8-2015

Finding Tuwaqachi, and Other Essays

Cory G. Ferrer
Northern Michigan University, coryferrer@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.nmu.edu/theses

Part of the Nonfiction Commons, and the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation
https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/51

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonnou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.
FINDING TUWAQACHI, AND OTHER ESSAYS

By

Cory Ferrer

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

July 2015
Title of Thesis: Finding Tuwaqachi, and other Essays

This thesis by Cory Ferrer is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and Faculty Chair in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Mathew Frank
First Reader: Austin Hummell
Second Reader (if required): Josh MacIvor-Anderson
Faculty Chair: Dr. Robert Whalen
Dr. Brian D. Cherry
Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research
ABSTRACT

FINDING TUWAQACHI, AND OTHER ESSAYS

By

Cory Ferrer

This thesis is a collection in four parts, divided by genre with the exception of the titular essay series, Finding Tuwaqachi. Insecurity, affirmation, and our need to connection emerge as the primary themes of this work. The essay series, Finding Tuwaqachi, takes a close look at intentional community and center for alternative therapy located in southern Michigan during the 1970s, by examining several lives caught up in this project. Part two of this collection comprises a series of lyric essays which explore the need to be heard, as well as the ultimate fallibility of our attempts to understand and imagine others as complete human beings. The third installment of this collection consists of a series of poems, many of which were written in blank verse that explore landscapes and imagery, paying particular attention the tension between alienation and intimacy. The final installment of this manuscript is a collection of short memoir examining insecurity and the fraught social territory through which the speaker has attempted to reach out to others, or others have attempted to reach out to him. Each section draws on a wide range of experiments in form and voice to provide a varied and well-rounded approach to their respective themes.
Dedicated to DW and GW
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank everyone who was generous enough to share their story with me while I was researching Tuwaqachi. I would especially like to thank my family for not only contributing to my research, but for supporting me in my writing and putting up with all of my insistent prying into sensitive family history.

I would like to thank all of the faculty I had the pleasure of working with at Northern, including Beverly Matherne, Jaspal Singh, Paul Lehmberg, and Lisa Eckert.

I would like to give a special thanks to Laura Soldner for supporting me in my development as an educator during my time at Northern Michigan University.

Thank my thesis committee: I would like to thank Austin Hummel for his approachable teaching style, honest criticism, and all the rides home from campus. Thank you to Joshua McIvor-Anderson for all of his warmth and enthusiasm. And lastly, thank you to my thesis advisor, Mathew Frank for all the detailed, nitty gritty feedback, for the wild stories, improvised pep-talks, and last but not least, thank you for sharing your fried larva snacks and your infectious passion for writing.

I would like to thank everyone else who helped me out in my research, including former residents, historical library archivists, and the property’s current residents.
Another round of thanks for the Office of Graduate Research for generously funding my research. Thank you to LuAnne Crupi and Erica Franich.

A hearty thanks is owed to Ray Ventre. During my first two and a half years at Northern, he was a readily available source of wisdom, encouragement, and entertaining stories. He will be dearly missed.

Thank you to all of my fellow teaching assistants and graduate students for making my experience at Northern so memorable.

Last, but not even close to least, thank you to Lori Rintala and Angela Rasmussen for their tireless work in keeping the whole English Department afloat.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I <em>Finding Tuwaqachi</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II <em>Lyric Essays</em></td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III <em>Poetry</em></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part IV <em>Memoir</em></td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual, and the department of English. It is a collection in four parts, divided by genre with the exception of the titular essay series, Finding Tuwaqachi. Though it ranges widely in style and form, my work concerns itself heavily with our relationships to ourselves and each other. Insecurity, affirmation, encounter, and the need to connect with others emerge as the primary themes of my work. Lyric essay, memoir, and poetry each have their own unique ways of engaging these conflicts. My poetry often explores the tension between alienation and intimacy, isolating felt Moments of attempted connection between people, in particular ones in which the impact of the experience on both parties is somewhat ambiguous. My lyric essays explore the need to be heard, as well as the ultimate fallibility of our attempts to understand and imagine others as complete human beings, while my short memoir often examines insecurity and the fraught social territory through which I have attempted to reach out to others, or others have attempted to reach out to me. Lastly, my series Finding Tuwaqachi explores the risks my subjects took in their search for affirmation of themselves, socially, spiritually, and personally, a search to live “authentically” as themselves among others, a search for which they ultimately paid a higher price than anyone expected.
The first part of this collection consists of the titular essay series, *Finding Tuwaqachi*: a linked series of eight pieces centered on an intentional community and alternative therapy center which thrived for a few years before falling apart during the 1970s. Located in Southern Michigan, the commune was home to anywhere from 12 to 30 people, including much of my family. My research took place over two summers of support from the Office of Graduate Research, and consisted primarily of interviewing my family members and other former residents about their experiences as part of this unique community. Because the community was largely aligned with the counterculture’s push for alternative values and lifestyles, my original goal for the project was to explore the intersection between individual lives and larger historical contexts, but I quickly became fascinated by the social experiment of the community, the alternative therapies practiced there, and perhaps most of all, my family history. My belief was that by capturing multiple viewpoints on the same subject, I could document the tensions, misunderstandings, and differences that make up a complex community.

However, as is almost always the case with long-form nonfiction, my conception of the project evolved considerably during the research process. First of all, many of the people I interviewed had lived in the community for several years of their lives, so after forty years of forgetting had done its work, few significant events emerged in common between their narratives. The body of research I
accumulated was both far more disjointed and far more personal than anything I
could have imagined. I found that the shape of their stories seemed to have less
to do with their feelings and points of view at the time, and much more to do
with how they feel about those years in the larger context of their lives now that
they are looking back on them. Some look back with resentment and regret,
others with excitement. Some relished re-living these experiences, while others
worked to keep them at arm’s length. I found that the material wouldn’t really
bear out the efforts to create a single, cohesive narrative by synthesizing multiple
testimonies. I decided instead to allow these gaps between experiences to exist
on their own terms, and focused my writing on individual people’s experience
rather than overarching narrative.

As I typed out the transcripts to my interviews, I began to realize that the source
material itself contained a certain richness, the compelling emotional pull of an
authentic speaker. The speech rhythms carried a sense of their attitude, their
level of education and their dialect. When researching interview skills, I watched
a video in which an experienced television journalist explained an interesting
approach to getting interviews that make good viewing. He instructed that if you
have a chance to talk to the subject before the camera rolls, you should never
make the mistake of discussing the topic of your interview beforehand.
Otherwise, when it comes time to shoot, the interviewees responses risk
becoming a disinterested re-hash of your previous conversation. The audience
likes watching ideation, he explained; there is simply no substitute for the dynamic vitality of a speaker’s mind spontaneously piecing together its impressions and beliefs in real time. I decided early in the research that the voices of interview subjects were going to play an integral role in this piece.

For inspiration I turned to authors of oral history like Studs Terkel and Svetlana Alexievich. Terkel provided strong examples of how to structure an interviewee’s testimony into essay format by latching onto personal declarative statements and deploying them like thesis statements in the work. However, it was Alexievich, with her focus on story, personal anecdote and the speaker’s emotional life who provided a strong example of how to treat this material. I became very interested in changes in speech rhythm that express a speaker’s emotions, in the brisk pacing connoting their confidence, or the hesitation and stuttering that accompanies a subject the speaker finds difficulty in discussing. I wanted to see if I could emphasize the speech rhythms using poetic line breaks, an idea I modeled after the nonfiction poet Charles Reznikoff, whose work in Holocaust is edited directly from transcripts of testimony delivered at the Nuremberg trials.

During the process, I also became somewhat ambivalent about the process of interviewing. I was delving into very intimate subject Matter for many of my subjects. Informed by those who looked back on the experience with resentment,
I developed critical attitudes towards some of the people and ideas involved in the community’s undertaking, and began to wonder how those I spoke to would receive my writing. After attending a series of panels on ethics of writing nonfiction while representing Passages North literary magazine at AWP in Seattle, I realized that there are no simple answers to the ethical dilemmas of writing about other people’s lives. However, I did become much more aware of my role as a researcher, probing at sensitive subjects. I read Janet Malcom’s *The Journalist and the Murderer*, a nonfiction narrative examining a true crime author who had deceived his subject in order to get the research access he was looking for. I began writing about the interviews themselves, about my role in pushing against the boundaries of others’ privacy. I found that this really spoke to some of the themes raised by the social experiment of the commune itself, since its residents sacrificed enormous privacy in order to live a more connected and “authentic” life.

This essay series represents the first installment of a longer work still in progress. These 50 pages cover the creation of the commune, my grandparents reasons for getting involved, and several of the people, philosophies, and styles of therapy which were central to commune’s origins and goals. I have structured them in the form of a lyrical series. The individual pieces are meant to work as a whole rather than as independent works, yet there remains some distance between them in time and style. The material engaged includes mythology and history,
finance, psychology, and faith. The pieces run a range from humorous to somber, but each is connected by the force of their relation to the community. Each one provides a fresh glimpse into some intimate corner of its existence.

Part two of my collection is a series of lyric essays. Here I define “lyric essay” as a personal engagement with research, as opposed to a personal engagement with memory or lived experience. A lyric essay differs from a standard research report in that its purposes stretch beyond the informative to create indelible impressions and unexpected connections, using found material as a springboard for creative engagement.

