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# Welcoming the Saturated Earth

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WELCOMING THE SATURATED EARTH

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Adam Thomas Million  
May 2008

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Accepted by:  
Keith Morris, Chair  
Michele Santamaria  
Wayne Chapman

## ABSTRACT

Three short pieces of fiction and ten pieces of poetry compose this creative thesis, which has been submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree Master of Arts in English literature. The manuscript demonstrates the highest level of literary comprehension—creation. Through my writing, I move beyond the interpretation of literature and become a participant in both genres. I read therefore to write better. Let my writing be the judge of my knowledge of literature.

## DEDICATION

For my family: Tom Million, Janice and Steve Cooper, Guy and Dorothy Million, Edgar and Dottie Gerhardt, Sam Million, Stacy Million, and Alex Cooper. Without your guidance, constant encouragement, and support, my words would be nothing more than ideas. And my teacher, Abby Courtney—a lifetime of words may never express the impact you have had on me. Thank you all, a million times over.

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## INTRODUCTION

### On Poetry and Fiction: An Inextricable Link

If writing were a public swimming pool, poetry would be the shallow end and fiction the deep, applying the terms spatially in regards to form, not theme or content. Poetry offers the writer the amenities of fiction, and fiction, the amenities of poetry. The same water flows through each section of the pool, just as fiction and poetry share a desire for story and language as well as the need to establish tone and voice, character, setting, theme, and movement of scene. Poetry occupies a more confined space than fiction, but it holds the same capacity for the writer to drown. Fiction allows the writer more room to spread out, more narrative time to develop theme and characterization, and the capacity for a wider range of voice. But with this freedom from constraint comes an increased risk of drowning—losing readers and narrative focus. Personally, fiction should contain poetic language to be successful, and poetry should have narrative elements like setting and character, as well as a lyrical quality. For poetry, story becomes what the reader projects her response to the written word upon; it is her own blank page to construct interpretation. Fiction and poetry should develop texture of story using emotive and accessible language that promotes understanding for the reader. Poetry should be as accessible as fiction, and fiction should not sacrifice poetic language for plot, or any other element traditionally linked to fiction.

Poetry and fiction provide similar mediums in which a writer creates a situation that desires a resolution then works toward it, or meditates on the scene lyrically. The writer presents the situation, in turn, evoking a question from the reader about the text. Like music, it is the hook. It is the recurring thought that plays over and over in the reader's mind as she

continues through the work. For example, the first two lines of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"—

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both (137)

—establish the problem of having to make a choice as well as provide scene, character, and the possibility of theme that are continued until the resolution in the penultimate line. The opening of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, "Young Goodman Brown," performs similarly:

Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset, into the street of Salem Village, but put his head back, after crossing the threshold to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap, while she called to Goodman Brown.  
"Dearest heart," whispered she, softly and rather sadly, when her lips were close to his ear, "prithee, put off your journey until sunrise. (667)

It introduces the reader directly to the problem, to symbolic images, character, and setting, wasting no time to garner her attention, providing the canvas on which she can construct understanding. The first few lines of a poem or the opening sentences in short fiction must present what is *at stake* within the work. These opening passages establish a contract, signifying where the poem or story is headed.

Both mediums demand the concentration and balance of what is heard and what is unheard, what is seen and what is concealed, what is envisioned and what is sensed. They require a certain balance between what the writer depicts and what the reader interprets. "While writing, the mind moves between consciousness and the unconscious in the effortless effort of concentration" (Hirshfield 16). Shelley calls these two threads reason and imagination, with imagination casting light upon reason. Writing, whether fiction or poetry, is the act of weaving the intentional with the spontaneous, leading to discovery both for the



writer and the reader. Frost states it best in “The Figure a Poem Makes”: “no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader...the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew” (126). But this idea of discovery, once again, must balance the tension created through situation. Prose or verse with only secrets and mysteries distances the reader from the work. The work is, therefore, unsuccessful, regardless of the writer’s ability. “The result, if the [writer’s] intensity of attention is sufficient, will be a [piece of writing] that brims with its own knowledge, water trembling as if miraculously above the edge of a cup” (Hirshfield 16). Writing poetry and prose is a tightrope between creation and interpretation where the author establishes the moment and continues it throughout the work in order to negotiate an intended outcome with the reader—the writer relinquishing his words and the reader making them her own.

My poetry and fiction begin with ideas, characters, or vivid settings, establishing the situation. In some cases, writers begin with a line or two sitting dormant on a white board or in a notebook or on a piece of scrap paper stuffed in a pile of papers. Raymond Carver discusses in his essay “On Writing” how he took one sentence and “made the story just as I’d make a poem; one line and then the next, and the next” (132). The process of creation is different each time: sometimes there is an ending floating around; sometimes the name for a character gets developed first; sometimes an idea just won’t leave a writer’s head, like spiral-bound notebooks filled with the names of people who have died on the road. Poetry and fiction take these ideas and put them in motion, giving them a *movement of scene*. Billy Collins refers to this movement, describing “a poem as a series of phases in the journey” (66). The writer must take his reader somewhere in the story, either from an abstract idea to

something tangible, or from the concrete, physical description of a scene into the writer's mind.

In "Cultivate," I begin the poem with action in a concrete setting:

I stab my spade in the hard Missouri clay,  
welling narrow holes equidistant.

And I work toward the narrator's mind—

These rows will be tilled over or abandoned, left  
as a vacant lot for a house, or filled with poplars.

—then end with the sound of a voice from the setting:

Behind me, a child calls the time for dinner.

While the poem's journey does not jump to another setting, the initial situation moves to a more reflective scene, inside the mind of the narrator. The reader picks up the scene as he labors over a garden, seemingly by himself. As the poem shifts from the concrete setting, the narrator becomes lost in reflection of his youth and the one time he helped his parents with their garden. When the child interjects, breaking the narrator's meditation, the reader is left with the hope that their daily labors will not go unnoticed, nor discarded up by their offspring. The simplicity of the scene emphasizes the sweat dripping from the narrator's forehead, the heat of the sun, and the strain of the narrator stabbing the hard clay. The poem provides enough room for the reader to project her own memories of youth, visions of a garden, and interpretation of the last four lines.

A similar movement of scene is exemplified in "On the Course." I chose to begin the narrative, once again, with situation—the ambulance sirens destroying the serenity of the golf course—moving through the attack and killing of the alligator to the final scene between the father and son in the hotel. To make the story more than narration about a

round of golf, I decided to begin it with the intensity of the ambulance sirens. The shift at the end suggests the inevitable connection between the generations of men presented in the story: the grandfather whose legs are amputated before he died, the father's swollen ankles covered with salve, and the son who keeps looking at the urn. The story ends before "tying up the loose ends," but the scene suggests movement beyond the last line and the confines of the hotel room, anticipating the journey back home.

Like both "Through Tennessee" and "On the Course," my fiction and poetry begin with an idea, characters, or setting and develops from there, because "what we know about writing the novel is the novel." While the focus here is on short fiction and poetry, this idea holds true (Welty 112). Whether the first line or the first paragraph, the opening statements in my works of fiction or poetry tend to begin in the visual, developing the lyrical near simultaneously. Whatever comes from that "inconstant wind" is a product of the moment of creation. For I believe that "a man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry'" or fiction as he would say, "I will run" or "I will cook" (Shelley 798). Creation hangs on the branch of a birch tree, bent from ice, and waits for a boy, "too far from town to learn baseball," to catch those limbs and pull them down until something greater than he connects through him, from heaven and earth, from his mind to his hand (Frost 157).

#### Working from Memory: Pressing Oil from the Personal

Memory plays an integral role formulating ideas and subject matter for poetry or fiction. All ideas, whether from emotions recollected in tranquility or from last week's newspaper article about pirates off the coast of Somalia, are the product of the writer's mind. Like the Lady of Shalott, a writer sits in a tower somewhere, watching "thro a mirror clear"

as “shadows of the world appear” (Tennyson 42). This progress of the artist, according to T.S. Eliot, is “the continual self-sacrifice,” and “extinction of personality” that mediates between the personal and the universal (2398). A writer cannot escape his memory, cannot separate the hand from the mind. This re-envisioning personal information becomes the play between the idea and content. For some, the choice of form is easy; it is either always fiction or always poetry. Others may find themselves caught in the middle like the idea in my poem, “Fixed,” needing more space than a poem and less than fiction. This situation creates a prose poem—the area of the swimming pool that slants from the shallow end to the deep. Peter Johnson describes this genre as straddling the line with “one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels.” My prose poems, “Fixed,” “Worn Smooth like Stones,” and “Leaving It Behind,” straddle the imaginary line between the two genres. It feels more natural to present their setting and reflections of youth in a more conversational form, one that is more country song than classical (i.e. poetry).

This narrative form lends itself to personal recollection, one that is a progression from poetry to fiction. “Leaving It Behind” is a prose piece describing the act of losing one’s childhood, broadening with the opening paragraph:

A child got lost once in the thick woods, butting up to my parent’s house.  
They always said, *take a friend, always*. They didn’t know we had already been  
through those woods. They didn’t know we kept going back.

Then, it focuses on a personal account of a group of underage friends drinking and smoking, incorporating the parent’s advice, suggesting a need for caution both in the woods and in life. The confession of the narrator, “they didn’t know we kept going back,” implies a return to childhood, to the vices of life, as if we must know where we have been, then leave it for dead, in order to move forward. Ted Kooser calls this the moment when “the poet looks up

from the triggering subject and sees (or senses) something larger” (84). The triggering moment releases the writer from becoming overly personal in the anecdote. Rather, he becomes “the master of the short narrative, using it the same way that a novelist might, as a part of something greater” (Kooser 85).

A similar example is “Communion,” a poem I wrote about a funeral in the middle of winter. It begins with setting—

Across the gravel road in the harvested field,  
I saw three fair-winged birds watching  
the fellowship from the barren tree.

I meditate on this scene until the bell’s wake mixes, then fades, with the crow’s caw, signaling the shift in the loose sonnet form at line ten. Memory in this poem is my vehicle to the jumping off point where delight turns to wisdom. In fiction, it usually occurs at the climax or during the denouement. In a poem, it is the point where I intuit my reader understands enough to take a leap with me.

Like the first paragraph of “Leaving It Behind,” the last four lines of “Communion”—

We are all farmers planting grey stones,  
together digging and toiling, planting and waiting.

We are all perched on memories, budding trees,  
hands reaching for hands with all their might.

—demonstrate the jumping off point where the poem moves from the concrete setting of the beginning through the mind of the narrator, into a universal claim. It is the moment when the poet asks his reader to leap from scene to theme, the point when “the pressed oil of words can blaze up into music, into image, into the heart’s and mind’s knowledge” (Hirshfield 32).

