Icelandic. I told him to write a poem and he copied *Green Eggs and Ham*, verbatim. He is a mathematical genius. He knows every statistic about Hitler, how many people Hitler killed, all the Nazi generals' birthdays, he knows many numbers, but he doesn't understand what death entails. I can tell by the way he jokes. He doesn't know about the other mass murders of the twentieth century, people who killed more. I think Hitler has become as notorious cultural icon, and that is what he's attracted to. Even Star Wars stole Nazi imagery to further their narrative. When the boy laughs, all his muscles tense and his whole body tremors, his arms shake as if he is having seizures, and he grunts.

The curly-headed boy keeps saying that Barney, the purple dinosaur, died because he had an asthma attack. The only reason he does this is because he knows it will make the autistic boy next to him uncontrollably laugh. The curly-headed boy has antisocial behavioral issues. He then mimics the autistic boy's spasms and acts like he is being friendly. I don't scold him immediately because the autistic boy is oblivious to the harassment, and I don't want to cause embarrassment to either. I wait until after class and tell his parents in private. The boy's dad says it's the most emotional that he's ever seen me. Maybe I'm trying to repent for all the shitty things I've done.

I was a fifteen-year-old boy who dabbled with Satanic symbols on dingy T-shirts. I boasted about how bad I was. My aspirations were to become a professional BMXer—rusted my bearings in the rain. I quoted early millennia rappers about riding clean, making cheese, and getting my dick

sucked. I idolized metal bands that I now find as radical and masculine as My Little Pony—one of these being Avenged Sevenfold. I grabbed one of the ragged Bibles and opened the first page of Genesis. I was disgusted that I liked something from the Bible. My only idea of Jesus was a virgin hippy. I dwelled in this nihilistic state for ten years, until I was incarcerated into responsibility.

I was arrested for DUI shortly after I graduated with my bachelor's degree. After a couple of weeks, my friend got me a job spraying chemicals on flora, that make the stems produce more flowers, whilst stunting the branches. I worked fourteen-hour Florida days where I barely slept and dragged a spray machine through the grass. I dripped in the sun all day, but when I was off work, it was always dark.

One day, we worked at Disney World at three in the morning—an abandoned theme park in the dark. I was told I needed to cut my hair by my out-of-shape boss. I left an “inside” teaching job that didn't care about my hair, to an “outside” job that cared about my appearance. I spent my entire ride home researching the hair laws on my phone for some loophole to conserve my locks. I was mad that I wasn't told this before I was hired and my recent run-in with the law would make getting another job difficult. Plus the pay was very good. I sold my soul and sleep for cash, but I wasn't ready to give up my hair.

I bought a flap hat and shoved my hair into it each morning, and my dumb-ass boss was either too lazy for conflict or easily fooled. I bought a fishing face mask to shield the sun and the chemicals, but my boss said I looked like a terrorist. I thought I looked like a Sith Lord in sunglasses. My hair dreaded every day, and I ripped the knots out every night.

My boss' last name was the same as my favorite seventh-grade teacher. I called her Ms. Brodie. She changed her name back to her maiden name when she was getting divorced. I remember a red-headed kid telling her that her husband must have thought she wasn't a good teacher too, implying

that's partly why they were getting divorced. In the big work truck, I broke the rambling of radio out of curiosity.

“Were you ever married before?”

“Once before.”

“I think your ex-wife was my seventh-grade teacher.”

It turned out that my suspicions were correct, and I was stunned that my favorite teacher could be romantic with such a lazy nerd.

“We gave her hell,” I said.

“I heard stories.”

I remember cutting my pubes off and putting them in my friend's backpack in her class. The red-headed kid had colored a tampon red and put water on it and hung it on her doorknob. We stuck pencils in the foamy ceiling. It was like a sticking our flags on the moon. I wrote profanity on every desk every other day. I would ask her to help me with a problem, while my friends opened porn sites on her computer. These are things I don't tell my students. I wish could tell them, so that they could relate and learn from my mistakes, but I have to keep a professional relationship with them. It's difficult sometimes.