In several of my nonfiction classes at Northern Michigan University, we have been evaluating and exploring the debate over what constitutes “nonfiction” itself, raised by works such as David Shields’ *Reality Hunger*, and John D’Agata’s *The Lifespan of a Fact*. Essentially, writers of “creative” nonfiction have been challenging the notion that “not-fiction” is synonymous with journalistic fact checking standards, and have been vocally pushing the boundary of what nonfiction writers can get away with. Some of my favorite experimental nonfiction has taken for granted the fallibility of source material and written work that isolates research from its original context to create a portrait, not of the subject itself, but of the imaginations of those generating the “knowledge” surrounding it. In particular, I’m talking about Eliot Weinberger’s
groundbreaking essay, *The Dream of India*. This work is composed of a list of “facts” about India, all of them written in Europe before the year 1492. In its own way, it still works as conventional nonfiction, but the subject it documents isn’t really India, but Europeans’ “dream” of India, as a bizarre fantastical world filled with magical powers, nude women, fabulous riches, and mystical beings. The essay slyly comments on misconception, prejudice, and fantasy, while giving its reader a rich look at an under-examined corner of cultural history.

Inspired by this work, I set out to create my own “list essay” engaging a cultural myth, but chose the pirate Blackbeard for my subject. I took a slightly different approach to gathering source material, and aspired to create a work in which credible history, legend, pop culture, and even advertising was all given equal authority to create a composite portrait of Blackbeard—not the man, but the public’s conception of the man, in all of its odd and perhaps inappropriate iterations. I sought to answer the question of why this particular pirate dominated all the rest when it came to his presence in popular consciousness. After all, there were many notorious pirates active at the same time, some of whom had much longer and more successful careers. The answer I found was strangely fitting to my approach in engaging his legacy: Blackbeard was the first celebrity criminal at large to be sensationalized by mass media in America, when tales of his fearsome persona and criminal exploits filled the pages of what was then the only newspaper in the colony. My essay quickly became comedic as I
explored “Blackbeard’s Inflatable Jump Land,” but the comedy took on a darker context when juxtaposed against real historical violence and cruelty. It is these kinds of juxtapositions that the “lyric essay” allows us in engaging research in unconventional ways.

Juxtaposition fueled one of the earliest lyric essays I included in this manuscript. The work “Plastic Pterodactyl” began with a conflagration of two seemingly disparate bodies of research. In my first semester here at Northern, I began to research the Voyager Golden Record which collected images and sounds of earth on a record which was launched out of our solar system with the voyager space probe. I began to wonder about how these could be interpreted at all without context, and examined the images and sounds with an emphasis on the possible gulf between representation and actuality. At the same time, I became interested in linguists’ efforts to decipher the script of the Indus Valley people. The untranslated language of a lost civilization seemed comparable in that there are signifiers stripped of their capacity to signify. I tried examining both in a brief lyric essay, and next to each other, the two clarified a unifying theme, ultimately turning the work into a meditation on the longing to be heard and understood.

Building off of the more comical juxtapositions in the work on Blackbeard, I also tried exploring the lyric essay’s potential for comedy in the two flash pieces which open and close my collection of “lyric essays.” In the Flaming Hot Cheetos, I
tried on a staple of lyrical nonfiction—food writing, established as a subject of sensuous illumination by eminent food essayist MFK Fisher—and wrote about the most corporate and unnatural junk food I could think of, The Flaming Hot Cheetos. In my closing flash piece, Investigations of a Cory, I sought to parody the modes of juxtaposition for which the lyric essay is now known, by teasing out the possibilities for silliness in assuming superficial connections to be deep and substantial. Though in its composition, my series of essays on Tuwaqachi could easily be categorized as “lyric essays,” in this manuscript I have chosen to separate these sections from each other on the grounds that they engage individual lives as opposed to public bodies of research.

While the Tuwaqachi project is my engagement with other people’s memories, the final section of my manuscript is the engagement of my own. This section covers a wide range of styles and forms, from narrative to epistolary, from flash to collage. When I write flash pieces, the goal is often to create immediacy, a snapshot of an experience or an emotion, and the voice aspires to create the impression of experiencing the Moment spontaneously, often in an anxious state. Sometimes the speaker will be at more of a distance from the experience, such as the laconic narrative, Drawing the Divorce, in which the speaker takes a reflective look at a childhood experience that feels both deeply personal, yet strangely unfamiliar, owing to the memory’s distance from the present. When writing about a backpacking trip through Colorado, the experience had taken on such a
fragmentary and impressionistic mode of recollection, that I chose to write the piece as a collage of fragmented memories and impressions, one without a clear story but which accumulated, I hope, into a cohesive portrait of an experience.

In this portion of the manuscript as well, I often experimented with my approach in regards to form and style. In direct emulation of a short story from Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Battleborn*, I tried writing a letter to a person I had never met, but whose abandoned belongings I had discovered in the mountains. In the short story, the narrator begins by writing letters to a stranger, but gradually seems to lose his sense of audience and begins using the letters as a kind of diary or confessional. It was tricky to pull off something similar in nonfiction, as the writer and the character are (at least theoretically) one in the same, and one would clearly be aware of one’s slippage between rhetorical postures. I decided to shoot for it anyway, in a kind of experiment with voice, where I wrote to this person I had never met until it felt like I was writing in a journal or having a conversation with a real person who would then be interested in hearing more about my life than would be conventionally appropriate to disclose in light of our absence of real connection. The result is similar to the attempts at creating an emotionally immediate voice in the flash pieces. The speaker is a kind of character attempting to authentically portray the author, or at least one side of him or her, but not necessarily the same person as the one who is sitting down typing. If memoirists can experiment with scene creation, surely we can experiment with voice
creation too, as we attempt to explore ourselves in other moods, at now distant times of our lives.

I continue the attempt to engage other moods and earlier times in my life in my third section, a collection of twenty poems. While some of the stories are invented, and some based on research, many of the images and Moments these works seek to capture are drawn directly from the storehouse of memory. Returning to the exploration of voice discussed earlier in this introduction—where I discussed adding line breaks to interview transcripts, one of my central preoccupations in any poem is the pacing. Much like in the lyric essays, my poems rely heavily on understated juxtapositions between seemingly disparate things. However, these are almost always rendered as images rather than explicated and explored at length. I seek to find the boundaries and overlap between the lyrical and the mundane, the sordid and the beautiful. My settings include nursing homes, greasy kitchens, college rental houses, and dilapidated cemeteries. I try to write towards unexpectedly intimate Moments, or rare and beautiful things catching the eye. I examine an immigrant worker’s experience of alienation in Closing the Chinese Buffet, and take a close look at an encounter between generations, a child visiting an estranged grandparent in a nursing home with dementia, in Ernesto. The tension between intimacy and estrangement has always fascinated me as a subject, as are the lengths we go to find connection
and affirmation in ways whose success or failure could never be measured, only held up to the light for our ambivalent attention.
Back then the big thing [in therapy] was the leather pillow with the tennis racket. I was 5’10” and under a hundred pounds when I was in the ninth grade, so I never had a body that could accomplish much of anything, and I remember getting out on that hot-seat with the idea that if I became totally involved with my swing, I could break through— And I must have swung that tennis racket for a good five minutes against that pillow—all sorts of yelling and screaming, everything like that. I finally fell back on the floor and thought, you stupid son of a bitch, you’re never going to be at peace until you die. I thought, if I could finally get my waist, my body, and everything all together, that I would become whole. And of course that’s not possible.

‡

We were about on the third day, [of a weeklong training seminar for Gestalt therapists], in the afternoon, and there was all sorts of anger among participants, that people weren’t doing it right, that type of thing. Neil said, okay we’re taking the afternoon off, because it was not productive, it was—we were destroying each other. And, he said we’re going swimming, so we went over to the lake.
And this was probably one of the most important things that ever happened to me, Cory. We got out of the car and two state police cars pulled into the lake. And we’re sitting, my guess is, probably about 300 feet from the beach, on a picnic table, and everybody’s running around down the beach, and I’d been taught that, when there are other people there, that if you don’t know what you’re doing, you don’t become involved, you don’t get in the way.

And something happened to me, I found myself—I’ll never know why—but I got up from that picnic table, left the rest of those people, and walked down to the beach, and I said, “what’s happening?” and somebody said, well, there’s a guy out there was scuba diving, but they, uh, they can’t find him…

I said, has anybody seen his bubbles? And this again, goes with my whole physical development: I had spent time when in college as a life guard, and the only reason why I got that job is I was the last person in the water with the boss—[he] was a big football player, and he had been in the water all day long, and it was cold, and he jumped up and grabbed me from behind, and I jammed my elbow into his leg and gave him a cramp; I had to hold the boss out of the water—this big football player. Okay, I got the job, but I still felt really, as physically—you wouldn’t expect me to be a lifeguard.

So I said do they know where this guy is, and they said yeah, we can see his bubbles out there, but nobody can get down to him, he’s too deep.
I waded in the water, did my aeration, getting air into my lungs, and I dove down, and I can remember how cold the water was getting.

I was probably about three feet from him his hands were above his head, and I could not go any further. I surfaced, went back to the top of the water, aerated again, and I should not have been able to go down as far the second time, because I didn’t have as much oxygen in my lungs. The second time I got him.