### An Analysis of Theme

In my work “Through Tennessee,” it takes a leap through R. J.’s interaction with Cindy and Lloyd. It illustrates the moments in life we stumble into that cast light upon our own place in the world, but show how inextricably linked we are to others. For R. J., Lloyd’s story about his son’s death and the discussion of his tenuous relationship with Cindy show the fleeting nature of physical connection in a world that keeps going, regardless of consequences.

At the Iron Pan, Lloyd is introduced as a paralyzed character, unable to communicate with Cindy, and his talk with R. J., once it gets going, is nothing more than a typical conversation. The scene moves toward theme when Lloyd bursts forth with the line “You get what you need,” from The Rolling Stones song. This statement foreshadows the conversation at the Pilot when Lloyd discusses with R. J. the death of his son. Through their conversation I show the parallel nature between Lloyd’s regret for not being able to communicate with Cindy and R. J.’s inability to call Sarah. The leap from the flat conversation to the more active discussion of The Rolling Stones sets up the scene with the notebooks and Jason’s death. Lloyd uses the notebooks as his way of connecting his life to something larger. At the end, R. J. is left to make his own decision whether he will move on with his life by becoming an active participant or will keep making excuses. There is hope R. J. will call Sarah and engage his desire to reconnect with her. This question of engagement is what I leave the reader pondering in order for her to translate it out of the story and into her own life.

Engagement plays a fundamental role in “Applications,” as well. The idea of connection and disconnection, both with reality and oneself, are central to the story. Logan’s confinement to a world of letters, translations, and applications is intended to heighten her disconnected state, intensifying the final scene with her kneeling in front of the mirror. The shift from scene to theme arises when Logan fails to receive a letter from Darrel. At this point, Logan loses connection by engaging only the representations of herself and Darrel. The acceptance letters are her only means of escape—the world outside her window, not the one in her mirror—but those letters get filed away. By ending with Logan kneeling in front of her mirror, I am exemplifying the problem of becoming overly invested in representative forms. The world she has created, while full of good intentions, disconnects from the need for human connection. The window without curtains becomes the escape route from society’s need to label and assess human beings. While “Through Tennessee” encourages engagement on a personal level, “Applications” presents the reader with a situation in which engagement without a physical connection leads to even more isolation.

The aspiration for a spiritual connection in both the 2004 and 2007 versions of “At the Indian Mound” engages the relationship between man and nature. Both versions are written with Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” in mind, especially the lines,

And so I dare to hope,  
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first  
I came among these hills; when like a roe  
I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides  
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
Wherever nature led: more like a man  
Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved. (65-72)

The narrator of “At the Indian Mound, 2004” reflects on the river he sees below him, the flood plain in the distance and the Indian mound where he stands. In this moment of meditation and recollection, the narrator expresses his desire “for the thing he loved,” moving from delight to wisdom when he questions, “whether or not a man’s soul is a living thing.” Each time the narrator returns to the Indian mound, he finds things different, but each time he falls short of touching the blue. With the final two lines, I emphasize the regenerating quality of nature, aligning the narrator with the foxes.

Like the inclusion of Wordsworth’s sister in “Tintern Abbey,” I chose to make the addressee of “At the Indian Mound, 2007” the narrator’s brother, providing instructions on how to meditate on nature in hope of attaining something greater. The narrator insists that, “we must be patient,” offering the suggestion, “I think of catching rainwater / with sails, offering a chute.” Teaching his brother becomes the immortality that is not reached through meditation. The poem turns in line 11 with “Look,” shifting the poem from the abstract to the physical description of the scene, toward theme. The reader understands the sun will rise again, and by mentioning the “bikes below,” I encourage the reader to make the assumption the narrator and his brother will try again, that man regenerates like nature. This theme echoes throughout my collection, from “Welcoming the Saturated Earth” to “Communion.”

When I approach theme I try to open a door everyone can walk through, providing enough detail so the reader can paint her own impressions of life. Whether cathartic or maddening, the elements of my writing are intended to elicit emotion, propelling the reader from scene into a universal connection between content of story and life. Without theme, I am merely reporting, with no direction, on whatever heightens my senses. I negotiate between what is necessary to the story and what can be implied, teasing out the details in



careful revision, line by line. Like the speaker in “Impressions of a Still Life,” I add “warmth, layering subtleties in the background,” using “broad strokes” to create “an authoritative foreground.” In the end I have only my words, and “they had better be the right ones, with the punctuation in the right places so they can best say what they are meant to say” (Carver 130).

## Welcoming the Saturated Earth

Wisps of stratus clouds smolder and fade  
through the foothills. The pines are heavy, full of rain.  
A limb, broken by the storm, falls like a child.

I love to think the dead fly on the backs  
of birds through a clearing calm after a storm.  
They are the voices crying from the tops of trees,

welcoming the saturated earth, the wind, the solstice,  
suggesting something is on the move, a horizon  
muddied like a pregnant river, an unintelligible  
dream, one that slowly reveals itself

after waking to a field, yellow from sun, vibrant,  
with white dogwood buds tracing the lake  
to the sky. The wind blows ascetically,  
as a mother on her child's doctored wound.

## Impressions of a Still Life

It filtered through the screen, a memory of scattered pieces:  
the golf course at night, freshly cut and dewy,  
the sound of cricket's screeching, the throaty frog  
crescendoing—their heated calls in the late nights  
of summer while a friend barbecues, swilling beer.

I painted it over the trees and the underbrush  
like an apprentice, selectively holding details back,  
adding warmth, layering subtleties in the background,  
broad strokes, an authoritative foreground:

The scene was lying flat on a hill, fixed.  
A red blanket, rumpled beneath the girl,  
beads of sweat, hanging like sap from her neck.  
Pointing, her eyes tracing the Pleiades.  
A boy, hunched, swatting mosquitoes from his knees.

## Leaving It Behind

A child got lost once in the thick woods, butting up to my parent's house. They always said, *take a friend, always*. They didn't know we had already been through those woods. They didn't know we kept going back.

Before I started high school, a trio of my friends and I rummaged my garage, found a box of matches, a pint of Canadian Club. On the edge of the woods, we smoked cigarettes and took turns on the pint after my parents fell asleep. Our shoes squished in the bristly Bermuda grass, soaked from the storm. The smoke rose. The whiskey warmed. We sweated layers, cooled by the clearing winds.

We walked our street. The dead-end neighborhood. Down the hill, past a friend's house, to the path his dad mowed, the path to the golf course, to the general store where we would buy cigarettes. We finished the bottle and sat beneath the pines, lighting matches and smoking, lighting matches and watching them burn. Blowing them out.

Our legs loose from the whiskey, back up the hill, we struck the sulphur tips and tossed them, flaming against the black, following them back down like falling stars. Like white pebbles, we left a trail where we had been to a pile of sticks somewhere in the woods, marked by an empty bottle.

## On the Course

The ambulance was blocking the cart path that worked between the houses from the fifteenth green to the sixteenth tee. Its lights were flashing and shooting through the gaps between the duplexes lining the fairway. Numerous course officials and grounds crewmen were riding golf carts through the streets of the retirement subdivision. We had heard the sirens start up as we finished the thirteenth hole. But it was not unusual to hear sirens when we played golf in Sun City. There were people dying every day. They were the reason there were more medical clinics per block than restaurants, grocery stores, and gas stations combined. There was still too much commotion. Something was really wrong this time, something close. It was different.

My father and I had wanted to play another round of golf before we left Sun City, before we took my grandfather's ashes back to Illinois, back home. Two years prior when my grandmother passed away, after visits to my grandfather in the hospice, we played golf. It was how our family grieved. All I knew was that my grandfather was dead. He tried to get some more out of life by having his legs amputated. The doctor's said it would help with his circulation, his weak heart. We didn't talk about our problems. There was no discussion about drugs when my sister was arrested in high school for selling marijuana to an undercover cop, no details disclosed about my parent's divorce. We got the bare minimum. We never asked for more. That was how it went. No news was good news, my dad always told us. We both knew this trip would be the last time we saw Sun City.

All week I had chauffeured my dad and his brothers from the lawyer's office to the hospice in the mornings, the golf course or hotel in the afternoon, then to Sonny's Real Pit Barbecue or a fancy sit-down place for dinner. It was exactly how my dad had told me it was

going to work before I came down to meet him. It was clockwork. The layout of the town combined to form a sort of labyrinth, one maneuvered best by retirees in a golf cart. Driving around the town was not like driving through Mobile or changing lanes in all the construction in Memphis on the way back home. There were no maps being shuffled. There was no planning out the next day's route or pit stops the night before. There was no trying to get a lock on the roads like my dad did constantly through Mississippi and Alabama. There was no pulling over to double-check his navigation. I had been to Sun City to visit my grandparents when I was a teen but never got comfortable. It was something like home for my dad. It was where his parents had lived for twenty years. He was in charge then and this time was no different.

I was driving the cart down the fifteenth fairway when an official came up to us, making the short drive from the other side of the road, where the ambulance was parked.

“What’s going on?” I asked him.

“There’s been an accident,” he said.

“On the course?” my dad asked.

The sky was cloudy, but we hadn’t seen any lightning. We hadn’t heard any shouts of “FORE.” There were no typical signs of golf course concern. There was a group a few holes in front of us, a foursome of older gentlemen, probably members, but there had been no sign of them since we made the turn. We assumed they had just taken off, picked up the pace.

“Yes,” the official confirmed. “When you finish fifteen, go on to seventeen. We’re doing our best to take care of the situation.”

I could see a couple EMTs riding on a long cart, like the one used to take football players off the field when they got injured. There was a man on a stretcher, a blanket over his lower body, a man pumping oxygen into his mouth, another holding up what looked like an IV bag.

“I appreciate your cooperation. Just drive on by to seventeen,” the official said, pulling away toward the ambulance and the EMTs.

“Shit,” I said to my dad. “Looks like he’s pretty bad.”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen that happen,” he turned to me. “I was out cold when I got hit. Your grandmother told me what happened. I had no idea.” He turned back to watch as the EMTs loaded the man into the ambulance.

“Let’s go,” he said, looking at me, pointing down the fairway.

My dad had been hit in the head with a golf ball when he was in high school. It knocked him out cold, almost killed him. I could see this was making him remember, making him think about everything: missing a year of school, his mother taking care of him, his dad, the difficulty of having only one good eye most of his life, everything else that I didn’t know about.

The ambulance pulled off and we drove up to our drives.

“That’s terrible,” I said, feeling I needed to reiterate the obvious.

We both got out of the cart, walked behind to our clubs. My dad was up first. He was down the middle, a bit shorter than I. Fifteen was a shorter par five, one of the only holes without water running down one side or the other. My drive had detoured left off the tee. I had tried to kill it. I wanted to reach the green in two.

“We all go sometime, I guess,” my dad said, pulling the head cover off his fairway wood.