The spoiled red-headed kid that blamed Ms. Brodie for her divorce told me that he didn't like to watch porn with black guys because it looked like the girls were getting fucked by turds. The boy's father was a prominent plumber. I read that red heads are statistically more likely to join Isis than other westerners. Why waste your life in public school indoctrination when you can become a hero in the ultimate war between good and evil?

Years later in high school, the red-headed kid dropped off my friend, James, in the spoiled kid's giant Chevy truck. Weed smoke flew out.

“Help. We're on fire,” said the red-headed kid.

James was around six-feet-six and black. Highlighting anyone's race makes me feel gross, but other people have made it important. He jumped into the back seat of my friend's Crown Vic. Five large teenagers were packed into the sedan. We were going to drop someone off at Burger King because they left their car in the parking-lot. About three minutes into the car ride, down a potholed road, we saw red and blue lights behind us. We didn't hear them because the bass was too loud.

“Trolls!” said the driver—it's short for patrol car. “Matt, you gotta take the charge for me. I can't go back,” said my ex-best friend. I was loyal, but not stupid.

Everyone pulled weed and pills from their pockets and started eating. It was like the opposite of a child sneaking vegetables into their pockets when their mothers threatened no dessert. It was like we believed that “there are children starving in Africa.”

The two cops that pulled us over had slick hair and tight pants.

“License and registration,” said the good cop.

“Smells pretty good in here,” said the bad cop.

They told us to get out and patted us down, but didn't find any crumbs on our clothes. They searched the car and found a gray nugget of weed, spun with lint and hair. It was a couple of grams at best. After we sat on the curb for thirty minutes, the good cop said we could go.

“Stay out of trouble,” he said and chuckled.

We got in the car and drove away in silence until the patrol car was a speck in the rear view mirror. Everyone laughed.

“Why'd they let us go?” I asked.

“Bet they wanted to smoke that bellybutton lint,” James said and laughed. He looked towards me. “Where did you hide the blunts?”

I smiled. I felt the spicy tobacco and weed stuck in between my teeth.

He laughed even harder.

“They didn't check under the glove-box?” said James.

Later that night, we went to a house party on someone's back patio. My sixteen-year-old liver was trying to filter a cup-full of cognac and a cudgel of weed.

The pool glowed purple. Vapor waved. The pills, from before, were kicking in.

I asked the previous driver, Niko. if I could have a Newport.

“I only have one left,” he said and flicked open the box. The end was face up, indicating it was his lucky last one. “Fuck it, you can have it, just buy a pack later.”

I sat down on an ashy plastic chair, sparked the cigarette, and drank in smoke.

I looked down at my sneakers for a second, and when I looked up, a pair of long jean shorts were in my face. James was towering over me.

“That's *my* cigarette.”

“Quit playing. I got this from Niko.”

“Yeah. But it's my cigarette.”

I stood up because I realized he was serious. His eyes were glossed over. James was known for eating a pack of Xanax bars. One time he ate twenty bars and we couldn't find him for two days. We were worried about him and went to his house. He had been sleeping the whole time. He was also known to fight when he was fucked up.

“My bad. I didn't know it was yours. Take it.”

“Why'd you take it?” His arms and chest tensed.

“I thought you were fucking with me. You're always fucking with me, James. I can't tell the difference,” I said.

“Pussy Cracker stepped down real quick. Look how fast white boy backed down. He don't want none,” said a kid in the corner.

“You're my friend, James. I'm not trying to fight over stupid shit,” I said.

“Just smoke it,” said James and he walked away. I didn't want to fight James, but the kid who chimed in, I wanted to murder. I was too strategic to attack him there. Bitch blew my high. I went to the car, smoked the cigarette and cooled off. I stared at the glove-box. Underneath was a glock. I felt like this was middle-school drama.