And I started pulling up, and of course, he still has weights on, so I’m pulling against all this resistance, and I recall breaking the water and yelling, I got him, I got him.

And they slapped him on an air-Mattress, and I looked at him, and he was just totally blue.

And, uh, I, uh, and I said— I knew it was too late. It was too late for him.

We discovered later that this young man just graduated valedictorian of his class, and had a full scholarship to MIT.

And, I thought, what a waste. I sat on that picnic table for a good 20 minutes before I went out.

Now this is the training that I would say is possibly one of the most valuable things—
I am the most, best qualified person available, unless I see somebody else. That has become a motto for my life.

Well, they tried to work with me, to recall the experience. Of course I was quite upset at the fact I had not gone in sooner. And, uh, everybody tried to work with me that night, and I don’t think anybody did much of anything for me.

Uh, so that gives you an example of the Gestalt training. It broke down when we were discussing theory and trying to—to tell each other what to do and how to lead. Then we had this real life experience.

He was dead all because he, well, I don’t know.

I don’t know how long he had been down. We never really heard the whole story, but the whole idea is that—I’m not qualified enough, so therefore I don’t do it. Uh, that’s not me anymore.

When you look back to what I was as a teenager, and even a young adult, and the fact that I was not physically capable.

To be able to do that where nobody else on that beach could—they were [all] trying to get down to him, and they couldn’t. But I did. Why? How did that happen? I don’t know.
The Shack

When I look down, I am standing in the pieces of a child’s bedframe. A color like green tea has steeped through the unvarnished grain, and the bed rails sink in a leaf litter of walnut shells, stray twigs, and scraps of tar shingle. This is the shack where my grandparents slept. They shared this farm with up forty people, all of them New-Age types, swept up an experimental group therapy called “Gestalt.” They sold a house in the suburbs of Kalamazoo, a Steinway baby grand. They thrust their T.V. set, their good silver on unwitting guests. A prickle creeps up the back of my neck. This bed belonged to my Aunt Kate, and it feels like I’m stepping on somebody’s memory. I overlooked twisted tufts of rusted nails pressing the rails to their bedposts, and now they form a kind of fence around my feet, like a fairy circle, a cordoned grave, a penalty box marked with sticks on the playground.

My Aunt Kate was the one got me interested in Tuwaqachi. I had always been vaguely aware that my parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents all used to live on some of hippy commune, but it wasn’t until she returned to Michigan for the first time in over a decade and started telling stories over lunch that I started to wonder how my family got involved, and why no one ever really talked about it. Back then she said she didn’t talk about it either. She went to a conservative rural
public school. When she would get home there would be forty people doing yoga in her front yard. “What was I supposed to tell them?” she asked.

When I was five Kate tied a fishing line around a dowel stick for me to dangle from the dock, enticing nests of bluegill to attack the night-crawler. Kate taught me how to turn an acorn top into a whistle by pressing my thumbs into a tight “V” on its rim. Then I went fifteen years without seeing her. The youngest by almost six years, and our family’s only “real talker,” my grandparents adopted Kate from Korea during the first major wave of international adoption in the late fifties. The only one who moved to the commune against her will, she was twelve or thirteen when my grandparents moved onto a farm with thirty people. Now she lives in Seattle. She has six years clean time, and a black Narcotics Anonymous tag clings to her keys. She won the money to fly in for my brother’s wedding in a women’s poker tournament.

A year later, I left a message on her voicemail, explaining my research. I wanted to interview everyone in the family about their experiences at the commune, to compare impressions and find out what happened. At first she agreed to the interview. But her phone only got reception on the bus, so we could talk for twenty minutes on her way to work. Then she changed her mind. She said that she would write her impressions down and mail them to me. She has always loved writing, she said. Next she said she couldn’t. There were too many
memories to write them, she said. Another day, we met for dinner in Seattle with some family. She wanted for my other aunt and uncle to leave the restaurant, then asked, “Are you still doing that Tuwaqachi thing?” When I said yes, she mentioned that it “wasn’t “the best place for children,” but didn’t have anything more to say. She asked whether I thought that my grandparents regretted moving out. I said they probably wouldn’t do it again. A year later, she was visiting my grandparents in Michigan, I asked one more time for an interview. “Don’t you remember, I don’t want to do that,” she said. “It was really more Dawn and Franklin’s thing than mine,” she said, using her parents’ first names.

‡

When my grandpa tells me about forming the community, he doesn’t use the term midlife crisis. After eighteen years as an Episcopalian priest, he was “coming to the end” of his time in the ministry, as if it had an expiration date this whole time, and he simply reached it. He gave away his black robes and starched white collars. He threw away his sermons. He had “come to the end.” He got a master’s in counseling, sold his house, and moved with his wife and youngest daughter into a two bedroom shack without plumbing. They hand-pumped a bucket of well-water for brushing teeth before bed. In the morning, they emptied a chamber pot. A communal shower fit four to five adults in the barn.
We sip decaffeinated instant coffee in his living room. A Norfolk Island pine stands like a Christmas tree in the dining room. A succulent spills from its pot in the living room. When I ask why he became he priest, he tells me about a “hole” in his “psychological makeup,” about an emotional complex beginning in childhood. He doesn’t talk about his faith. Those were his exact words. A hole, his need to “be somebody,” by which, he means someone important.

I was sandwiched between a brilliant older brother who was an outstanding member of his class and a fine little girl who got all A’s, and I was miserable in school because I was ADD and too young for my age, so there was a lot of unfinished business about where was my place in this family? I became obsessed in doing something in which I was important.

I ask him if he got what he wanted, if he found the authority and respect he was looking for. I wanted him to crack a sly smile, as if remembering, if not an achievement, at least an indulgence, something that was his. “Yeah, that comes with the territory,” he dismisses, as if it were the pulpit not the person they valued. “Is it really a hole?” I ask, meaning the desire to be someone important. “Yeah,” he answers, taken slightly aback that I would question him. I wanted to ask if it was a hole in my personality that I wanted to be somebody too.

He lists off the lines of work he feels were better suited to his score on the Meyers Briggs personality test: archivist, research librarian: careers in solitude where only the meticulous shine. In a family of introverts, he is the first to excuse himself politely from the table and listen to books on tape in bed. When helping
him mark garden plots, I said the guiding string “looks pretty straight,” to which he dryly said, “either it’s straight or it isn’t.” I wonder if he was too much of a romantic to become a librarian. He plays piano every morning. He meditates.

The living room is filled with his paintings of coastlines and boats. When he tells about his years on a Destroyer Escort in World War Two, he doesn’t talk about the German U-Boats punctured by depth charges dropped from his ship, or the Japanese Zeroes shot down with flak from the deck. He tells me what it’s like seeing a sunset on the open Pacific, when you’re a teenager thousands of miles from home.

I can’t tell if he likes to talk about the joining community. I soften each question with compassionate sounding inflection. I’m worried what I write will hurt him. I’ve always been interested in failures. We each had a script. I printed out a copy of my questionnaire, and he wrote a brief essay. He reads it to me with a voice rehearsed in reading sermons. Every word receives weight, and he paces his clauses like a measures of music, structuring the silence, coaxing rumination from his listeners. He glances up between sentences automatically, as if still shyly meeting his congregation’s gaze. He summarizes the experience in a series of aphorisms, distant and distilled.

Along with our children we were caught up in the idealism of the hippy movement. Our kids played and sang the happy music of the folk singers, on trips they played their recorders and guitars. It was a time of radically loosened restraints, especially regarding drugs, sexuality, and relationships.
As adults, we were living out our own adolescence, and some of the rebellion we had missed in our earlier lives. In a sense we had joined the kids, and the great experiment. At this time of trying to express our own idealism, we were little aware of our unfinished psychological business. Our experiment in community building was an attempt to learn and exemplify a better way of being.

When I approached the shack, its walls were the color of wasp nests. The building had all but been swallowed by a beech tree leafy sprawl, and a splatter of silk cocoons clung to the doorframe. I crawled in through a broken window. Squirrels lived here, I could tell. Empty black walnut shells pushed back against my sandals. A bare white mattress lay crooked on a plywood loft up a short ladder of dry, brittle wood, with lines of sand collected in its seams. A shredded nest of Styrofoam had settled in the sink. Seedling trees sprouted from the floor. When I stepped into the bedframe, I was walking carefully past broken boards to take a picture through the window of the green farmland rolling away to a dark line of trees. I thought that I could capture how the landscape shimmers through a single pane of glass, gently warped.
What I tell people who ask about my first workshop is, I showed up at 9 a.m. with a pad and a pencil, and by 5 p.m. I had snot rearing out my nose, screaming at my Mom.

Some of the worst pain I ever experienced followed unresolved emotional issues—Upper back and shoulder, neck complaints: very likely a result of not physically expressing emotional energy.

I was unaware of this anger toward my mother, and I clearly identified it as I watched other people, and realized this was a safe arena. I decided to pull out all the stops and have that experience. I had weeping and sobs I didn’t know were within me.

As a mid-1950s-born male where boys didn’t cry—you know, buck up, and stiff upper lip, all that kind of stuff—I gave myself permission for the first time in decades, to really feel what I was feeling, and express it in a very loud and definitive voice.