I looked at him, thinking about my grandfather’s ashes in our hotel room. “Yeah, it’s inevitable,” I said. He had been in Florida for about a month as my grandfather struggled to stay alive, losing both of his legs. I only flew down after his death to drive his car home, to transport his ashes.

My dad addressed his shot, took a few practice swings. “How far out am I?” he asked.

“It’s a par five,” I said, looking at the scorecard, calculating. “You’re about two hundred and sixty yards,” I told him, guessing approximately. “Too far to reach it.”

“Yeah I know. I want good position though. A hundred yards or so out is where I want to be.” He turned to me and said, “Grab my hybrid, will you?”

I fumbled through his clubs, pulled out the hybrid iron, and walked it over to him.

“Someday, you’ll realize you just can’t do all the things you used to. Your back will go and you’ll start playing position.”

“I know,” I replied. He always let me know how one day it would be gone, the long drives, the hard swings out of the rough, my back, my wrists, and on and on. There was always some part of my game that would fail, eventually. It would take someone else to come along, someone half my age probably before I realized. But he never discouraged me from going for it. He enjoyed watching me play. I could see my game in his.

He took another practice swing with the hybrid, adjusted his glasses, found his target, then set himself over the ball. His swing was tight, shorter than some, but powerful nonetheless. I don’t know where he got it. I never saw it in my grandmother or grandfather’s



swings. My grandfather's was loose and powerful, for an old man. It had a bit more Johnny Miller at the top, that little bit of hesitation. My dad's swing had that hesitation. It was different from my grandfather's only in degree, a variation.

"Nice shot," I told him. "Right down the middle," I followed up, in case he didn't quite see it.

"Yeah, I hit that one square."

We got in the cart and took off to my ball.

"I wonder what happened to that man. You think he had a stroke or a heart attack or something?" I asked.

"I imagine," he said. "You never really know with people down here. They're old." He put his foot on the dash. He pulled his shoestrings tight around his swollen feet and ankles. "They've got something they're medicating. It could be anything."

I was about 210 yards from the green and decided I could work a three iron in from the right, avoiding the bunker on the left side of the green.

"Your grandfather always said he got sick and tired of talking to the people in the hospice. That's all they wanted to talk about. *How much are you paying for your medications? What are you taking?*" My dad let out a little chuckle and started working on his other shoe.

"Like old men and women at McDonald's drinking coffee at five in the morning," I said, taking some practice swings. I found my line, then set myself. My backswing was a bit outside. I corrected it on the follow through.

"Handy," my dad said from the cart. "Your swing's too loose."

"Yeah, I could feel it," I said, putting my club away.

When we pulled up to my dad's ball, just outside the hundred-yard marker, there were still carts coming and going where the cart path led to sixteen. He approached his shot in the middle of the fairway, went through his routine and stuck one below the pin, to the right. "Avoiding that bunker, I see."

"Got a putt at it anyway."

"That's true," I said. "I'll just drop one close."

"Yeah, don't blade it in the bunker," he said, grinning at me.

We pulled up to the green. Across the street an official truck rolled its way to a stop. It read, Sun City Animal Control. The officers went to the back and pulled out a couple long poles with some kind of rope on the end. The female pulled out a blanket and some more rope. The male officer loaded darts into a gun, and the female officer set down the blanket and the rope and un-holstered her side arm. She checked the magazine, then rearmed the weapon and holstered it. Together they gathered their arsenal and set off on foot down the cart path toward sixteen.

"Holy shit." I said.

"Alligator," he said. "Let's go," motioning toward the green. "I want to see this."

I stumbled out of the cart, grabbed my wedge and my putter, and headed for the green.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. Gators all over the place down here," he said from across the green. He squatted to get a line on his putt.

"I know that. But what are you saying?" I asked.

“Gator,” he said looking at me. “What else do you need to know? Hit. Let’s go see this.”

I took a few quick swings to get the rhythm, picked out where I wanted to land the ball and swung. It nestled up to the hole, just outside of a foot.

“That’s good,” my dad said. He raked it back to me. He pulled the pin, walked down the gentle slope to his ball, marked it, picked it, then squatted behind it briefly. He replaced the ball, took a few quick practice strokes and rolled one a couple feet past the hole.

“That’s good,” I said. “Let’s go check this out.”

We drove the cart across the street, between the houses, to the sixteenth tee. There was another official sitting there watching the man and woman from the truck walk toward the lake.

“Go on to seventeen. We’ve got a situation,” the course official said. “We’re trying to get everything taken care of.”

“What happened?” I asked the official.

“The gator got his foot.”

“Whose foot?” I asked.

“An old man. He just got too close.”

“No shit,” I said. “Got his foot? Like bit it off?”

“Knew it,” my dad exclaimed, looking over the official to the water.

“Yeah. It seems that’s all the gator wanted,” the official said, watching the Animal Control officer.

“Damn,” I said, joining the others, gazing at the water.

“Bit it clean off,” the official said, turning to us.

“Was he still conscious?” my dad asked.

“The man’s friends drug him out of the water. Put a tourniquet above his knee.

Saved his life, I believe,” the official said.

“Jesus, dad always told me to watch out for them.”

“EMTs?” the official asked.

“Gators,” my dad said.

“Yeah, you don’t want to get too close. Definitely don’t go looking for stray balls,” the official warned, focused on the scene. “They’re a part of life here.”

“I heard about the man in Palm Beach,” my dad said. “It’s no joke.”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” I said. “Most said it wasn’t true, though.”

“True or not, most think twice before getting too close,” the official said. “They’re trying to get the foot now.”

“Get the foot?” I asked.

“They think they can put it back on,” the official said. “Gators are swallowers. Said there might be a chance.”

“Really,” I said.

“They’ll try and catch him, but either way—” He paused and looked at us with one brow raised. “That gator’s boots. Dead as my third wife.”

I laughed.

“I’d hope so,” my dad said.

“Sorry about all this, really,” the official said, gesturing to the scene.

“I want to watch. It’s no inconvenience to me,” I said.

“You can get a better view by that tree up there,” the official said, pointing down sixteen fairway. “Should be safe.”

The official pulled off. We waved and headed down the path to where he had suggested. Both of us were looking over at the lake, watching the Animal Control officers get information from the policeman and the course officials standing around. They had put a chunk of meat down off the water’s edge.

I had never seen my dad this interested in something before. He was the guy who kept his head down. He followed through. That was how I knew him. There wasn’t much stopping for this or that—business, golf, drinks, dinner. He had a plan typically, always had his map out. He wanted to know where he was going, how to get there, the length of time. He was deliberate and focused, especially on the course, whether he was on track to shoot ninety or break eighty.

The man from Animal Control put the carcass on one of the long poles and stuck it into the water and splashed it around. The other men standing around were pointing. One of the policemen was smoking, laughing at something. One man was pointing at something in the water. The man with the pole said, “Let’s draw him in a bit. Jill, get the gun ready.” The woman unholstered her side arm and took aim.

“Dammit,” the man with the pole said. “The tranquilizer. We can’t shoot this thing here.”

“Here he comes,” said one of the police officers.

“Reel ‘em in,” Jill said. “Draw him in, dammit.”

We could see the alligator’s eyes pushing ripples toward the man with the pole when the lady shot the tranquilizer into the water.

“Dammit, Jill. I told you to wait till I said so,” the man with the pole said, turning to Jill. The gallery started yelling and pointing, waving their arms at the man with the pole. The alligator had surfaced at the shot. He came jawing out of the water at the man with the pole. It snatched the chunk of meat from the pole and dragged it back into the water.

“Goddamn,” one man shouted.

“Shoot that sonofabitch,” another screamed at the woman.

“Shit,” I said, pointing at the gator. “Holy—”

The woman wheeled and shot the other two darts, then dropped the tranquilizer gun. She drew her sidearm and put three bullets in the gator before it submerged.

“Goddammit, Jill. How we gonna get ‘em out there now? I ain’t going in there.”

“What’d you want me to do?”

“Not kill the damn thing. Not yet. We gotta get that foot.”

Jill holstered her gun, gathered up her things and walked away without a word.

Everyone watched the man poke at the alligator with his pole. The gator floated away from the man and started to sink.

“Dammit, Jill,” the man yelled, throwing down his pole.

My dad and I were both frozen, our mouths open. Old women and men were coming out of their duplexes. The course officials hopped in their carts to inform the residents. The policemen left. The man with the pole stood there watching the water.

“No foot,” my dad said, as he chuckled a little bit.

“What’s funny about that?” I asked, pushing the accelerator. “A man lost his foot. Who wants to live like that?”

“I guess it’s not funny.”

“Damn right, it’s not funny.”

“Grandpa would have laughed,” my dad said.

“That’s all we got.” I told him, shaking my head.

“What are you talking about?”

“As golfers. Another round. ”

“What?” he said. “Let’s play golf.”

“Let’s,” I said, looking at him, nodding my head up and down. He shook his side-to-side.

We rode in silence to seventeen.

I checked the scorecard for the yardage, got out of the cart, and pulled my driver.

There was water on both sides.

“Keep it in the middle,” my dad said.

I teed my ball. I swung hard and fast and pushed it out to the right.

“Fuck.” I slammed my club on the ground.

My dad teed up his ball. His landed left-center of the fairway. “Another round and you might beat me,” he said, putting his head cover on.

I teed up another ball, walked behind it for my line and picked out my target. I made contact and watched my shot down the left side of the fairway.

We went straight to the hotel after our round. We were the last to leave Sun City. My dad’s brothers had been there for weeks. The last one left the day before. We were tying up the loose ends, the transportation. I sat on my bed, beside the empty pizza box, reading a book. My dad studied the map beneath the table lamp, sipping the last of his vodka. I could

see him looking up toward the television, at the urn. I had been doing the same thing between paragraphs.

“You know where we’re going tomorrow?”

“I’m following the signs north. About 85 miles an hour.”

“Let’s go interstate ten.”

“Sure,” I said. “Whatever.”

My dad left the map on the table. He pulled out the cream for his ankles. They were swollen and sunburnt.

“Doctors are full of shit,” he said, rubbing on the cream.

“They don’t look real good.”

“The sunburn makes them look worse,” he replied.

He finished, then propped his feet up on the chair to help with the circulation. I went back to reading.

“What time in the morning?” I asked him.

“Seven,” he said. “I left the urn by the TV, so we won’t forget it.”

“Right,” I said. I set the alarm to seven, looked at the urn, and went back to reading.

There was nothing to discuss.



## Communion

*Those who wept as they went out carrying seed will  
come back singing for joy, as they bring in the harvest.  
—Psalms 126:6*

Across the gravel road in the harvested field,  
I saw three fair-winged birds watching  
the fellowship from a barren tree. First,  
two came gliding as the clapper clanged, tolled  
from inside the tower. The third came riding  
the rolling beneath him, the bell's wake.  
A crow kaahed through the last note,  
the cry of a mourner offering a final prayer.  
The vibrato hung softly, sustaining—together  
heaving like dry soil, sighing like rain.