As a twelve-year-old, my favorite guitarist was Jimi Hendrix. I dressed up as him for a report/celebration my teachers deemed Exceptional Individual Night. I didn't pick him because he was black. My favorite basketball player was Allen Iverson. I didn't pick him because he was black. My favorite comedian was Dave Chappelle. I didn't pick him because he was black. I remember the kids yelling, “I'm Rick James, bitch,” down the hall. It was one of Chappelle's most famous skits. Another popular skit that he played on his show was of a blind black KKK member. It was done in documentary medium, by a sophisticated narrator, which made it even funnier. Dave's blind black character, who was racist towards his own race, was finally told that he was black. His character then divorced his white wife, “because she was a nigger lover.”

Five years later, I voted for Barack Obama because he was black. He ran against two old white guys. One was a Mormon. That was the extent that my eighteen-year-old self researched politics.

Back in Japan...

Half a decade later, I was surrounded by foreigners. My Japanese boss asked me what I thought of Trump. All I knew of him was references from rap songs. When Brexit happened, I had no idea that the UK contained England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. All my European friends thought the break was evil. I didn't know the EU existed. When Trudeau was elected Prime Minister of Canada, my Canadian friend said she voted for him because he was hot. I thought this was stupid reason to vote for someone, and it was, but at least it wasn't a racist reason.

I was walking to work one day, down a narrow street, lined with rain chains, and on top of a hill

there was a group of Japanese high school boys. I could tell by their navy-blue uniforms. They said, “Hello,” and I replied, “Ni Hao,” Chinese for hello. They twisted their heads in confusion. A week later, my bicycle was stolen. I told my boss' forty-something-year-old son about both instances, separately, and he said that the kids most likely stole my bike. I like to think it wasn't them. I was trying to teach them to not stereotype people based on their appearance, even if the stereotype is right, because when the stereotype is wrong, resentment builds. If they did steal my bike, then maybe I proved my point the hard way. My Welsh friend told me he sometimes spoke Welsh when Japanese people tried to talk to him in English.

The Jedi Religion was officially recognized by the British government in 2001. Jedi Knights surpassed the amount of people on the census that registered under Judaism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.

I sit through my evangelical Christian coworkers' devotional rambling, as they refer to God as Him. I translate some more Old English into rational abstractions. The kids daze out like me. I want to be respectful, but I feel like they are just venting and airing all their dirty laundry. Kind of like I'm doing now. On one level of truth, I can understand why they refer to God as Him. Their conception of Him is primarily masculine, the archetypal figure of a wise old man. The omnipotent eye above the pyramid. The eye of Horus. The Logos.

God is referred to with masculine pronouns in Hebrew, in an ancient culture with few forms of birth control—other than death—and where the only rulers were male, in a context of no scientific method, where tribes would kill each other to protect themselves, and reproduction was more difficult than dying. In their narrative, Adam was created in God's image, and Eve from his rib.

On a scientific level of truth, the masculine pronoun is limiting. It might be more biologically correct to say men come from women, in the sense of the womb, but a child's body is a feminine X blank slate, until the Y chromosome blooms testicles.

Putting the gender issue aside, the idea that a perfect being is in any way associated with humans is silly to my mathematical nature. Why refer to God with a pronoun at all? Maybe to keep it less abstract.

I think that Star Wars expressed the scientific truth of the concept of God more correctly, a formless Force. The way one wields The Force makes him good or bad. Force is choice. I hate Episode I through III because of the actors' lame lines.

Some people will kill for fame. I wonder if fame was a prime motivation of Mao, Stalin, and Hitler. I think Hitler was the only one who fulfilled this hypothetical goal. Maybe it was the mustache. Yeah, right.

I sometimes come back to reality and I give my two cents on devotional topics, but different languages make it hard to communicate. I do my best.

“Mr. Matt, any thoughts?”

“As long as you try hard, and don't lie, you'll be successful.”

“Donald Trump lies a lot, and he's rich,” says the curly-headed boy. For a moment, I think that a fourteen-year-old gave an example that disproved my statement. For a second, I think I became one of the same hypocritical teachers I hated.

I talk a lot of shit about wealthy and famous people, but if I dig down deep enough, my resentment is not fueled by their lack of worth, but my own. Who am I to judge who people like and to whom they give their money? I have had to kill my ego enough times to find this dead body of truth. I am low-key jealous of these people. I envy boy bands for their army of shrills and hipster hair. I lust over the power of gaining money without working a nine-to-five.