I felt a freeing up of my shoulders, I could breathe easier, I felt light on my feet. I was hooked.
“How do you feel?” Fritz asks. The client shifts in her brown leather armchair.

“Um…” she begins.

“She feels um,” Fritz interrupts, planting an unfiltered smoke in his lips.

“Pay attention, everything you see is a clue,” he explains to a circle of about ten people slouching on sofas. It’s the seventies: all the furniture are different shades of brown.

Before his death at 77, psychologist Fritz Perls left behind a catalogue of demonstration videos to keep the indelible art of Gestalt Therapy from dying with him. Credited with founding the practice, he once wrote, “I have often been called the founder of Gestalt Therapy. That’s crap. If you call me the finder or the re-finder of Gestalt Therapy, okeh. Gestalt is as ancient and old as the world itself.” Fritz needed six implements to work. A box of Kleenex, a pack of cigarettes, a book of matches, and two chairs, and somebody willing to work.

This particular session was shot in somebody’s living room. There’s a brick fireplace, a bookshelf, and a room-length rugs. They fidget on overstuffed furniture. The coziness almost makes up for the camera, the boom mike, the
studio lighting. A woman with exacto-blade-bangs and a wide, nervous smile took the hotseat. She takes a breath brace herself.

“I’ve had this dream since I was eight,” bashful and eager at the center of attention. She describes standing on the shore of a lake. She stands on the sandy shore of a round, clear lake. She makes her hands into a ring, and looks with concentration in her lap.

“Be the lake,” Fritz asserts calmly. “What’s your story lake?” Fritz never raises his voice. The circle leans in when he speaks. Heavy wrinkles turn his face into a kind of mask, with a chest-length white beard of wiry split ends that branch from the sides of his face. He smokes almost constantly, lectures slowly in a thick German accent, punctuating each clause with pauses.

The woman leans forward into herself, ankles crossed, hands between her knees. “I’m a round, round lake.” She starts. Her fingers in the shape of the lake now rest between her knees, as if to protect them. “And my water is very good and soft to the touch.”

“Who are you talking to?” Fritz asks.

“To myself.”

“Talk to us.” He directs, tapping his ash. She smiles defensively.

“My water is very cool and soft to the touch.” She continues. “You would like to come in me. You can swim into me very easily. There’s nothing mucky in my bottom, my bottom is of pure sand. When you come into the middle of my
lake there’s a surprise, there’s something that you don’t know.” The corners of her eyes perk up as if remembering a secret. “It might frighten you or you might like it, but it’s right in the middle of me, and you have to swim or row to get to it.” Suddenly feeling silly, she laughs “It’s worth swimming to go and see it.”

“See it?” Fritz asks? “There is no it. There is you or I.”

“It’s worth swimming to see me.” The nervous grin disappears. She stumbles over words. She describes a statue in the middle of her lake: a little boy pours water from vase above his head. Every time she’s tried to drink the water, she woke up.

Fritz tells her to close her eyes, continue the dream. The camera blurs out, then slowly focuses, like dream cutaway in a black and white film. When her eyes snap open, she blinks heavily, startled, as if actually waking up. “You came back to us,” Fritz notes. Fritz directs her to speak as the water. “What’s your script?” he asks. “What’s your story, water?” She hesitates.

“I don’t know much about myself,” She admits, saddened.

“Say this again,” Fritz commands her. Her voice breaks when she tries.

“I come, and I don’t know why I come, but I know I’m good, that’s all I know.” Her pitch rises. “I want you to drink me because I know I am good.” The corners of her mouth pull open and she starts to cry.
Fritz tells her to stand up, say this to each person in the room. She grabs at her shoulders. “I’m water in a vase, and I don’t know where I come from. But I know I’m good to drink.” A teardrop loosens from her eye, and she begins running her hands up and down her arms as if warming her shoulders. “I’m just there all the time, and I’m pouring out, and I’d like you to drink me. I’m there, and I’m white and pure, and if you ask me where I come from I can’t tell you. It’s a miracle. I always do. It always comes out.” She sobs. “I’m in a vase and I don’t know where I come from, but I’m coming out all the time. And you have to drink me.” Her cheeks shine with tears in the studio lighting.

“Now what are you doing with yourself?” Fritz asks, meaning her hands.

“I’m holding myself” she tells him.

“Now do this to me.” She bends over him, slowly running her hands down the length of his arms, as he looks up at her from the chair. She stands up, calmer now, sniffs a little, running a hand through her hair. “Okay, sit down.” Fritz directs. He lectures the group. “There is no interpretation. You know more about yourself than I do. There is no meaning in the dream. There is only uncovering your true self.” A fresh unlit cigarette hangs from his mouth.

“Thank you,” the young woman whispers, taking her seat in the ring. The credits roll as Fritz begins to strike a match.
Neil

In a mailed advertisement for his Gestalt therapy workshops, Neil Lamper wrote:

If I had my life to live over, I’d try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been. I know of few things I would take seriously. I would be crazier. I would be less hygienic. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers and watch more sunsets. I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I would have more actual problems and fewer imaginary ones. I would not live prophylactically and sensibly and sanely hour after hour, day after day…I would start barefoot earlier in the Spring and stay that way later into the Fall. I would succeed by accident. I would ride on more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies.

You could reserve a spot in his Gestalt workshops for a deposit of twenty dollars, nonrefundable within two weeks of the workshop.

In his taped demonstration, Neil said, “I almost always start out my sessions by telling everyone that you all have the power that I don’t have. The power is not in the hands of the so called therapist or counselor. You are all the leaders. I’m the only follower.” The Tuwaqachi community was allegedly leaderless. Their first brochure is pretty clear on this: “we want to emphasize that this will be OUR PLACE – it will belong to all of us.” However, it takes the eight page promotional booklet about nine words to bring up Neil. The text begins, “For a long time, many people attending Gestalt workshops with Neil Lamper at a number of different locations have had fantasies about doing Gestalt in our own
place - a place designed for and always available for our purposes.”

Furthermore, while most of the text is apparently credited as the organization speaking, Neil gets a full page under the personalized heading “N e i l  S a y s…” with spaces placed between each letter to make it look more like a heading. He lets you know right off the bat, “I have a number of fantasies for this place… I am not concerned about any of the details, bylaws, rules or the plans of others.”

Depending on who you ask, Neil ran away from home at the age of 13 or 17, and served in either World War Two or Korea. He was an aviator, an essayist, a teacher, a ranch hand, and finally, a Gestalt therapist. He claimed to have learned more about therapy while watching ranchers coax horses into their corals than he did during his entire PhD, which was either in psychology or literature. In one of my grandfather’s journals, he offhandedly calls Neil a “giant among men.” He goes on to write Neil was “what some people call charismatic,” but he would say he’s “in touch with himself.” I’m told he was “the rooster in the room.” Other men “got mild” when he was around: they spoke less, spoke quieter, spoke in turn.

In his own Gestalt demonstration tape, Neil wears blue jeans and a beige turtle neck. He has tan complexion and the leathery skin of someone works outside. He picks at his fingernails, leaning forward to absorb the client: each shifting of weight in their armchair, each dip in the pitch of their voice, each hesitation. “I
have perfect clarity as to what this work leads to,” he says, “and it leads to being reborn.” Neil gestures as if pulling a ribbon from his stomach, hand over hand, and letting it float through the room. He tells them children are their teachers. That all parenting is inevitably a contest of wills. Even if you came from a good family, all of us have behind us a long history of situations both large and small where we gave up our power.

Small meaning we were told to go to bed at 7:30 and we didn’t want to. Large situations where we lost our power, one of the biggest ones I can think of is probably incest. So synonymous with growing up is that we lose our cutting edge. We lose the wonderful kind of directness and just being present that kids have.

There are children in the workshop so he picks out their ticks and directs everyone to mimic them. He stretches the skin under his eye with two fingers. He leans on whoever sits next to him. He hides his face behind his forearms. Twenty people pull at the skin below their eyes. They lean on whoever is next to them and bury their heads in their arms. He asks them to practice leaning forward, entering another person’s space. Now kiss me, he says to the woman bringing her face to his. Everyone laughs.

There was a karate teacher who couldn’t get in touch with his feelings, Neil asked him to go through his Kata, and he spun around the circle, kicking the air. Neil asked him to slow it down as much as he could, until it turned into a dance. By the end he was weeping. A woman suffering from colitis, mother issues, and a Catholic upbringing sought Neil for individual therapy. He told her to walk
across the room like a whore, and the next week her colitis was gone, according
to a story he told during a seminar recorded on 8mm reel to reel found in a box
by the current resident of the Tuwaqachi property. It’s one of the few things
legible on the decaying audio. There’s also tape labeled, “Franklin playing
piano,” (my grandpa) but it was erased.
The first people were made out of clay. Spider Woman wet them in her mouth, and sang them into living. They lived in harmony with Tawa, the sun spirit who made the earth and Spider Woman. The first people felt his vibrations through a hole in the crowns of their heads, which were as soft as baby’s. We call this hole a “fontanel” after the Latin word for “source” or “spring,” the same as “fountain” or “baptismal font.” The first people called it “kapavi” meaning “open door.” It sometimes vibrates with a baby’s pulse. When the first people heard the creator’s vibrations through their heads, they would sing back to him, and the creator knew that they were listening, living right.