We are all farmers planting grey stones,  
together digging and toiling, planting and waiting.

We are all perched on memories, budding trees,  
hands reaching for hands with all their might.

## Fixed

They got the ladder from the barn, wanting to watch the fireworks from on top the wash shed. Her brother made it, scurrying up the shingles, waiting for her to summit. Their family, stuffed with sweet corn, potato chips, and cheeseburgers, congregated on the lawn, singing their cautions in a round. *Mind your steps. Don't act foolish. Help your sister.* As she ascended one hand, one foot, one wooden rung at a time, the ladder bounced. She faltered coming to the zenith, unsure how to make the ultimate step, raising her hand toward the sky, reaching for, then grabbing the hot wire for sureness, as a guide. The shock caught her mid-step. She froze, fingers taut around the black wire, between the brown grass, the sapphire sky. The congregation shouted and waved their arms. Her grandfather grabbed his hammer from the porch, enduring the current of screams. Up the ladder, he put one hand to her arm, grabbing and pulling as the hammer descended upon her fist—pulling and hammering, pulling and hammering. Her brother watched her eyes rolled back in her head, then release as she fell back to Earth, to the congregation's feet, waiting, receiving her gasping body.

Three years later the wash shed was torn down. The heat of those Midwest summers past had drowned the memories from most of the witnesses that Fourth of July. She bought new clothes and supplies for her tenth grade debut. He purchased books for college and made plans to move. But occasionally, she would see him in the back yard smiling at the sky as he would, ever so slowly, ride the air backwards, his back straightened, arms at his side, and eyes wide open, waiting for something like hands to catch him, or a bird to pass above, or a voice to cry out.

At the Indian Mound, 2004

The river slices the bluff, one slant for another;  
the floodplain flows in the distance, the tree-lined fields.  
The churn is only visible from where I stand.

There is no sound, no guttural swish; a breeze  
distracts me from trying to touch the blue sky.

I used to ride my bicycle to this look-out point,  
and pretend to be one of the Indians  
who buried men in the mound atop the bluff.

Lewis and Clark explored this area,  
traveling by keel boat toward the winter sunset.

I always wondered if they met the Indians  
who buried men in the mound, or if they kept going  
when they saw the warriors standing where I stand now,

plastered like a god among the clouds. When a man is a boy,  
he does not consider whether a man's spirit is a living thing.

Each year I ride my bike back. I try to touch the blue,  
rouse the Watcher between bottoms and bluffs.  
Each year I find something new—

the way the fields are rowed,  
the driftwood drowning in the muddy water,  
or the foxes watching me as if they had always been there.

## Through Tennessee

I just started in on my three-egg and potato scramble when the waitress came back and refilled my coffee.

“You said you was waitin’ on somebody?”

I nodded in approval, swallowing hard, trying to get to my words. “Yeah,” I managed, taking a sip of my coffee. “Yeah, one of my uncle’s friends is supposed to be giving me a ride.”

“What’s he look like? I’ll keep an eye out for ‘em.”

“I don’t really know. I never met him before.”

“He got a name?”

“Lloyd,” I said, between bites.

“Lloyd, you say?” She set the coffee pot on the table and sat down, working her tip, I thought. “Well, what you doin’ waiting on a ride you ain’t never met before? A good-looking kid like you shouldn’t be in an ol’ greasy spoon like this.”

“I’m doing field research for a book I’m writing with a friend of mine back in Kansas City.” It was the same reason I told everyone why I was taking the bus. It was the reason I got my uncle to set me up with Lloyd, his truck-driving buddy, here in Clarksville. It had been my excuse ever since my dad called and told me about Grandma Jo being hospitalized. It was cheaper to travel this way and got me out of explaining my DUI, so I figured I would just keep the story rolling and see where it took me.

“What kind of research you doin’?”

“I’m researching people.” I was ready to finish my food. It wasn’t the Four Seasons. It wasn’t even Denny’s. But I wanted it hot. So I said, “It’s sociological.” I could always

mention *sociological* and people would quit talking about my research; Sarah, the young woman I met on the bus, kept on about it though, but she had studied the subject in college about the same time I had.

I took another bite, forcing out, “What’s your name?” between swallows, because she wasn’t getting up. And even though I could read it on her nametag, I felt like I should be cordial. After all, I was doing research.

“Name’s Cindy.” She slid to the inside of the booth and put her feet up.

“Well, Cindy, I don’t want to be rude, but I’m gonna keep on eatin’ here,” I said, slipping into her Tennessee drawl.

“You mind if I smoke a cigarette, then?” she replied.

“Go right ahead.”

Cindy lit up her cigarette after pushing the coffee pot to the middle of the table. I kept on eating my scramble; she kept on smoking. One long drag after another, blowing smoke toward the ceiling without tilting her head back. I would take a bite, chew and swallow, sip some coffee and repeat. She would place the cigarette between her lips like she was planting one on the only lover that never got away. She was probably middle forties. Her face was worn and she looked like she knew the ropes of the Iron Pan. She was one of those girls you knew back in high school: damn good looking, liked to screw, always driving through town—before school, after school, all night long—and got stuck there, for one reason or another. As much as I wanted her to leave as soon as she sat down, there was some sort of peace between us now—me eating, her smoking.

The dining room had been fairly empty. There was a gaggle of old men sitting at the counter, drinking coffee, smoking, sharing stories. One of them had a Mayflower hat on.

They looked like they could have been school bus drivers having their morning coffee before they started rounding up the local kids. In the kitchen, I could hear one of the chefs singing, “Mamas Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys,” tapping out the rhythm on the flat-top grill with his spatulas. There was a woman at the cash register filing her nails, and occasionally, she would throw a comment over at the old men: “Ed, if your wife knew you was here talking that a way—” then stop short, shaking her head, and go back to filing.

I had almost made it through the scramble when Cindy spoke up: “Well, I better make my rounds. Them old men over there, they get pretty rowdy if I don’t come by every so often.”

I nodded. She smashed her cigarette in the ashtray and slid out of the booth, rubbing the exposed part of her leg across the seat.

“I’ll be back in a minute, sweetie.”

She walked to the kitchen, behind the partition, then stepped back and looked at me. “Hey, what’s your name, good looking? You got mine,” she said, patting her breast where her nametag hung.

“R. J.”

“All right, R. J. I’ll keep a look-out for your friend.”

I took one more bite of the scramble, pushed the plate to the middle of the table and deposited my napkin on top. I reached into my pocket for my pack of cigarettes and had to pull out a whole wad of receipts and loose cash I had accumulated on the bus ride to get to them. I pulled out a smoke and lit it and noticed the piece of paper Sarah had given me with her number on it.

I kept thinking about the conversation we had on the bus, the fact that I kissed her while we were sleeping—well, half-asleep—and how rude I had been to her when I got off here in Clarksville. I wanted to call her and tell her how glad I was to have met her, tell her I was sorry for being the way I tended to be—all closed off about myself. I had not expected to meet someone like her. Something about being at this truck stop. All of it made me want to call, but it was only a little before five. I had only been off the bus for about hour.

I ashed my cigarette and took another drag. I slid to the inside of the booth, kicked my feet up, like Cindy had, so I could get a better look at the diner. Everyone was quaint. They were like characters out of a low budget film, characters that didn't know they were being filmed. Everything was cinematic. The way the old men drank their coffee, the way they heckled Cindy. The lady at the cash register, her belly rolls rolling over her lap, damn near over her stool. The man in the kitchen still singing, but now singing The Band's version of "When I Paint My Masterpiece." It was quiet cacophony. I took the last drag from my cigarette, listening to the tobacco crackle and burn, when Cindy came through the partition, holding the coffee pot.

She filled my cup—number four, but I'd only drunk about half of each before she warmed them up. She sat down again, shuffled to the inside of the booth, sliding the coffee pot with her. Putting her hands into her lap pockets, she pulled out another cigarette. I was pouring half and half into my cup when she spoke, cigarette dangling from her mouth.

"I hate when them damn kids come in. Big groups. Give me shit all early in the morning." I sipped my coffee, looking up at her. She lit her cigarette. "Yeah," she exhaled. "I had a group of them before you came in. Had to call the cops on 'em."

"What happened?"

“Cops came in. We had a two top. A couple of guys sitting over there,” she said, motioning toward the counter. “A family, looked like they was traveling. And eight drunk high school kids. One was Jackie Filmore’s boy. The other was Tom Jackson’s daughter. Not that you know them, or it matters,” she paused, taking a long pull from her cigarette. “So the cops took ‘em outside. Had ‘em all call their parents. And let ‘em go. Just like that.”

She turned over the coffee cup on her side of the table and filled it up.

“You want more?”

“No, thanks,” I said, putting my hand over my cup. “They just let ‘em go?”

“Yeah. Just like that.” She took another drag from her cigarette. “Everyone here was glad they were gone, but none seemed to mind they just got sent home. Not even a slap on the wrist.”

“I got in trouble once like that when I was in high school. I was one of those kids. Sorry.”

Cindy looked at me, tilting her head to the side. “Why you sorry? It’s not like you raised them kids.”

“I mean. Well, I know, but I guess. I only added to the problem. I never took anything away from it, regardless of whether I know you or those kids.”

“Oh,” she replied. She sipped some more of her coffee and smashed out the cigarette. “I think your friend’s here,” she said, looking out the window behind me.

“Where?” I said, turning to the door. “There’s no one here.”

“If it’s the Lloyd I’m thinking of, his rig just pulled in. You’ll like him, I bet.”

“How do you know Lloyd?” I asked.



“He been coming in here since before I started.” She smashed her cigarette in the ash tray and grabbed the coffee pot, her cup, and slid out of the booth. “What’s your uncle’s name? You from Missouri, right?”

“That’s right. His name’s Jason—”

“Schler?” she finished.

“That’s real good. I guess they come in here a lot, major highway and all.”

“They come in here when they want, which is most the time they drive through, but—” She looked down into the cup she was holding. “I’ll be back in a minute with a clean place setting.”

When Lloyd came through the door, he waved to the lady filing at the register. He said something that cracked her up, which garnered the attention of the old men at the counter. They turned and greeted Lloyd like one of their own. I was about to get up and introduce myself when he waved at me from his conversation with the old men, so I just stayed seated.

“You must be R. J. Just like your uncle described you,” Lloyd said, walking over to me.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lloyd,” I said, shaking his hand across the table.

“You haven’t been here long, have you?”

“No. Not long at all. Long enough to get a little food in me and enough coffee to last the rest of the trip.”

Cindy came around the partition, holding the coffee pot in one hand, a paper place mat, some silverware, and a fresh coffee cup in the other.

“Hey, Lloyd.”