This bitter realization (or rather conscious admission) led to a far deeper question. Why do I value excessive wealth or fame? I wish to gain fame without the struggles and tribulations, because I am lazy, but—examining myself deeper—I don't think satisfaction is attainable without the journey,

and possibly unreachable until death.

I see the fallacy in the boy's presupposition.

“Money and power don't equal success,” I say. I can tell he doesn't buy my reply. I wouldn't have believed me either at his age.

I watch some media outlets claim that they don't understand how someone could kill random people. I see them bitch about giving hate speech a platform. I see them post the pictures of killers, place them on a pedestal for all the world to see.

The Rock is a famous wrestler and rich movie star. I remember that my fifth-grade teacher made us raise our eyebrow like a check-mark, The Rock's signature facial expression, after he asked, “You smell what The Rock is cooking?” We had to line up get it right to leave class. I practiced the slogan and the pose throughout the line. I'm sure that my face looked like I had gas. She sent to the back of the line. The Rock battles with depression.

I don't really want the things I desire. I long to strive for things, to admire from a screen—to masturbate to Helen of Troy—to ejaculate to a romance novel with young Fabio—to imagine my face on a rickety billboard. There is always some sense of nostalgia in the suffering to obtain, because nothing can ever own up to the ideal.

It's ironic Descartes came up with the precursor to the scientific method because he had a vision from an angel. It's strange that something as abstract as math can have a one-to-one correlation with natural events—like how all electronics function, based on mathematical equations, but spoken language was insufficient in thoroughly articulating quantum mechanics, the basis for all electronics—like natural geometrical patterns in molecules and flora.

I gritted my teeth, and trudged to the bloody judgment in Revelations. Demons are like ideologies. They conflict inside my mind.

I am a crusader cloistered in a midnight niqab, bleeding black eyes. My thawb flows in holy wind. A flaming scimitar in my left hand and an oiled Kalashnikov in the right.

I'm a Jihadi with a red cross, laced in chain mail. An iron great helm encases an opal gaze.

I am God, plated in scarab scales, horns like a rhinoceros beetle. A raven feather scythe with swollen blades, and an icy lizard tongue.

I am Lucifer with swan wings and angel eggs. Golden rings around the roses.

I meet myself at a crossroads between the hills of the west, the frozen tundra of the north, the ocean of the east, and the dessert of the south. An army of angels and demons eat each other over and over until the ground is wroth with golden blood. The sky is industrial garbage bag black, over the horde's cannibalistic orgy, sucking souls from leftover stone carcasses. Regurgitating Xanadu into the fallen bodies until they are resurrected stronger, less naive. Egotistical generals march the battlefield—Baal, Beelzebub, Mephisto, Satan, Lucifer—if any win, I lose.

O holy knight, the stars are blighted, shining

It is the knight of our dear Savior's burn

Long lay his world in sin and error pining

Till he peered into soul and felt its worth.

I have these visions in class, as I catch a kid picking his nose.

I've finally discovered death is the only path to deflect the poisonous provisions of my awaiting births. Everyone has to have an ideology. Not having one is impossible. It's like not having ground to stand on, and falling into an infinite abyss of chaos. Everyone needs a compass in confusion. The trick is to let ideologies die, so they can resurrect, closer to "God."

"Mr. Matt, it's time to go to Wickham Park," says a teacher.

We take the kids on a field-trip to the local park with its Vietnam veterans' memorial. It is a traveling stone monument with the names of the fallen. There are a bunch of war-torn guys that look

like a motorcycle gang. The skinny kid asks an old bald guy with shaky hands about his time in Vietnam.

“What did you like most about the war?”

“I saw my buddy bleed to death after he was shot six times.”

He won't lose his day job.

“Thank you for your service.” I don't know what else to say. I know many Vietnam vets were treated pretty horribly when they returned from the war. All wars are ideologically driven. Protesters called them murderers. The State called them heroes. I know that some of them were treated badly by the VA system. I know many of them developed Parkinson's disease because of Agent Orange, a toxic war chemical. An ideology often eats its host.