The first people stopped listening to the creator when their skulls hardened and fused from the sun. They stopped singing back to their creator. They started making spears and axes, so the creator wanted a do-over and drowned the world in lava. All of it. The people, the deer, the trees, the grass, everything blackened and sizzled into shapes like used-up sparklers underneath a steadily advancing wave of liquid rock. There were a handful of people who hadn’t lost the ability to hear God’s vibrations through the narrow crease of bone across their brains. They hid underground with the ant people. The anthills were deep enough that the molten lava turning dirt to glass above their heads just missed them, and the faithful few were left to populate the next world, which the creator had already
whipped together, hoping that a second draft of existence would keep human beings in line. No such luck. As soon the earth was cool enough for them to crawl out of their man-sized anthills for a reboot of all of human civilization, they invented money. This time, the creator, apparently out of lava, froze the entire earth by knocking it out of orbit. Again, a handful of the pious went back to hang with the ant people where they survived certain death by methane-liquefying lows of -260 degrees. The ant people kept warm by huddling together and conserving body heat until the creator retrieved the world from its state of aimless drifting around Neptune’s orbital path.

By now, the Ant people had given so much of their food to the refugees of divine wrath that they tightened their belts to the highest notch just to keep their pants from falling off their now emaciated waists. To this day all that connects their thorax to their abdomen is a thin node which entomologists have named the “petiole,” the same word Botanists use for leaf-stems. When Tawa pulled the planet back in line, humanity got its third do-over. You think this time they would have learned: you have to listen to the creator’s vibrations through the top of your head, live in harmony with his plan, and sing the song of creation, or it all goes “kablam.” Instead, they built cities, raided each other on leather shields you fly like hang-gliders, and got, like, way into prostitution. This time tsunamis.
Nothing was spared except for a few who hid in hollow reeds, while the homes around them crumpled in a black advancing soup of broken buildings eating farms and neighborhoods alike. The first people had to travel years before they found land. The creator knew they needed something different. Their worlds had been easy. Maybe strife would build their character. Perhaps only instability and hardship set them straight. When they arrived, Spider Woman gave them an ultimatum.

The name of this World is Tuwaqachi, World Complete. You will find out why. It is not all beautiful and easy like the previous ones. It has height and depth, heat and cold, beauty and barrenness; it has everything for you to choose from. What you choose will determine if this time you carry out the plan of Creation on it or whether it must be destroyed.

Tuwaqachi’s incorporating board of trustees considered the Hopi creation story at least metaphorically related to their aims. The quote above, from Frank Waters’ 1963 Book of the Hopi, appears on their first brochure soliciting funding, and the Hopi labyrinth—a lobe-shaped spiral of concentric half-circles with a cross at its center—made its way onto their letterheads. They too, believed that arriving at the present was a journey, a journey towards awareness. Neil wrote that the purpose of the mind is to process the world coming in through the senses, and not this infinite game of “mind fucking” as Fritz called it, of speculating and prescribing as a means to avoid oneself. Fritz said you must lose your mind to come to your senses, a slogan treasured in the social movement loosely called “Gestalt Momentum.”
The forward to Frank Waters’ Book of the Hopi proclaimed it as a kind of spiritual guidebook for the modern age. It begins with a quote from a problematic, and perhaps strangely fitting figure.

Laurens Van Der Post, gifted writer and perceptive student of humanity, has deplored the loss to our society of the “whole natural language of the spirit,” with the result that we no longer have a certain basic sense of proportion.

Van der Post was a South African born writer, world-traveler, spiritual advisor to the British Royal family, World War II hero, amateur anthropologist, and disciple of Carl Jung. He wrote 17 books, most of them memoirs and travelogues of a long and varied life in Africa, Europe, and Asia, and became Prince William’s godfather. Since his death 1996, his reputation has fallen steadily under attack from revisionist biographers. His list of posthumous allegations include: inventing most of his life story, cheating on all of his wives, advising Margaret Thatcher not to impose sanctions on South African apartheid, and lastly, impregnating then abandoning a 14 year old African girl who had been entrusted to his care by her parents on a sea voyage to England.

However, to many liberal thinkers of the 60’s, he was the sympathetic voice who narrated black and white BBC travelogues in a mannered Afrikaner cadence, opening the Western world to the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, guiding
viewers on a grainy tour of mostly naked natives spinning sticks to kindle fires, and eying the camera with shy, nervous smiles.

Van Der Post claimed that he was brought up by a “Bushman nurse” whose face was the first he remembers, and that she raised him “as she would a young Bushman,” filling his young mind with the gods and folklore of the Hottentots (a term coined by Dutch Settlers for the Khoikhoi in imitation of their language). In one of his last television interviews in 1992, Van der Post affirmed his conviction that “there is a bushman in each of us” which personifies “the spontaneous, the immediate, the intuitive, the instinctive” and that when the “owning, materialistic, conscious, rational” side of man sees the bushman, he will realize what has been missing from his life. Once we rediscover our “reverence for natural life,” then we won’t have “any more problems” with “our other values, they’ll fall straight.”

The Forward to Book of the Hopi goes on to say,

…”here, I believe, may be the answer that we seek. Here we discover the “natural language of the spirit” speaking in loud clear tones. Here we find the sustaining power of the religious sense and the clue to understanding. Here we may find our salvation. As so often happens, the clue was in our back yard the whole time.

Gauging by the introduction that follows, Frank Waters saw in the Hopi what van der Post saw in the Bushmen. He invokes elders with “gnarled hands” and
“dark wrinkled faces.” Their guttural voices rise “out of the depths of an archaic America we have never known, out of a fathomless unconscious whose are archetypes are as mysterious and incomprehensible to us as the symbols found engraved on the cliff walls of ancient ruins.” He lists the frustrations of professional ethnographers and anthropologists confounded by a system so abstract and esoteric “it would take a longer than a man’s lifetime to understand” and which may even require a mystical “sixth sense of the Hopis themselves.” In their stories, he saw something elemental, something durable, something here at the beginning that could stay to the end. Something lost for us to restore. He writes with urgency about climactic times, “now the bow is bending…tremors of unrest and resentment against the imposition of our rational materialism are shaking the Sierra Madres.” He warns of a “cataclysmic rupture between our minds and our hearts.”

The founders of Tuwaqachi believed that by following your deepest impulse, what they came to call “the wisdom of the organism,” that you would lead an existence of harmony and growth. Gestalt was, as founder Fritz Perls put it, a process of “turning paper people into real people.” The goal was maturation, self-possession, self-actualization, in other words, though they may have rejected the term for its modern connotations, self-improvement. The Hopi legend links destruction to human spiritual failure, specifically the failure to live in
accordance with a plan that is deeper than the conscious mind minds, deeply felt, but never understood.

The founding of Tuwaqachi, the Gestalt community eventually took on the shape of a mythical journey. This is Neil’s account as it appears in a 1975 issue of Voices; the art and science of psychotherapy.

We came in from the East and though we had enough emotion, the journey was not easy. We loved the land and each new vista caused us pause, to linger and look; longing etching every eye already made dull with grime of weariness and much travel.

In some the dream dimmed and from weakness we lost them along the way, the first of many, for what we proposed to do was not easy and we all knew something of the fierce fighting that lay ahead.

It must be remembered: we are people of the East and we were edging westward far from home into dark and foreboding provinces. We lacked support and more often what began as interest changed to aloof curiosity and then became attack. Now it was difficult to distinguish between the bitter dirt of forced travel with little rest and the awesome burden borne by all those who have been abandoned…

We wandered in the desert a long time. We watered at a number of wells but none belonged to us and we moved on. We wanted an oasis where we and others could stay for a time and renew our strength. And we wanted at this oasis to see maybe a little of the face of God, in the land, the wind and weather, in others and in ourselves.

Well, we see the backparts, the passing, and the constant struggle consumes a lot of our strength. So be it.
My grandmother said this kind of therapy left people feeling unfinished. Someone would have a breakthrough, an aha Moment, and needed to find a way to work with that, to live that new Moment, and not just let it go down the hole. Another former member explained it took weeks to come back from a weekend. Several years before death, Fritz Perls declared that group therapy was obsolete, ripe to be replaced by what he called the Gestalt Kibbutz, where, he wrote, 

the division between staff and seminarians will be obsolete. The main thing is, the community spirit enhanced by—let’s call it for the time being, for lack of a better expression, therapy. The whole thing is meant to be a growth experience and we hope that in this time we can produce real people, people who are willing to take a stand, people who are willing to take responsibility for their lives.

The first Gestalt Kibbutz was Cowichan, in British Columbia. Neil was reborn there, according to a personal essay published in the 1971 issue of Voices: the Art and Science of Psychotherapy.

Looking back on his sojourn to the Cowichan Gestalt Kibbutz, Neil was “amazed” at his preparation to experience the growth potential of a therapeutic community. By preparation, he meant going crazy. “Insanity,” he writes, “is a mucked-up medley of the head with little awareness of the simple goodness of existence.” He had been “winding his internal clockwork tighter and tighter.” He “avoided his colleagues and preferred the company of women.” When he took
new clients he would make his diagnosis “in the first fifteen seconds of the initial interview” and then “proceed to pound those poor people” into the shape of his “arrogant phantasy.” “Madness” he writes, “spreads like a cancer.” His clients held “whispering campaigns” against him, got drunk, and “blackened the eyes of their wives.” He was giving them madness. On his motorcycle, Neil ran out of gas on top of a mountain. He coasted down in silence, floating like a feather. “I will not lie,” he tells us, “It was terrible. Each day I prayed for transcendence and only tumbled deeper into pain.”