“Hi, Cindy,” he said, glancing up at her.

“I hear you’re giving my friend R. J. a ride. Where you headed to this time?”

Cindy slid the mat in front of him, then the silverware, then the cup. She filled it and set the pot on the table.

“We ain’t staying long,” Lloyd said.

“You never do anymore,” she said, glancing over at me.

“I’m headed to South Carolina right now. Gonna drop him off somewhere along the north-south border,” he said, looking up at her. “How’ve you been?”

We waited on her reply. Lloyd’s spoon tinked around the cup as he stirred in some sugar.

Finally, Cindy said, “Fine. Doing just fine. I’ll bring you your bill, R. J. It was nice to meet you. Lloyd, good to see you again.” She paused. “Don’t be a stranger.” She disappeared around the partition, and Lloyd sipped some more coffee.

“You got a cigarette, R.J.?” he said after a few sips.

“Yeah, sure.”

“preciate it.”

I watched Lloyd smoke his cigarette and sip his coffee without a word. His drags were long and deliberate, blowing thick clouds of smoke at the ceiling. I took a sip of my coffee, not realizing Cindy hadn’t filled it up for a while. It was cold. The sweetness of half and half and sugar was all that was left. For the first time on my trip, I was uncomfortable.

After I paid my bill—Lloyd’s coffee was “on the house,” according to the lady at the register—we saddled my two small bags into Lloyd’s rig. He wanted to make it through Nashville before traffic got too bad, and I was getting anxious to see my family, especially

Grandma Jo. It was the first time I had ridden in a truck since I was little. All I remember from back then was climbing into my uncle's rig with my cousin and looking at the naked girl calendar my uncle had in the sleeper. The ride was not near as educational as the calendar.

Lloyd's rig didn't have any naked girl calendars. He had books that I had read in college and Tom Clancy novels. On the dashboard was a GPS device and three notebooks, the spiral bound, single subject kind. Each of them was a different color and had a state abbreviation on the front in black magic marker. They were dog-eared and tattered around the edges and faded from living on the dash. The rig smelled like Febreze and cigarette smoke. Everything was really nice. Not how I pictured a big rig. Not how I vaguely remembered my uncle's rig. Lloyd made the light, and we slammed up the on-ramp and headed east to Nashville. I felt powerful riding in that truck. Up high off the road, barreling across the slowly rising road.

We made it through Nashville at dusk, on the cusp of rush hour, hugging the left lane to Knoxville. The ride was relatively quiet. For a long time there was only a brief mention of where I was going, which Lloyd programmed into his GPS. We listened to an early morning news broadcast. The sounds of driving and the hushed tone of the reporter were comforting.

Just outside of Nashville, I broke the silence. "So, Lloyd?"

"Yeah," he said, staring down the road.

"How long you been driving?"

"Twelve years," he said, glancing over at me.

We sat there for a minute, looking straight ahead, bouncing with the road.

“How’d you meet my uncle?”

“We drove for the same outfit.”

I knew nothing about truck driving. I wanted to pass the time, take my mind off Sarah, off my grandmother. Lloyd put in a cd and shuffled a couple tracks. He stopped on “Country Honk,” by the Rolling Stones.

“You a Stones’ fan?” I asked.

Lloyd rolled down his window and started tapping his steering wheel. The wind rushed in and he pulled his hat down. I watched the cars’ lights pass by in the opposite lane as Lloyd mumbled the chorus. He looked like the song could have been about him, like he was singing his life: laying a divorcee somewhere down the line, some woman he ran into at a truck stop or a bar.

“You got a cigarette lighter in here? I need to plug this in.” I said holding up my cell phone charger.

Lloyd flipped down a console without a word and went back to tapping the steering wheel. I had to call my dad when I hit the border. He said he would meet us off I-26. I plugged my phone in to charge. I liked it charged, just in case.

“Can I smoke?” I asked.

“Sure. Use the ashtray,” he said, pointing below the console with the cigarette lighter.

I lit my cigarette and Lloyd joined me. We smoked and watched the road, the lights of Nashville fading behind us. I kept thinking about Sarah. Part of me was glad I had to get off at Clarksville. Part of me wanted to stay on the bus, see where that road took me. It was always that way with women. But, Sarah, I was interested in what she had to say. I wanted to listen.

I forgot about my cigarette and the air caught the ash and blew it all over the cab. Lloyd looked over at me, blinking his eyes and brushing the specs off his shirt.

“Use the ashtray.”

“Sorry,” I replied, brushing ashes from the seat, from the dash. Lloyd changed tracks, stopping on “Gimme Shelter.” He had gone back to the beginning. “*Let It Bleed*,” I said. “Damn good album.”

“Sure is,” Lloyd said, stamping out his butt in the ashtray. He put both hands on the wheel and drove.

Lloyd was dark. My first impression of him at the Iron Pan was different. He joked with the people there, even talked to Cindy, briefly. But, the rig was his world. I thought he would want to talk. It had to be somewhat lonely driving for twelve years all across the country by himself, but he seemed to be more interested in the music. His face was dry looking, worn like a smoker’s with a two-day growth. He was a tall man, big around the middle with short hair. He looked like the kind of man who would wear bib overalls into the grocery store on Sunday morning then go straight to church, without changing. There was no contract between us that said he had to take me to my grandmother. I did not want to piss him off, but there was no way I was going to sleep. I had too much coffee in me, and as much as I would have rather not talked, it was a long way through Tennessee. We just sat there and listened to the music. Lloyd watched the road, and I looked through the dark, following the headlights, trying to read license plates.

We had listened to most of the album. Just listening. In silence. We passed a sign that read, *Knoxville 55*. I pulled out another cigarette.

“Sure smoke a lot,” Lloyd said.

“There ain’t nothing else to do,” I replied. “Turn this up.”

It was “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” the last track on the album. It was simple—a few chords, a shaker, Mick Jagger, the acoustic guitar giving way to the electric; everything weaving through the percussion, the bass; everything bouncing off of everything; and that organ. All of it building and building toward the end, toward that wall of vocals, like a choir of archangels singing the truth, giving it up.

“Can I get one of those?” Lloyd asked. “Smoked my last one.”

“Sure.” I handed him one. He turned the song up more, letting it roar over the engine, then Lloyd belted, out of nowhere—his voice like a drunk reveler singing to a jukebox, screaming it at the glass: “You get what you need...AHHHH, YEAH!”

I smiled thinking maybe I was with a real person, someone that could at least let something out, be personable.

“It’s contagious, isn’t it,” I said, taking a drag off my cigarette.

“It’s true,” he said, then smiled. “Someone should have elected him president back then.”

“Did you ever see ‘em live?” I asked.

“Twice,” he paused, blowing smoke out his window. “You remember Cindy, back at the Iron Pan?”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“We saw them in seventy two at Municipal Auditorium in Nashville,” Lloyd said, “then in seventy-five at Freedom Hall in Louisville. Both shows were amazing. Damned Keith Richards was so drunk,” Lloyd said, laughing, “he fell down at the seventy-two show

twice, but he played fucking amazing. The booze didn't phase his fingers, just his legs, man. Just his legs"

"I never would have pegged you as a Stones' fan."

"Why's that?" Lloyd asked.

"I don't know. I judge people too quick sometimes, I guess."

"What do I look like, an old farm boy rocking out to the Allman Brothers or something?" he said, looking at me with a grin. "Don't get me wrong, I love them too."

"Yeah, that's about it."

"We liked it all back then. You could like country music and rock 'n roll. Hell, the country stars sang rock songs; the rock stars sang country songs. No one gave a shit what you called it, or who sang it, as long as it was good."

"You two dated or something?" I asked.

Lloyd turned to me. I could feel the rig slow down a bit, like Lloyd had taken his foot off the accelerator. He turned back and we accelerated. "We saw the Stones, saw the Dead a couple times. Let's see," he paused for a second. "Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Neil Young. Lots of acts."

"Sounds like a good time."

"It's all about making the most out of what's at hand." He looked like he was caught, frozen on the reflected pavement. "Wish I had caught Dylan. Never made it to one of his shows."

"There's definitely shows I've missed, other things too," I pulled out another cigarette. "Things with my mom." I lit my cigarette. "She saw the Stones back in her day," I

said, inhaling the smoke. “Died a few years ago.” I exhaled through the cracked window. “It was her .45 I listened to when I was little.”

“Sorry to hear that, R. J.”

“I don’t know why I brought it up,” I said. “Could we stop in a bit? I need to piss. I’m about out of cigarettes, too.”

“Sure,” Lloyd said, still fixed on the road. “I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee.”

Lloyd adjusted the music and switched back to the morning news show. I kept looking for license plates, reading billboards. We were still about thirty miles outside of Knoxville. It was dawn and we were going to be driving into the sun in a few minutes. The shadows were starting to creep back into the corners of the valleys. The fog was burning down from the higher elevations, leaving a low cloud, like dry ice in water, over the dew-drenched fields. It reminded me of my mom and the year we went to Virginia Beach for vacation. She wanted to drive through the Smokies in the morning. She wanted to see the fog. She wanted to see the mountain’s smoke. She traded off driving duties with my dad every few hours through the night. When it was her turn to drive, my dad slept. When he drove, my mom yelled at my sister and I for fighting over who got to play the Gameboy or tried to keep us occupied so as not to bother him.

She drove through Nashville, with all the lights and nighttime construction. She was so tense that, when we made it through the city, she woke my father and made him drive after only going about an hour herself. She fell asleep. She missed the mountains. She never got to see the fog burn off in the morning sun. Getting to see it with Lloyd now made me feel guilty. I felt like I was partly to blame. It was the last time we drove cross-country for a vacation. Her job kept her too busy for vacations, flying her from one location to another.



She always said the clouds from thirty thousand feet were more beautiful than anything. She called them layers of heaven when I was little, and I didn't believe her until I took my first flight, one of only a few.

I looked out the window at the cows in the field, the homes built into the hills. My comfort had melted with the fog and the thoughts of my mom. We smoked our way toward Knoxville, keeping the radio low. Just east of town, we stopped at a Pilot. He went inside to get us coffee and more cigarettes. I reached into my pocket, pulled out my empty pack of smokes, and read the newspapers in the machines out front. There were quite a few cars filling up. Trucks pulling boats. Vans with children hanging out of the back. And the smell, a mixture of fast-food grease, motor oil, and gasoline. I was about to toss my pack when I remembered Sarah's number. I had slid it between the cellophane and the box. I still thought it was too early to call. It was closing in on six hours since I stepped off the bus. She needed to be further away still.

When Lloyd came out, he handed me a big coffee and a pack of smokes. He already had one in his mouth. We sat on the parking stump right there in front of Pilot, smoking and watching all the people fill up their cars, trucks, boats, gas cans. We took a few more drags, exchanged glances, and nodded as if we knew what the other was thinking.

"You know R. J., I like people."