It's difficult to trust people. After work, I drive to a lone gas station, some exit off I-95. There's a sticker on the rusty pump that says *Credit Charge. To Avoid, Pay In Cash.*

I pay extra to avoid people. I don't hate people, just their unpredictability. It's also what I love about them. I love when someone makes a witty remark from the corner, the diverse viewpoint of a foreigner. When a few guys fart in yoga class, I'm the only other one that laughs. I resent the fact that I'm not God. I resent the fact that I lack the competence, if I had the chance.

I don't care what I believe. Reality doesn't care what I believe. Burns past blistering, growling, hissing—when reality's poking through. I am tempted to play God for a day, but I'm still burning away infections.

As a child, I launched lizards from a 2x4 on a high curb. As a teenager, I burned my leg out of boredom. The oval scar still remains. As an adolescent, I got shitfaced because I graduated then was arrested. I called the police Nazis and said I'd understood that they needed to meet their quota. If I were God, in my worst moments, I'd conjure earthquakes out of spite. I'd cry over the Earth, out of boredom, flood the filthy and just. Thank God I'm limited to a measly body.

I know I'm not right, and that ironically makes me more right. It has something to do with the more one learns about the world, the more one realizes the less one knows. The intricacies and complexities of the universe are ever vast for humanity to understand. This gives us a will to live, a struggle. There's a Jewish koan that states: What does the omnipotent lack? Limitation.

I presume that vice versa is true. I shouldn't try to play God.

I watch some media outlets claim that they don't understand how someone could kill random people. I completely denounce infectious thinking. I don't know why each person murders. Each is an individual that should not be lumped by race. But if I did murder randomly it might be because I was resentful, possessed by hate and ideology, and someone tried to nail me in a box—lump me into a casket with all other white males. I might have murdered for recognition and fame, gasping for meaning in a nihilistic schema.

I meet none of the criteria for being a school shooter. I'm not guilty. I'm not misogynist. I'm eccentric. My hair is fine. I have not shot anyone. I'm not playing these games.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: DEAR EX-BEST FRIEND

Thank you. When you jumped off the Pineda Bridge, butt naked, hit the bottom, and twisted your femur into fragments, I didn't know that it would be the beginning of the end of our lifelong bond. The painkillers you were prescribed were more important than answering your phone. I'd count sheep trying to stop thinking about why we fell apart. Fuck you.

We were inseparable since you were born a couple of months behind me. Our mothers met while pushing strollers in the cul-de-sac. I don't remember, but I know we were cool back then, “goo goos and gah gahs,” like “what's ups and that's tight.”

Eight years later, I remember getting yelled at in Spanish by the next-door neighbor when we'd ding-dong ditch, and steal chromies off the shiny Cadillac's rims. I remember you pushing the redneck kid off me when he stole my Tamagotchi, back when we thought those things were living creatures. When Abuelo pulled the eyes out of the roasting pig, and bit down on it, we climbed the biggest tree in the sac to hide. It was the same tree where, on Halloween, we sewed our dad's over-sized clothes together, stuffed newspaper in the sleeves and dropped our scarecrow on trick-or-treaters.

Eight years later, eight months after your broken leg, I remember how you made a kid kiss your shoe. I remember how his friend filmed it, and how disgusted I was. How your new best friend grabbed the knife right out of the kid's hand. How I would have never thought to do that, just snatch someone's knife that was about to stab me. He just grabbed it, threw it in the bushes, and made the kid kiss your shoe. How could I compete with someone like that? Maybe you deserved someone more courageous.

Later, on Burger King's sticky outdoor patio, you made yourself throw up by forcing fingers down your throat. You vomited on the curb because you were bored. Your new best friend tested me. He flicked one of his fries at me. I threw one back, and he stood up and pressed his chest against my head. I told him I didn't want to fight, that he had just done the same thing to me. He eventually calmed

down. I started lifting weights the next day. I should have fought for you.