He bought a motorcycle. He took a sabbatical and rode across the country. He doesn’t use the term midlife crisis either. He writes that his choice was the choice of Job. Rot on your ash-heap or get off your ass. Some might say the motorcycle was part of the craziness. Neil would say it was “the functioning of the wisdom of his organism.” The trip was part of his cure. The community which may easily have been the inspiration for Tuwaqachi was an old motel bought by Fritz Perls on an inland lake of Vancouver Island.

The steps I took to heal me were so slight that had I not been crazy I would have rejected them. The therapy at Cowichan lies like a mist less seen than felt. Soon after I arrived there I was fully aware of the people. We, the people in process, are the process. Our therapeutic atmosphere is first of all the place itself. Nature heals. When I first arrived at Cowichan I laid my craziness, my incessant babble on everyone else. Jerry suggested I try to turn off my head and begin to experience the place, the trees, lake, air and soil. I wish I had another word than "suggested," which smacks of being told what to do. Never did I experience being told what to do at Cowichan.
My grandparents place the genesis of the Tuwaqachi community at a conversation that took place around a picnic table after one of Neil’s Gestalt workshops. Someone said they couldn’t just break up. They had to find a way to stay together. A friend of theirs credits Neil directly with planting the idea, while conducting a “guided imagery” meditation in which the whole group was walking together through the wilderness. Each sat quietly, hiking their private wilderness until cresting a hill and seeing a “red roof inn” down in a valley, where Neil could do his work. Each saw their own little inn.

Before it took the name Tuwaqachi, the community began as a fantasy called “Our Place.” A newsletter dated August 28, 1972 relates “some of the fantasies which were verbally described” when nineteen people met at a ski lodge, where they fantasized about buying “a minimum of 80 acres” of “isolated and varied terrain.” They wanted “a body of water, made if not natural, suitable for swimming with a good beach for sunning and playing.” Under the subheading GOALS, they wrote: “All kinds of structured and non-structured relationships among people and between people and environment,” semicolon, “Ten Ring Circus.” The newsletter opens with a parenthetical: (Introductory Realities: Kay kissed Bill; Nae kissed Bud), and ends with a plan for a “euphoric get together” next October, starting at 1pm, and “proceeding until closure is reached.” Food and/or wine was “solicited.” The letter closes with a gentle reminder that
“future operations” will require “a little bread,” adding that “a couple bucks per head” would cover postage.

By the second newsletter the fantasies started to sound more like plans. Only eight met this time, a group who “couldn’t stand” waiting for the meeting in October, and met up “all of a sudden” to “work, fight, laugh, love, and in general share fantasies about a Gestalt growth community.” They listed six potential properties including, an “art colony on its last legs,” a campsite owned by the Grand Rapids boy scouts, and hundred acre parcel enclosing a small lake, purchased by “a priest friend of Franklin’s” who originally intended to use the place as a halfway house, but may be looking to “unload.”

By the second meeting, they also got down to working out how the community itself was supposed to function. “Some communities have disintegrated because their members held differing visions as to the purpose of the group,” they wrote. Although only eight from the original nineteen attended — those who “couldn’t stand” waiting for the advertised official meeting in October, and just gathered “all of a sudden” to “work, fight, laugh, love, and in general share fantasies about a Gestalt growth community” — they “talked about that for a while [possible disintegration]” before agreeing that the community would be “first and foremost a Gestalt-oriented living and growth community offering space for acceptance of all kinds of activities originated both within and outside the
community aimed at Gestalt-oriented personal growth.” The letter clarified that this meant agriculture wouldn’t be a top concern, and they imagined mainly “kitchen garden farming” with canning and selling of possible surplus. This wasn’t going to be a “come one come all” community, and additional residents would be “looked over” for “something like four weeks” and then accepted or rejected. They guessed ten would be enough to get it going, and wanted an even balance between residents who worked exclusively “on the place to keep it going” and ones who kept their jobs in town for “bread” to keep it operating.

The advertised meeting took place in early October of 1972. They established a board, whose members included my grandparents and Neil. They drew up incorporation papers for a nonprofit organization. Those in attendance pledged over 5,000 in risk money, and they settled on a property: 140 acres of quiet, rolling farmland in Allegan County, down a dirt road just past a brick Catholic Church and a cemetery hundreds of years old. According to their first brochure soliciting funding, they still needed 19,515 in pledge money to get the project off the ground, including 15,000 for a down payment, 1,000 for legal fees, and another 9,000 for turning a farm made for corn and cattle into a commune that could house 40 people while running a nonprofit group therapy business. In 2015, that would be roughly $103,991. They only had amount a month to raise the capital, but they promised one free hour of personalized therapy with Neil Lamper (or an equally groovy therapist) for anyone who hits $5,000 or more. The
brochure closed with an invitation to the next meeting on October 28th to “share fantasies and realities.”

“Bring some food and/or wine.”

‡

My uncle Stuart was the first to move out there, and spent the winter by himself in the farmhouse. He had written a paper on the shakers and other 19th century utopian experiments, and was curious to put his theory to practice. He was in the process of discovering that he didn’t have as strong a focus as he thought in college, and embarked on the gradual process of choosing to drop out and move to the West Coast. He spent that first winter with his dog Abraham, maintaining the buildings and practicing his violin on lengthy winter nights.

When the last mud-crusted snowbanks dripped away, construction began. They converted cow stalls into dormitories. A grain silo was taken apart and re-assembled as a two story “roundhouse” They rebuilt the farm during “work parties,” where they drank beer and wine while tacking Styrofoam insulation to the walls of the barn. A restaurant-refrigerator with four sliding doors was installed in the basement by a row of deep metal sinks and a ceiling-bolted grease hood for the stove. “The simple things cure,” Neil explained in his essays.
“Working with your hands cures. Work that makes use of the head but not the body is a curse.” While curing at Cowichan, Neil stared digging fence posts with his fingernails.

We needed a fence so I cut logs for posts and dug post holes. And I got traumatic phone calls from home, and then when my son dropped out of sight for eight weeks in the Middle East, and the law was on my ass, and my colleagues were furious at me, I put down my shovel and dug the post holes with my fingernails…My eyes could see only the four square inches of the post hole and ears could hear only my heart, my breathing, and my scratching. One time Janet watched and I didn’t know it and later she said, “Who needs therapy when they can do that?”

Everyone I spoke to fondly remember that summer. Carried by a sense of possibility and shared excitement, a group made up of mostly students, professors, counselors, and ex-clergy worked with their hands to build a serviceable colony on the frontier of inner experience, “an oasis for tense, tired times.”

‡

Tuwaqachi, Inc. opened for business the year of the “Great UFO Wave.” Flying objects shaped like saucers, horseshoes, footballs, wedding bands, ping pong balls, and bullets hovered over tree-lines, left scorch marks on farmland, and swiftly changed direction in the sky. Engines cut. Cats panicked. Televisions flashed on and off.
A Utah woman received a gynecological exam from four short men in blue fluorescent suits with “fishlike” mouths, orange claws, and eyes that wrapped around their heads. They could read her mind, and injected her with something to make her forget.

A floating window of orange light appeared in Australia.

A twenty-foot ball of searing blue light tailed an airliner over the tip of New Zealand, spinning its compass needles, letting its captain fly blind.

A woman in the Netherlands woke to find three “little men” dressed in white, belted robes with pointed cowls outside her window. They ran off to a red glowing sphere about seven feet wide.

At a lumberyard on the Hokkaido island of Japan, the night-watchman reported a smooth, glowing ball hover 75 about seventy-five feet in the air. Apparently sucking water up from the bay, “min-min” like a “cicada.”

Some “humanoids” with wrinkly gray skin X-rayed a Wisconsin man using an “oval.” His sheets were neatly folded when he woke.
A Sao Paulo woman was working on wedding cakes when her parakeet shrieked at something hovering out in the garden. Three short beings stood behind a floating parapet, directing searchlights. Their lights combined into a single beam and shined directly on her, paralyzing her with dizziness and pain. A medical exam found that her uterus had prolapsed, but her pre-existing hypertension had been cured. From then on she needed glasses.

By November of 1973, a Gallup Poll found that 51% of Americans believed the UFO’s were “real,” and 11% claimed personal sightings, equally out to roughly 23 million. Police stopped responding. BOL became the acronym for “ball of light.” U.F.O-watching caught on. Cars lined up on the hillsides at under the starlight, sometimes up 50 in a row.

‡

A budget from their first year of operations reveals that the Tuwaqachi nonprofit organization came out $2,828 ahead. A creative movement workshop cost 75 plus food. A weekend workshop, 35 plus food and lodging. A two-week workshop: 150 per couple, 125 per single adult. $40 for ages 8-17, $15 5-8, and under children under 5 just paid for food and lodging.
Most of their income came from the monthly lodging fees paid by residents and visitors attending workshops. Most residents had jobs in town or in nearby Kalamazoo. Lodging for workshop residents is three dollars a day for the first adult in the family, two dollars a day for the second, and one dollar a day for anyone for ages 2-17. Members receive a 25% reduction in lodging, but were requested to phone in advance to make sure space is available, and to assist in food preparation and cost.