"I like people too, Lloyd."

"But, sometimes, being a truck driver and all—," he looked down at the concrete.

"Never mind."

"What?" I asked.

“You got me thinking about Cindy,” he said looking over at me. “Dammit.” He shook his head once and lit his cigarette. “We did have a thing. We had a kid, a boy.”

“How old is he?” I asked.

“He would have been about your age,” he said. “What are you twenty five, twenty-six?”

“Twenty-seven,” I said, still stuck on *would have been*. He was my ride. I was worried I crossed the line, that I had brought up more than our drive needed to get into.

“Jason would have been twenty-three.”

“Lloyd, we don’t have to talk about this, I mean, I’m sorry I brought up Cindy, man. I didn’t—”

He slapped me on the back, then took a drag from his cigarette, exhaled, and sipped his coffee.

“It’s hard. You can’t imagine, so don’t try,” Lloyd said, watching the people at the fuel pumps. “But, I like talking about him. It’s good for me.”

I sat silently drinking my coffee, fumbling with Sarah’s number and the pack of cigarettes Lloyd had bought for me. The sun had risen above the horizon and the long shadows at the truck stop were receding into themselves.

“He died in a car accident,” Lloyd said. “Lost control.”

I nodded and looked at him, so he knew I was listening.

“He went off the side of the road into a ditch.”

“I know this doesn’t compare, but I lost a couple of friends in car accidents. Both went into ditches. One fell asleep. The other—” I sipped my coffee. “We don’t know what happened. Got thrown from his car.”

Cars were coming and going. People going in and out of the truck stop.

“Cindy and I never married. I drove all the time. It was difficult even in the beginning,” he said, turning to me.

“Like you said, I can’t imagine.”

“She doesn’t blame anyone, but I can’t get over the fact I wasn’t around more.” He turned and looked at me with a smirk, “You know, typical self-pity. Non-nuclear family. Parents working all the time, not around to help protect their own kid.” He shrugged. “That’s some sort of natural tendency or something, right?” He said glancing at me, then back at the road. “One of the ten steps of moving through grief, like the stages a person goes through after losing a job?”

“Sure,” I said. “Only natural.”

“Just another stage. Another fucking door to crawl through,” he said, looking further, past the pumps at the cars on the outer road. “I’ve learned to deal with it.” He glanced over at me again. “I have a hard time being around her. I don’t know how to act anymore.”

“Well, I met a girl on the bus,” I said, holding up the piece of paper with her number. “Got to know her, you know, as good as one could on a bus. But, I don’t know how to call her.”

“You should call her sometime,” Lloyd said encouragingly. “She give it to you?”

“Give what to me?” I asked.

“Her number, or did you ask?”

“Oh, she gave it to me.”

“A good-looking kid like yourself—don’t not try.” He looked to me, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“I’ve been there before,” I said. “Went to college to get away from a girl I wish now I hadn’t.”

“Sometimes *going* is all you got, at least that’s what I tell myself,” Lloyd said, taking his hand from my shoulder. “Sometimes we confuse *going* and *trying*.”

We let the conversation drop. The fog was all gone, and we could hear the hum of the interstate behind us.

“Lloyd.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for the ride,” I told him.

He looked at me and nodded. “Hell, you ain’t no trouble. You been good company. You’re a good kid.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that coming from you.”

“What’s that mean?” Lloyd asked.

“You tell it how it is, unlike most people. Unlike those assholes who keep playing shitty music on the radio.”

Lloyd laughed. It was the first time I heard him laugh the whole trip. He slapped me on my back again. “You’re all right, R. J. You’re all right,” Lloyd said, getting up off the parking stump. “I got something I want to show you.” I followed and we headed around the other side of the building where the trucks parked.

“You remember those notebooks on the dash?”

“Yeah, the ones with the abbreviations on the front,” I said.

“I got, at last count, forty-four of them, one for each state I been through. They’re full of names, or Xs, or check marks. It’s not real easy to write while you’re driving.”

“Names of what?”

“You ever seen those crosses on the side of the road, the ones that mark where someone has died?” he asked.

“My friends have crosses up where they died.”

“I try to write down the names on the crosses, or at least keep track of all the ones I see.”

“Why?”

“I think of all the people who drove by Jason’s cross and never knew him,” he said, turning to me. “All the people he never got to meet, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“It’s my way of believing he’s somewhere. Heaven,” Lloyd continued. “Maybe just a ghost walking the side of the road. I don’t really know.”

“You know, if your friends aren’t in there, you add them,” he said.

“I’ll do that. Thanks.” He slapped me on the back one more time.

I took another sip of my coffee, thinking I might fight through the caffeine and try to get some sleep on the next leg, might step into his sleeper and make a phone call.

“Let’s get you to your grandma. What do you guys call her, Grandma Jo?”

“Yeah, Grandma Jo.”

He walked to his side of the rig. I to mine. We both climbed up.

At the Indian Mound, 2007

Brother, close your eyes, feel the hill  
slant beneath your feet toward the water.

Listen to the echo up the bluff. It cuts  
like a lathe to vinyl, a vintage master.

Let the anabatic breeze lift you off the mound,  
arms raised like a roller coaster, always reaching.

We must be patient. I think of catching rainwater  
with sails, offering a chute. We are sailors wrecked.

Imagine trade ships drifting south to port, pushing  
horses, our bikes, the dead weight of travel

over the edge. Look! The verdant plain,  
the shades of blue. Rise like leaves from whispers

muted. The river wakes. We must slink  
back to the mound. We have fallen short, lying

with our mouths gapped toward heaven. We pass  
time, watching the world hoist the sun,

then dip it once into the horizon burning  
between our grassy pillows and our bikes below.

## Worn Smooth like Stone

The windmill stood idle, adjacent to the yard where the kids played. The girders towered above the house, the rusted wheel, churning. Water had been pumped for washing, cooking, and bathing years before wires carried electricity to the pump. Where pails were used to ferry water back and forth, a path, worn smooth like stones in a river marked the generations. Inside the wash porch, an old woman bent. Doubled over the basin she refused to give up for the Sears-Kenmore in the corner, her hands rubbed the clothes across the boards, soaping and scrubbing, rinsing and hanging—the process, everything she couldn't let go, already conceding to the color TV and the window unit in her room. The agitated water slopped over the sides of the tub, ran over the pails she carried as a child for her mother, collected around the plastic pool her grandkids were playing in, left of the windmill's shadow. For lunch, she made sandwiches, served powdered milk, and listened to the wheel, like a mouth, worked by wind, arguing with the washer sitting on the porch, quietly mocking everyone.

## Applications

As I look into this mirror, I try to find what it is that started out as a blank I needed to fill in for an application. I look to find what it is that separates the reflection, what distorts it, what rearranges and orders it. When I received my first letter, I thought it would be more than easy, a way to fill in the community service blank on the applications. It became much more than that when I got to know Darrel, a twelve-year-old with Dissociating Issues Disorder, when I depended on him as much as he on me, when I depended on him. I saw on the news last night that Darrel's mother had drowned him in the bathtub. She had pulled him from the center, from the FLP program, put his head under water. Drowned. The investigator told the reporter she had opened her wrists and bled out right there with him. After I heard the news I found myself staring at things in my room, the rejection letters on my wall, the back of the spoon on my coffee table, the folders I had been keeping, then at nothing particular—like when you have been up all night drinking coffee. My eyes were fixed on my eyes, windows that framed images of me filling in the blanks of my applications, images of Darrel with his hands outstretched. I could not control the image. My hands could not grab him. They cannot grab him. I keep looking and thinking about what I have been doing the last few months. The more I stand here looking, the further I go back—all the way back to the beginning. Everything seems to move like cars through red lights on empty streets. All the signs say *stop*, but it feels necessary to go. There are no curtains on my windows.

Dissociating Issues Disorder (DID) was something I had learned about through television, the nightly news programs and *60 Minutes*. I had seen the normal parents struggling with their wild children, beautiful boys and girls. I heard the doctors talk of no real



cure, because there was no real diagnosis of the condition. The doctors said they were gaining ground on the disorder. They were getting closer to labeling it more specifically. The parade of medical professionals encouraged parents to get an experimental vaccine, one that was more controversial than beneficial, so some parents were saying. The more DID was televised and talked about, some parents were saying, the more it seemed to become a larger issue. Televised. Some parents were saying. A larger issue.

In high school, I dated a guy named Alex. He was two years older than me and worked with DID kids at a daycare. It was a daycare. But it was a school. It was a daycare, but the kids were taught skills. It was a school. It was socializing. I was the normal teenager, the typical high school kid, trying to manage my own issues with image and success and freedom and love, and I didn't know why Alex did it, or how he found the time. He was always physically and mentally drained when I would see him after his shift, and I don't know why Alex did it. It was socializing. It was helping. It was normal, he said.

When I was faced with having to fill out applications to graduate school, I never thought I had enough to fill up the community service sections. My grades were good, but I decided not to join a sorority as an undergraduate, losing out on service opportunities. I had worked with my church when I was younger, but those projects had been so few and far between, so far in the past that I didn't want to list them. It didn't feel right. To me that gap in helping, in doing something for someone else, said more about me than marking down that I helped take food to shut-ins over Christmas in 1989, or helped the elderly walk through my church's graveyard on Memorial Day in 1990—twelve years ago. I was younger then. My grades were good. I needed to fill in the blanks of the application.

One afternoon, Oprah had the founder of DID Outreach (DIDO), a non-profit organization that worked to provide opportunities for children with DID, on her show. The founder, Dave Smith, was the father of a child with DID. He was forced to raise his son alone after his wife killed herself, driving her car off the Mississippi River Bridge outside of St. Louis. She had developed postpartum psychosis and could not balance her own problems with those of her son. It was more than one person could handle. It was all too common, the doctor said on *Oprah*, almost normal for the nature of her situation—her own psychosis and the DID—to end tragically. It was an affecting program.

After his wife's suicide, Smith found some other parents who were in his situation. Together, they, along with a couple of DID experts and a psychologist, formed DID Outreach. Smith also mentioned that his organization was more than a program for DID kids; it was a program for families struggling with DID, a program designed to help find ways to cope, ways to help parents help their kids find an outlet in normal society. Help the parents find normal society. It was a program to bring both the parents and children out of the dark, out of the woods. It was intended to reduce the isolated nature of DID, both on the family and the individual. I went online and signed up, joining the mailing list before the show was even over. After his wife's suicide. I wanted to help slice light into the dark.

DIDO sent me information on DID a few days after I joined. The packet included the objectives of the organization and discussed various different programs that needed volunteers. My daily life had been consuming, trying to finish school, working, so I chose to volunteer for the Freedom Letter Project (FLP). This project was designed to help DID kids with their communication skills and begin offering them different opportunities to explore their creative sensibilities. It was a program Dr. Johnson, one of the gentlemen from *Oprah*,

had developed as a means to get DID children access to more outlets in their daily lives, to help them explore their minds, and express themselves to others whom they did not see daily. It was not only an opportunity to help children with DID develop more normal lives, be able to express themselves, and have someone to share their thoughts or observations with, but a way to help educate a larger section of average citizens on the topic.