Maybe you stopped answering because you were high. Maybe you did it because you didn't want me to get arrested. I know which one is true, but I like to think the other. I like to think that you knew where you were going.

I followed you regardless because you were the one who had taught me how to act bad. It was in your blood. Turns out that I'm a pretty good actor. I remember when we got pulled over, and the cops found your shit, and you asked me to take the charge, because you were on probation. I remember when I said no.

Thank you for showing me how shitty you were, before I completely mimicked in masquerade. Thank you for beating the nativity out of me.

P.S. When you're out, it's my turn to not answer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: IF SHE DIES BEFORE I WAKE

I nuzzle the belly of my fat chihuahua as hair feathers like dandelions. It's before the sun comes up, and he stretches his peg legs. I always wonder how he never gets tired holding them up. His belly is pink under the fluff. He yawns, and I mimic. It's some kind of subliminal magic.

I am jealous, as I say goodbye, plowing through the door, late to work. Why can't I lie on a couch all day? I would pay my salary to cuddle all day, under covers, on my couch. I would wither away from no bread, and my dogs would still lick my fingers, even if I didn't bring food home.

Long distances make me long for her. This little dog is cute, but doesn't compare. Her hair doesn't flake, and she smells like sunscreen. The key to my happiness is 7317 miles or 11775.57 kilometers far away. Our cultures think about distances differently, but it feels the same. An empty beer can floats across the Pacific.

Every day feels more like waiting than living. I hold warm things close to me. Things that can breathe, things with a heartbeat. I look at how my dog is oblivious to all of this. How he can sleep all day, waiting for me to come home. I wonder what he does all day without supervision. I bet it's just sleep. That's my favorite way to wait.

I call Miho every day. "I can't wait until I can squeeze you," I say. I close my eyes and imagine her, but it has been too long to remember all her cute scars and lavender smell.

"Squeeze me," she says.

I open my eyes and up above is a full moon.

"I can see it too," she says.

I close my eyes and pretend that I am across the Earth. There's not a destination, but a person. I don't care if I have to go to the moon, I'll setup a picnic blanket, take both ends and watch as I throw it into the atmosphere and it floats to the dust. I'll pack our favorite, fajitas for two.

We'll make our meal as the sun rings a halo around the Earth. It's as if I can hold it in my hand. There is no government here. There are no visas. Fuck, I hope they never find us.

Eventually, we'll gravitate towards our home planet. Share the last taco crumbs as the world comes crashing into the moon. The explosion will be so grand, it will make Nagasaki look like child's play. Make Hiroshima look like bubble gum. Make Tunguska look like a cherry bomb.

My dog is oblivious.

It's been three months since I've seen my darling. I used to hate the word "darling." I can feel her in my neck. It's really a pinched nerve that runs down my right arm into the shoulder and projects through the fingertips. I'm getting arthritis on only one side of my waxy body. So bad that I cannot sleep on my good side. So bad that I try a strict ketotonic diet for three days and have the equivalent to a week-long hangover. Now I'm back to draining gallons of sweet tea in vain. I plugged my pinky finger into my ear and a lip-gloss liquid dribbled out that smelled like mildew. I read online that Asians have a different kind of ear wax than people of European and African decent. I'll have to take a look when I see her—if I see her.

Anxiety attacks should be renamed impending doom. The sky turns overcast and feels like it will fall. The moon is slowly drifting away from the earth, but it feels as if it is going to land on me. All the oxygen is burned from the air. Invisible needles prick like tattoo guns with no ink, begin at the extremities and head to the heart, until they make the fatal bite, crunch in like an apple. The thought alone is enough to frighten to death.

If I die before she gets a marriage visa I hope she will find another fiance and have a kid without me. A younger version of myself might have been greedier and possessive but a couple of broken, tired, and vengeful hearts later—I realized to truly love something means to wish the best for it, even if the best thing is not me. I had to obsess over revenge for years, wishing people—I called lovers—would suffer regret and slow doom. Molasses dripping down diabetic ulcers. Luckily, all their new

boyfriends look like band geeks that never touched an instrument. Thoughts like this make me feel better about myself. But then I realize I'm torturing myself and I never really loved them. I should let them die from my mind.