That year, the organization dropped almost six thousand on building materials, three thousand on utilities, heating each building with gas, another thousand on house supplies, seven hundred on printing and postage, advertising their workshops with brochures and fliers to their ever growing list of addresses. Thirty-five-hundred went to mortgages and loans.

However, $4,034.67 of their income is listed simply as “Misc.” comprising almost 20% of their revenue. Early documents suggest the organization was tapping some of its better off members for substantial loans. On December 2, 1972, Tuwaqachi borrowed $1,000 dollars from a Judith H—, one of the eleven original incorporating board of trustees, at an interest rate of 5% per annum.

‡
In an advertisement for Gestalt work at Tuwaqachi, Neil wrote:

During this Workshop you may accomplish what some take years to do in weekly, individual sessions... We will delve deep into our wholeness and allow the fertile void to happen. Precisely because we contact our fear and tension we will feel fulfilment and rapture...

Tuwaqachi is a good place to do this. We have a great group room for intimate work and explosive ecstasy. We live close to the earth, even use privies. We live in our own tents and cook and eat in the dining area in the barn. The land, the crops, the trees, swamps, wildlife and rural neighbors are all an organic part of our workshops...

We do not make promises, or use slogans. Yet will be somehow different; we will never be the same.

Depending on the month, you could partake in primal therapy, past life regression, meditation, hypnosis, yoga, or workshops on creative movement or awareness of the eating process. Membership to the organization cost a hundred dollars a share. Members received priority in workshop registration, but did not receive a discounted rate. Neil didn’t live there, he just held his Gestalt workshops in the “big room” of the barn. The board of trustees managed the finances. The daily functioning and maintenance of the center and community was managed by the residents. They had a signup sheet for chores, and held weekly “Us Meetings” where every single one of them had a chance to raise and discuss any issues or concerns. The idea was they would make decisions by consensus.
The Allegan News and Gazette never once mentions the colony of new age therapists taking up roost in their conservative farming county. Scrolling through its microfilms, I began to wonder if the Tuwaqachi commune was simply too insignificant to find a space for itself among such headlines as “Memorial Day Parade Planned,” or “Area Students named to all-A honor roll,” or if they purposefully ignored the hippy outsiders. Few of the therapists or community members who moved out to Tuwaqachi were natives of Allegan County, and the paper offers a glimpse into a rural community primarily concerned with itself.

Only 6-8 pages in length, the paper would frequently feature a full page of obituaries and marriage announcements. Its editors and readers were fond of studies that affirmed their residents’ general wholesomeness, offering headlines like “Allegan County marriages last longer, statistics show,” or “Study shows Area Residents do less moving than average,” whose writer cheerily announced, “Residents of Allegan County…feel that the grass is greener right where they are.” They had two separate bridge tournaments, one for women and one for men, conducted simultaneously. They took an active interest in their residents’ eccentric passions. There’s a feature on local man who published a book of haikus, and a headline, “From clowning to mime: a natural step.” They ran a follow up piece entitled “Sand Lion is Ant Lion,” in which it is revealed that
“The ugly little bug that Jerry VanOrder keeps for a pet—featured in last week’s News and Gazette—apparently is an ant lion larva.” The article quotes the New Standard Encyclopedia three times in 177 words. The larva are also called “doodlebugs.”

While the town’s journalistic eye may have been turned inward, the small paper hinted at the tide of social change rising on their island of white-bread American values. The paper ran full page ads reminding readers that there are no rotary clubs in Russia, followed by the awkward slogan, “Where the spirit of Rotary is, There is liberty.” The Advertising Council ® contributed their “Diagram of a Drug User,” to highlight warning signs like “constant licking of lips,” “profuse perspiration” and “sunglasses worn at inappropriate times and places.” The musical “Hair,” with songs named “Hashish,” “Sodomy,” and “Hare Krishna,” broke all previous sales records in their local theatre, making the paper twice, inspiring the headline, “Hair goes on and on.” Meanwhile, the “young homemakers” contest was postponed “in an effort to encourage more contestants.” Beginning with the recession of 1973-75, the collapse of America’s almost 30 year postwar boom characterized as “the malaise,” the small paper desperately added pages and pages of local ads. The newspaper closed down on Christmas of ’75.
For about a minute, I was sure the woman in the picture was my mother. The photograph appeared in a package my grandparents sent with some family documents and undated journal entries. I saw a woman in her early twenties, standing in front of a barn, scratching a little dog’s neck. Her blue sweater hung down her hips like a tunic. Heavy, knitted sleeves bunched in folds down her arms. She had the same circular face as my mother, the same prominent nose with a round, protruding tip. Her long brown hair hung over her chest. Sun blanched the side of her smile, and a wedge of shadow from the corner of her mouth described a round cheek breaking the light. The barn’s paint faded to pink on the vertical grain. Its heavy door sits partway open, a solid band of blackness through the frame.

When I flipped the photo over I found it was my grandmother the whole time. There it was in ballpoint cursive between the torn double sided tape and the dry yellow rubber cement from when the photo was peeled from the album, “Dawn in front of the Barn.” I flipped the photo back, it was clearly her. Their faces are similar but not identical. I tried to repeat the experiment: held the image at arm’s length and let my focus fall slack. It still looked just like my grandmother. She would have been in her mid-forties. On closer inspection, only the small strands
of shadow suggesting the width of her eyelids would hint that she has children in college.

My uncles told me she looked younger after moving to the farm. She stopped tying up her hair, and grew it long. She traded her dresses for blue-jeans, and never wore those formal ladies’ gloves again. She was done playing the minister’s wife. She was done letting the gossip in her husband’s congregation dictate her sons’ haircuts. My grandpa said that both of them were living out the adolescence they had never had. As a therapist, her group workshop filled up to the thirty person cap. Two residents told me that she was the reason she joined. She gained the nickname, “mother Tuwaqachi.”

She looks older in a photograph taken almost ten years earlier. She sits squeezed on the couch between her oldest son and her husband. My grandpa’s clean shaven, and still wears the white collar. She wears her hair chin length and lightly curled. She wears black, pointed shoes, nylon stockings, and a white checkered decorative scarf. Her shoulders and knees point inward, leaving her compact and square. Maybe it’s the other people in the photo who complete the illusion. In the pic from the 60’s, she looked like a woman committed and tied down to family. Alone by the barn, she looks more like a teenager, thrilled to be out on her own.
When I began to research Tuwaqachi, my grandmother gave me some personal writings she had held onto for forty years, including a presentation she had given to the local Unitarian Universalist church. Her speech was written by typewriter on a folded sheaf of translucent paper. The pages yellowed in the forty years but kept their sheen. With the help of my desk lamp, I can make out the nicks left by typewriter script, their serifs punctured in the fine, dry pulp. A rusting paper clip has left its perfect outline in a dirty orange streak. My grandmother opened the presentation with a self-deprecating remark about her reasons for joining the community.

People ask “Wasn’t it hard to make the decision to sell your house and move into a woodshed? Wasn’t it hard to give up your possessions; your grand piano and your silver tea service? Where were your husband and children in all this?” Good questions.

In the beginning I did not ask questions. I felt a pull in my heart and I went with it. I thought later of my mother’s frequent comment “Dawn thinks with her heart instead of her head.”

When I asked my grandmother about this pull in her heart, she started laughing, and gently hid her face in her hands. “There’s an elephant in the room, she tells me. And it’s really hard for me to talk about it. I really fell in love with Neil…” she paused, as if not sure where to carry this after dragging it out into the light, in this instance, that of a clean room in indirect sunlight. I waited I already knew what she was telling me. Both of my uncles told me this. One of them felt this
was part of why she looked younger at Tuwaqachi. I felt honored that she would share this confession. I didn’t want to step on this moment with words. She tells me that she hopes I don’t sit in judgment of her. I assure her I don’t. I love her. I want to pry. I ask her what she felt the attraction was about. Looking back, she says, she can’t remember what it could have been. I wait for her to speak.

‡

In a slim, spiral bound volume of personal reflections on her childhood, my grandmother describes the special “prayer desk” her parents set up for her and her sisters to kneel and say their nightly prayers below a silver crucifix, backed by a velvet blue curtain.

When her father explained the suffering of Christ, she secretly stood on a chair to pull the crucifix down from the wall. She hooked her fingers on the figurine of Christ’s frail body, and tried to pry his body from the soldered pieces, convinced that she could end his pain.

She had high hopes about confirmation. She grew up with the story if the Holy Spirit landing on the heads of the Apostles, giving the power wondrous deeds of healing, and dreamed that one day she too could perform miracles through her
devotion to God. She was taught that through God all things were possible, and she believed it.

Here at last was my big moment. I knew that as the Bishop laid his hands on my head, I would be changed forever. I too would be the recipient of God’s wonderful gifts. In my new white dress and veil, I knelt at the altar rail waiting for the moment when I should be visited by the Holy Spirit. I heard the words being intoned: “Defend oh Lord this they child…” Nothing happened. I mean nothing! I got up and stumbled back to my place in the pews. Through tears of disappointment I asked myself, “Have I done something wrong?”