The program was explained as a way to encourage the DID kids to explore their own thoughts through written communication, instead of primarily physical interaction. It was designed to provide more contact with others, to get the DID kids away from feeling isolated. Dr. Johnson called it, “a program to help socialize through means of communication other than those which focused on the personal, face-to-face development of spoken language.” The FLP’s vision was written in the pamphlet,

*To break free from the grip of DID, it is imperative to help those children, no matter the severity of their disorder, by breaking the traditional methods of interpreting the disease. It is the Freedom Letter Project’s vision to help develop communication skills through an activity those living with DID can view as repetitive, and not compulsory or overly ritualistic in means, but as a loosely framed device designed to improve communication, worldly perception, and comprehension on a larger scope than is able to be done in a face-to-face setting.*

It was different and intriguing. I could help by simply reading and responding to letters. The cost of a stamp. A few minutes of my day. I could make a difference. Because of the severity of some of the children’s cases, the pamphlet mentioned that, once a registered volunteer, each person would get a password to join the community forum on the Internet. Each person would join the community. The internet community was set up for anyone having difficulties dealing with the letters or subject matter or anything in general. Along with this online support group, each letter would come with a rough translation or “summary” as the

pamphlet referred to it, in order to help decipher some of the handwriting or thoughts. I could help by reading and responding to the letters. I thought. It was intended to fill in blanks. I thought I could make a difference. I could have joined the community.

Each volunteer was assigned one DID child, but the pamphlet stated you could sign up for more. I thought one would be plenty. I was glad I didn't take on any more. It was written in crayon, some sort of blue, on a piece of construction paper. I thought it was a bit childish considering the scope of the project Dr. Johnson had spelled out in the pamphlet. It was difficult to read, but I wanted to try to figure it out before I turned to the "summary."

As I read through it, I wrote out the words for my own benefit. The letter was big physically, but was short on content. It read something like this,

DEAR LOGAN,

LOGAN ARE GIRL. YOU AM WRTIN LOGAN FOR SCOOL.  
DARREL EAT APPLES HAM. AT SCOOL WE PLAY. LOGAN  
ARE GIRL.

DARREL

This was the whole page, all 9x14 inches of the construction paper. Big capital letters. The letter was folded in half and mailed in a manila envelope. The "summary" expanded upon what I had interpreted from the crayon. Darrel's teacher, Mrs. Jones, wrote:

Dear Logan,

You are a girl. (He thought Logan was a boy, because we have a boy named Logan in our class.) I am writing you for school. (His thoughts sometimes repeat what we say and tell the class.) I eat apples and ham. At school, we play. You are a girl.

Darrel

Below her translation was a note to me.

Logan,

Thank you for volunteering for this wonderful program. Darrel is a wonderful boy. He is ten-years-old and has a mild case of echolalia, where he meaninglessly repeats another person's words. He also confuses pronouns and reverses them sometimes, where instead of "he," Darrel will say and write "you" or his name.

He is very energetic and has made great efforts to break his compulsive actions—rearranging the desks when he comes to the center and his ritualistic eating patterns. His conscious effort is unusual in DID children and is one of the reasons he was recommended for the FLP.

Thanks again for volunteering as an outlet for Darrel. We will be waiting for your reply.

Sincerely,  
Ms. Janice Jones

After I read the letters, I couldn't help but think of Alex and his job at the daycare. I couldn't help but think of the boy he always talked about—Jimmy—and how he would always latch on to him. Alex would meet up with me after his shift and tell me that everyone at the daycare was so glad when he came in because Jimmy would finally settle down.

Alex would tell me about how Jimmy would act out violently in some instances. He said that he would throw things and have violent tantrums, and when the female teachers would try to talk him out of his tantrums, he would grab their breasts, clamp his hands down on their nipples and not let go. He would scratch their faces when they tried to get his hands off of them. This is what I remember from our relationship. Alex would tell me. Jimmy would stop acting out when Alex showed up. He would play with the other kids and listen to the teachers as long as Alex was around. He still had difficulties learning, but he would participate. He was normal on those days. Somewhat normal, I gathered. Alex thought it was because he treated him like any other kid, like a nephew, or a cousin, or a little brother. The teachers didn't know for sure why Jimmy would calm down when Alex was around, Alex

had told me. The music Alex listened to on break had attracted Jimmy to him in the first place. It wasn't Alex that sought out Jimmy, but Jimmy who had found Alex.

When I put that first letter away in the folder I bought to keep track of them, I couldn't help but remember a boy I went to kindergarten with, a boy that was always left alone. Maybe we shouldn't have left him alone; maybe it was the wrong thing to do. One day the boy in my kindergarten was gone. I think his name was Josh. Everyone thought he was retarded. I thought he was interesting. I wondered if Jimmy was like him, if Darrel was like that boy from my kindergarten that was gone one day. Maybe we shouldn't have left him alone. One day he was gone. Jimmy was like him, I think.

I wrote back, in blue pen, to Darrel the day after.

Darrel,

I'm excited to get to know you. I, too, like ham and apples. They complement each other. Is blue your favorite color? It is my favorite color. What do you play at school?

Your friend,  
Logan

I folded the letter and addressed it to Darrel, stamped it and went to the mailbox outside my apartment. This was a Thursday.

I got the second letter the following Wednesday. It was short, this time in red crayon. It took up the entire page again, all 9 x 14. I had to interpret it like the first. It had to be done.

DEAR LOGAN,

THANK ME FOR YOUR LETTER. MOM CRIED TODAY. YOUR CLASS WALK TODAY. GINGER FLOAT TODAY. GOODBYE TODAY. YOU LIKE RED BEST. I WRITE RED. WE PLAY BALL. MOM CRIED TODAY. THANK ME.

## DARREL

It was more difficult to read than the first. I could only guess at what he meant by “ginger float today.” He had answered my questions, though. I turned to Ms. Jones’s summary:

Dear Logan,

Thank you for writing back to me. My mom cried today. (Darrel talks of her crying quite often.) Our class is going on a walk today. The class fish, Ginger, died over night. (One of the students found it floating.) Goodbye. I like red. I wrote with a red crayon. We play ball. (They get rubber balls to toss around and kick when they go outside.) My mom cried today. Thank you.

Darrel

Logan,

Thanks again. I’ve never seen Darrel so focused on one task. He talked about you to everyone last week.

Ms. Janice Jones

I wanted to write back but I needed to work on my applications some more. I had filled out everything but the community service blank. I had all my schools lined up. The transcripts. The letters of recommendation. The writing sample. The personal statement. Everything was ready. I needed to work on them some more. I kept printing off new application forms and filling them out. I had done this three times already, trying to get each word perfect. It had to be exceptional. Each time I came to the community service blank, I locked up. It was still just one line: DID Outreach volunteer. I wanted to write back. I kept thinking about Darrel.

The next morning, Thursday, I wrote back to Darrel. I used red marker this time, Darrel’s favorite color. It bled through the white copy paper, but it was the only red I had.

Darrel,

How was your walk? I'm sorry about your fish. Fish are difficult pets, sometimes. What do you like best—baseball, basketball, football, or soccer? Do you have a favorite athlete? I hope your mom is better.

I'm filling out applications to go to school. I'm having trouble with one section. You are helping me with it, though. Thank you. Did you know I work at a bank? I have to count large amounts of money every day. It is no fun, because I don't get to take any of it home.

I hope your mom is feeling better. I look forward to hearing from you.

Your friend,  
Logan

“When the center cannot hold, things fall apart.” That is what a professor of mine in college said. “I’m trying to center myself,” is something my college roommate said. I never knew what “center” meant. The core? Sometimes I felt like I was at the center of it all. I feel I’m at the center of it all. As Darrel’s letters kept coming in and I kept responding, I started to understand what—no, I started to understand why Alex had volunteered to work at the daycare, at the center.

My letters back to Darrel continued. They were short and descriptive. I told him how old I was, what I looked like, what I did, where I went to school. I expressed to him everything I could, as simply as I could, in order for him to develop a connection. I kept asking him questions. The program resisted pictures initially, because it felt like they would distract the children from developing thoughts and images in their head. The program didn’t want anything spelled out. It wanted the children to keep on guessing, to see where the project took their imaginations. I didn’t understand, because eventually the DIDO encouraged the children to send a picture and for the FLP partner to send one back. It seemed to defeat the purpose. I didn’t understand. Did pictures hold more truth than words? Could one develop all of these thoughts and ideas from words to then be presented with the



truth in one brief moment? Do we have to develop these notions of being wrong, not understanding first, to know what is right, that we are right? I didn't understand. I don't understand it, sitting here in my room, staring at these letters, at my mirror. I had to fill in the blanks, though. My applications. The program resisted pictures. They wanted thought, development of communications. It was too easy to sit down with them. It was too easy to just talk to these children. There were too many, apparently. It was too easy to second-guess what I was doing. I was just too far away to help.

Darrel continued writing to me. I to him. In one letter he asked me if I had a mom. He told me his mom was nice but that she always had tears. I told him that my mom was in a different town, so I didn't get to see her very often. We never talked about his father. I asked once, but he didn't reply. Ms. Jones said that he rarely ever talked about his father to anyone. His letters were getting longer and better. He was still talking about himself in the third person and confusing his pronouns, but not as much. I looked forward to the big manila envelopes in my mail. I would try everything to leave work early on Wednesdays, but the bank manager always wanted to leave early on those days to get to the gym for his Pilates class. I would try everything to leave work early on Wednesdays. His letters were getting longer and better.

A couple months into the FLP, Darrel wrote to me about his principal, about his lazy eye, about his mom, and asked me a question I wasn't ready for. He never asked questions. I had to interpret.

LOGAN

SHOOP HAS LAZY. EYE GOES LEFT. SHOOP FUNNY. MS.  
JONES SAYS NO TO ME. YOU POINT. I LAUGH. I POINT.  
MY EYE. DARREL EYE GO STRAIGHT. MIRROR IS MY EYE.

MIRROR IS NOT FUNNY. DARREL NOT FUNNY. SHOOP NOT FUNNY. EYE GOES LEFT. I WANT TO LOVE. MOM SAYS LOVE DARREL. MOM HAS TEARS. WHAT YOU AM. LOGAN MOM? LOGAN HAVE TEARS. SHOOP HAS LAZY. DARREL EYE STRAIGHT.

YOUR FRIEND,  
DARREL

Ms. Jones wrote her summary, but I was getting to the point where I didn't need it. I had done some research on DID after her initial comments on Darrel's condition. I was figuring it out. With time, I didn't need the summary. With time. I had built a connection. I was disconnecting. I can feel it. My eyes are straight. They are straight. I can see them.