I she dies before I wake next to her I'll make Juliet look like *PITA*. I know I sound melodramatic, but I'll lose my point, become dull and break—it won't be a spectacular death.

She visits me by way of a twenty-hour flight. The flight is enough time to watch five movies and bury into a book or two. The flight here is like resetting time. The arrival date is actually before the take-off by a couple of hours.

We have as much fun and intimacy as possible. Go to the beach every day and cuddle, soaked in aloe vera. I proposed to her on the beach at dusk. Afterwards we hugged for thirty minutes and sat on the shore. As we left, baby sea turtles hatched and made their way, swept up by the deep blue ebb and flow. This is as sentimental as I'm going to get.

We spend our nights settling the marriage visa paperwork. I can barely recall last week but a K-1 marriage visa requires your job employment, everywhere you've worked, and what color underwear you wore for the last five years. I'm used to staying up all night. But the tension is enough to frazzle the steadiest of lovebirds. After a couple of hours of making sure all the information is correct by double-checking dates from obscure legal papers.

PITA and her boyfriend come to the table with Heinekens in hand and act like they can empathize. Their shoulders are loose and dimples embedded for the moment but I can see straight through the drunken visage. Tomorrow they will sleep all day to forget the meaningless, that is their life.

“Marriage stuff, eh?”

“Yep.”

“I remember when my parents had to fill that stuff out.”

I put the hot graphite down.

“My parents were actually married to different people.” His face is rosy, and little knots of sweat accumulate around his temple. They paid strangers to marry them so that they could come to the United States.

“Later, they both got divorced and then married each other,” he laughs.

Miho and I look at each other and down at the paperwork. Two more weeks and she's back across the world.

The true test is not the paperwork, it's the nights I have to pretend pillows are her, hug inanimate objects so I can fall asleep. I feel like I've been asleep even when I'm awake. Sedatives helped for the first year—then unbearable reality becomes preferential to meaninglessness meandering.

It has been ten months since I've seen my darling. She made me rethink the word “darling.” I despised “darling” like the word “yummy” because I thought it represented something disgustingly perfect—things that only exist in mirages. When people are that enraptured with a strawberry tart, they are blind to the carcass of and bloated stomach of a starved child. The flabby-armed glutton takes a sip of tea, sinister and smugly says those words that represent most of what is wrong in this demented world,

“Yummy.” The words drag out with lilt, satisfied until the realization that the food is fueling the very person that they despise—themselves.

It takes a sadistic sense of humor to dance upon the blade of nihilism and death. The edge cuts all over, and all one can do is laugh.

I get a text from her after a doctor's visit.

“It didn't go well.”

I call her, but there is no answer.

“Please call me.”

My aunt died this holiday season. She died in front of her husband and two boys. She had a bad headache—as opposed to a good one—and said, “I think I'm having an aneurysm,” then hit her head on the floor. My uncle used to be an EMT and pumped her heart until the paramedics got to her.

“For all the people she helped, she didn't like people that much,” said my uncle to my mom.

“My kids say the same thing,” said my mom. “What's with them?”

I think I just hate myself and I'm projecting onto others.

My uncle says he got ripped off by the funeral company. He paid thousands of dollars to have a granite slab inscribed, but it wasn't even done for the funeral. I feel bad for missing it. I should have been there to support my dad.

Instead of getting bitter about the price, my uncle is going to start a burial at sea company. Seaternity he says he's going to name it.

“All you have to do is wrap the bodies and anchor them. Think of all the navy vets that would take up that offer. I'd make money and they would save.”

I wonder if my psychologist would label this idea as morbid.

For someone who is—for lack of a better term—blessed, I'm fucking miserable. Maybe I have too much leisure time. Too long a waiting time. Maybe life is just a big waiting game. The flight should be enjoyed, in case the destination sucks. Especially since it's either the dirt or twenty-thousand leagues deep. I look up at the moon, even being so far apart, at least we can share that. In the end, I'm glad I found a true friend.

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