Logan,

Mr. Schupp has a lazy eye. It drifts left when he talks to Darrel. He thinks it is funny. He laughs when Mr. Schupp talks to him. (I tell him not to laugh, because it is normal, that there is nothing Mr. Schupp can do about it. It was how he was born.) Darrel points at his eye when Mr. Schupp speaks to him. Darrel laughs at him. Darrel points. (Darrel is getting better with his pronouns. He is learning when to use them, but it requires him to write it how he is used to and me to ask him who he means.) Darrel's eyes are straight. He is in the mirror. (Darrel keeps looking at his face in out classroom mirror. He also stares at himself in the spoons he uses at lunch, anything that reflects his eyes. His logic works where he has made a comparison, a connection between himself and Mr. Schupp.) Darrel is not funny; therefore, Mr. Schupp is not funny. Mr. Schupp's eye goes left. (Darrel keeps staring at his eye and pointing.) He wants to love. (It was Valentines Day and we talked about love, feeling, and emotion.) He said his mom loves him when she cries. She says, "I love you," when she is crying. (I think he wrote you about this already.) He wants to know what he is. (I'm not sure where this came from.) Are you a mother? Do you have children? (I think he has associated you with his mother. He asked the class if crying means mother, if it means love.) Mr. Schupp has a lazy eye. Darrel's eyes are straight.

Darrel

Logan,

Darrel is still repeating himself, but he is making some real progress in the class. He loves writing to you and sharing his letters with the other students.

Thanks, as always,  
Janice

When I wrote that first line in the community service blank, it hadn't occurred to me what I had been doing with Darrel. What I had been doing with Darrel wasn't writing letters because I had to. Because I had to. When I tried to describe what I had been doing for the past few weeks in the blank, the blank wasn't big enough to fully explain the service I had been performing. There was only one line. But what I was doing was more than one line. It was more than the one line of taking food to shut-ins over Christmas in 1989, or chaperoning the elderly on Memorial Day in 1990. The letters would come on Wednesdays, usually. I would write back to him that night. In the mail the next. And get his next letter by Wednesday of the following week. Each week. Clockwork. Efficient. I was socializing. I was helping Darrel break free from the grip of DID. I was connecting to him. It was helping. I know it was. I can't find what separates this reflection in the mirror, in these letters. It's all in my mind. I just have to find it. I can order it.

I mailed my applications the week before I read Darrel's last letter. I was pleased with the completeness of all the sections, but still worried. I didn't think I had enough down to be able to convince a committee of my worth, of my knowledge, of all the things committees look for. I was more comprehensive with the community service blank, but in my assumptions, I was still normal, maybe spread too thin over all the sections to really shine in any of them. I had put so much time into the whole process that it had to pay off,

but either way the committee's decision swung, I knew I would still have Darrel to talk to. I never wanted to be in his situation, but always wondered what it would be like to not necessarily have things expected of you. I had put so much time and thought and emotion into the whole program. The applications had stated to expect a reply in four to six weeks. It was a tough wait, especially when I didn't get a letter from Darrel the following Wednesday. Then another week went by and no letter. I thought if I waited long enough, I would get a letter. I wanted to write to see why I hadn't heard from Darrel, to see if things were all right, but I waited some more. If I waited long enough. I wanted to write. I did. The applications had stated to wait four to six weeks. I wanted to write Darrel or Ms. Jones. If I waited long enough. I wrote to Darrel,

Darrel,

I'm worried. Is everything going okay? I sent my applications to school. I should hear back in a week or so. I'm nervous. I hope you are doing okay. I miss reading your letters. I miss hearing about your day.

Your friend,  
Logan

I mailed my letter on a Thursday, like usual, so I was hoping to hear back from him soon. When I checked the mail on Monday, there was a manila folder in the mail. It wasn't from Darrel. It was a response from one of the schools I had applied to. I got accepted to the program. The committee approved. Inside the envelope was a handwritten letter from the director of the program. It was written on FLP stationary.

Logan,

Congratulations on your acceptance. I too am a member. I too know what it is like to become invested in someone else's life. It is rewarding and straining all at the same time. It is like you continually

surrender part of yourself to something more valuable. It is hard to express. I look forward to meeting you.

Congrats,  
Dr. Janet Butler

Still no word from Darrel. I was happy to be accepted, but Dr. Butler's school wasn't my first choice. It was just one of many. I filed the letter away, taking note of the reply date to accept or deny my place on their roster. There was something about her words, something that I recalled—emotions, anxiety, fear—that made me break down. I broke down. I was happy about school, but it was more. I needed Darrel to write to me. I called in sick the next day. Still no word from Darrel.

Two weeks went by. Two more manila envelopes came. Two plain white envelopes came. Two more letters of acceptance. Two letters of rejection. I'm not unintelligent. I am intelligent. I filed the acceptance letters away, taking note of the last date to reply to accept my position.

Three weeks had gone by before I heard back from Ms. Jones,

Dear Logan,

I'm sorry about the delay in getting in touch with you. I know you have been invested in Darrel and the FLP. I'm sorry to tell you, but Darrel's mother has taken him out of the center and the program. I certainly hope you reapply with the FLP for another child. Your letters were a tremendous joy and help to Darrel. I'm sorry that I have to be the one that tells you.

Sincerely,  
Ms. Janice Jones

I called in sick to work three times after I received her letter. They told me not to come back. The floor of my apartment is still littered with half-written letters—each one beginning, but with no end. I had repeated information I didn't know that I had stored.

*Darrel,  
Wherefore art thou?*

*Darrel,  
At my back I hear, times black winged chariot?*

*Darrel,  
This is just to say*

*Darrel,  
Where is it now, Darrel? Where has it fled?*

*Darrel,  
I hear a murmur of distant seas, Darrel.*

*Darrel,  
How do I love you? I miss you. I will count the ways.*

I got a phone call this morning. I keep replaying the conversation, the scene , thinking there was something I missed.

“Is this Logan, Logan Richard?” the man’s voice asked.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“I’m Darrel Miller’s father.”

“Darrel’s father?”

“Yes. Ms. Jones told me you were the one writing to Darrel. The people at the center gave me your number. I hope it is all right that I called you.”

“Yes, yes,” I told him, shaking my head into the receiver. “How is Darrel? I’ve been really worried about him.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about, but I don’t—”

“Is he all right?”

“I would like to talk to you in person, Logan.”

The tone of his voice was off. It wasn't normal. He was serious. It was real. "Ok," I told him. "Where?"

"Do you know where 42<sup>nd</sup> street is?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"There's a coffee shop on the corner, *The Blacker the Better*, I think it's called."

"I know where it's at. What time?"

"Can you meet me there in an hour?"

I tried to clear my head, think of what I had to do, what I had been doing, where I had to be. "Yes. I'll see you in an hour, 42<sup>nd</sup> street."

"Ok, Logan. I'll see you then."

I went to the café. There were a few people there. I realized when the door jingled I had no idea what Darrel's father looked like. I didn't even catch his name. Darrel's last name—Miller. I got a cup, black. They didn't have cream—something about the pureness of coffee not needing any thinner or sweetener. Black. Darrel's last name—Miller. I grabbed a seat and waited to see if any one approached me.

I waited sipping the thick, aromatic coffee, watching the steam slip through the little hole at the top. I kept looking around thinking I would catch the eye of someone, someone who might look like the picture Darrel had sent me, someone who might be the image of how I tried to construct Darrel's father. But I had nothing to go on. I wanted to stand up and yell out, "Mr. Miller, I'm Logan Richard, Darrel's friend." There were three men sitting at tables by themselves. One had a book. One a notepad. One had a laptop. There was music pounding. It was deep and in short bursts. It sounded like my name. I kept staring at them trying to see if they would look up, if they had been testing me out. I was the only woman

sitting alone in the café. I didn't know why he wouldn't come up to me and ask if I was Logan Richard. I was Logan Richard. Where was Mr. Miller? I was Logan Richard. One book. One notepad. One laptop.

I finished my cup of coffee, enough of it. As I got up to leave I tried to focus on all three of the men, looking for anything, a glance up from the text, a movement to erase, a backspace, a sip of coffee, a glance. Nothing. I paused at the door and turned back toward the counter, toward the barista. Nothing. I was Logan Richard.

I threw my cup in the trash. "Where is Mr. Miller?" I asked loudly, over the conversations, over the barista grinding more coffee. "Where is Mr. Miller?" The customers looked up. All of them. The man from his book. "You are Logan Richard. Where is Mr. Miller?" I said to him. The man from his notepad. "You are Logan Richard. Where is Mr. Miller?" I said to him. The man from his laptop. "You are Logan Richard. Where is Mr. Miller?" I said to him. Blank. One couple looked at each other and smirked. Another group of women raised their eyebrows and shook their head. The men just stared. Blank. "Where is Mr. Miller?" I said again, louder and in the direction of the barista who had stopped grinding coffee. "Tell him Logan Richard was here." He shook his head, confusedly. Everyone went back to what they were doing.

I am kneeling in front of the mirror, trying to find what it is that started out as a blank for an application. I look to find what it is that separates my reflection, how it is rearranged and ordered. The program had been explained. The couch frames the letters with the television and the wall. I want to tear down the paisley border. My door is closed, dead-bolted. There are no curtains on my windows.



## Images in a Glass Screen

In a world saddled with gadgets,  
cell phones and wi-fi, iPods and Blackberries,  
the idea of loneliness is blurred,  
like the photos on my fridge, bleeding  
from the magnets holding them up.

I hear Maya Angelou reading  
a poem on television about being alone.  
The ripple of her words voiced  
over images of lovers, friends  
looking for something like home.

I am a social addict,  
searching from network to network, static  
images in a glass screen,  
memories, one step from  
crashing in a flood of data.

I watch the news, seeking  
connections to something greater than me,  
an inactive participant salivating  
over the powerful, the indigent, the lionized  
faces in a crowd, overexposed.

We have time enough to be cordial  
before the program ends, our message  
in a voicemail times out.  
We are dangling mid-sentence,  
holding back something intrinsic.

## Cultivate

I stab my spade in the hard Missouri clay,  
welling narrow holes equidistant.  
I have twenty rows behind, further  
than my eyes can see. I have never broken the clods,  
nor covered the seedlings with loose top soil.  
I once helped my parents soak their garden, spraying  
water like a spring shower over the maturing plants.  
It was satisfying and temporary, like remembering my youth—  
tossing a baseball with my dad, turning the steaks  
on the grill while he took sips of Miller Lite.

I am planting more than corn or tomatoes or zucchini.  
These rows will be tilled over or abandoned, left  
as a vacant lot for a house, or filled with poplars.  
Behind me, a child calls the time for dinner.

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