By the time her youngest daughter was old enough to receive confirmation herself, the life had gone out of her faith.

How many times had I gone to a communion service? How many times had I heard the liturgy? She asked. Yeah, the life, had gone out of it for me. And here’s where I began to see life, you know? I saw people who were extremely withdrawn and shy, and I saw new life come into them, where they could project themselves in a new way. I thought, oh, this is really helping people. Because that’s what I had longed for. Show me something that works. That’s what I believed I was seeing.

She began working on a Master’s degree in counseling at Western, where she studied Gestalt therapy under Neil Lamper. One the first day of class, she remembers he wrote one word on the board, “Awareness,” and she simply thought to herself, yes, yes, tell me more.

“It was more than that… she explained. It was something he saw in me.” In counseling class, each of them were videotaped attempting therapeutic work with a client. They watched the video’s together and critiqued them. When it got
to be Dawn’s turn, the teacher stopped and said, “Now I want you to look at this carefully, because here’s some lady who has the gift.” He kept pausing the video, asking the class, “What did you notice her do?” As she tells me this, my grandma imitates herself beaming, stunned, as if the Holy Spirit landed on her after all, as if she could perform wondrous deeds of healing all along. She liked what Neil could draw out of her. “But,” she confesses, “she wasn’t mature enough to just leave it at that.”

She told me there was numinosity in all of this. I asked her what that meant. The “Numinous? she starts, that which is…” she pauses for a full six seconds, as if waiting for some kind of inspiration. She offers up, mysterious, but quickly backtracks. “That’s not a good word though.” She adds to her definition, an “aura….a dreamlike aura quality.” She tries out several terms, as if feeling their weight before putting them down for another. I offered a few framing phrases to get at what she meant, and we settled on the working definition, “something you are spiritually drawn towards.” She reached for a book on Carl Jung, called Wounded Healer of the Soul, and read to me that the true purpose of therapy is to put someone in touch with the numinous, which is the real source of healing. The numinous comes a Latin word, meaning “to nod.” It is a wordless affirmation. It shares a root with innuendo, a sly intimation, a wink for what can’t quite be said. It implies that we live with a secret question, half-formed, just at the tip of our tongues. Something just simply says “yes.”
My grandmother wasn’t the only one who began to see Gestalt practice as a spiritual practice. There’s something inspiring about bearing witness to another’s inner life. In one of his essays, Neil wrote:

…all of a sudden there is a Moment of resonance—a sound, a movement, a word—rolling out from the core I am so awestruck that if I have any strength left and am not blind I may snap my fingers, jump up, tumble over, hold my head, my breath, stop picking my fingers and stammer, “There, there; that, that.”

Fritz argued that there is no meaning to a dream, no interpretation which can substitute for the Moments of contact which allow us to grow. He said there is only the process of our “authentic selves” coming out. There is a person underneath our controls, underneath our appearance. The emergence of this self, on a stage, in a group setting, this becomes the confirmation of faith, of what Neil called the “integrity” of the universe. My grandmother said she saw “flesh on dry bones” at her first workshop, like Ezekiel in the desert. She wrote:

In the beginning, I read, “Gestalt therapy is process and flow, not rules.” I came to my first Community experience with eyes aglow, certain that if we did not interfere with the process and went with the flow, somehow in a mystical way we would achieve an alternative the world had not seen since the days of the early Christians.

The “process.” This became the operating concept. If you tried to control the process you were interfering. Left to its own devices, the “process” invariably moved towards healing. Follow your intuition like a vibration entering your skull through the top of your head. It leads to Tuwaqachi.
The Flaming Hot Cheetos

For Matt

This shade of red does not belong on earth. Maybe on the dying stars we call “Red Giants.” Maybe in the dust beneath the devil’s fingernails. But here, Red 40 Lake is an abomination, some unholy hybrid of Kool Aid and gunpowder, a red so radiant it causes attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children, according to Jennifer Hill of “StopKillingMyKids.com.” Red40.com claims the color to have once been called “Coal Tar” dye after the foul black pitch from which it had first been derived. I can only imagine the 39 shades of red tested and destroyed in its alchemy. Red 40 Lake is promethean. We have stolen this fire from the Gods, and just like thieves, we find ourselves red-handed, its popsicle-red stain lingers on our fingertips through each successive wiping: on paper towels, pant-legs, and countertops.

The crunch begins with corn meal enriched by ferrous sulfate. Like the name suggests: it is both iron and the acid it dissolves in. Picture for a moment, if you can summon the imaginative resources required to do so, that a packing peanut has bones. Then imagine snapping them between your teeth like some kind of modern Polyphemus, grinding their lumpy femurs into paste, lording your
ogerish strength over all the little packing peanut people, who dared to come fuck with your sheep.

If you think about the citric acid, when the cornmeal turns to gritty porridge in your teeth, you will hardly taste anything else. An aggressive, industrial tang, consistent in its frequency if nothing else, a little like late 90s techno. If you could imagine Sandstorm playing on a Dance Dance Revolution console in some a dimly lit arcade, at home in its artifice and self-assured in its allure, then you’ve approached the pitch of citric acid in a handful of flaming hot Cheetos. Do not think about the citric acid, no matter how piercing its tang. Restore the pucker to its four part harmony of sugar, salt, and MSG, what the Japanese call Umami, and we simply call Monosodium Glutamate. A barbershop quartet of taste excluding only bitterness. Let these pitches fade into the background. Focus on the namesake. Focus on the flame.

At capsaicin’s first touch, our cells spread their walls open wide, they feel themselves penetrated by calcium. The mineral tickles nerves made for heat and abrasion when there’s no heat or friction at all. Spicy food is my favorite illusion. We burn without scarring. We singe without searing. This is the real fire stolen from Gods. We welcome this sting without risk.
Is it a sin to gorge ourselves on pain? Is there no end to masochism’s feast? The wrapper claims to hold 3.5 servings, but you and I both know that’s bullshit. It begins one Cheeto at a time, then two or three awkwardly clutched between fingertips. It ends with tipping the last handful into my mouth straight the bag, just to be rid of them. Excess is a punishment unto itself. For gluttony we must face the redundancy of pleasure, a confrontation, with the banality of our own desire. The Cheeto experience rises, peaks and falls. Imagine a fresh dirty word in the mouth of an unsupervised fourth grader: so powerful, its limits demand to be tested; so disappointing once those limits are found. I wonder, if this was the point all along: to exhaust the spectacle, to inure us to our lust, and inoculate our tongues from devilry. The Flaming Hot Cheetos carry us through searing ecstasies, unholy strength, and lakes of red, only to return us to ourselves; lightly singed; tender yet crispy, leaving only our fingerprints crimson.
34 Facts about Blackbeard

1. Blackbeard was shot five times, stabbed twenty-six, and decapitated on the deck of a small sloop near Ocracoke Island, North Carolina. His severed head was tied to the bowsprit. The disembodied head hung like a lantern, eyes closed, lolling its tongue.

2. Blackbeard’s real name was Edward Teach or Edward Thatch or Edward Drummond. He was born in either England, Philadelphia, or Denmark.

3. Engravings imagine his beard as a black squid spilling down his breast.

4. Blackbeard braided cannon wicks and candles in his hair. When they burned, he looked like the devil incarnate.

5. Blackbeard sprinkled gunpowder on his rum.

6. Blackbeard’s crew had liquid mercury pumped into their genitals. When the wreck of Queen Anne’s Revenge was discovered in 1996, marine archeologists recovered a collection of 18th century medical equipment including a brass mortar and pestle, nesting weights, two enema pumps, a
bloodletting bowl, and a urethral syringe containing trace amounts of mercury, then a common ant syphilitic.

7. Blackbeard's ghost still haunts Teach's Hole, a small cove on Ocracoke Island, and his favorite place to anchor and party for days. His ghost swims underwater, carrying a lantern. On stormy nights, the wind bellows, “Where is my head?”

8. Blackbeard once served on a jury with Chief Metacomet, a Narrangansett leader who declared war on New England’s Puritan colonists, who called him “King Phillip.” Metacomet provided the plot to America’s first bestselling memoir when his warriors kidnapped a preacher’s wife named Mary Rowlandson and held her for weeks in the woods, a redemptive ordeal which strengthened her faith. The jury was summoned by Satan. They entered the courtroom with flames on their clothes.

9. Blackbeard fought a running duel with the 30 gun British Man o’ War, **HMS Scarborough**, but they never wrote about the battles in their log.

10. Blackbeard suggested to his crew the activity of “making a hell.” They sealed themselves in the hold with lit pots of sulfur to see who could stay
down the longest. As the hands ran out one by one, Blackbeard cursed them each, calling them “milksops.” He was always the last one in hell.

11. Before a crocodile bit off his hand, Captain Hook served as his boatswain.

12. Blackbeard retired in 1718. He was pardoned by the Governor of North Carolina. Then in 1718 he went back to being a pirate. It’s rumored the Governor was bribed.

13. Blackbeard murdered his first mate. If he didn’t shoot one or two of his crew now and then, they’d forget who he was.

14. Blackbeard’s treasure still lies buried on the East Coast. During the American Revolution, war-impoverished colonists riddled the shoreline with holes, but they never found it.

15. Israel Hands from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* was once his coxswain. Blackbeard shot him in the leg, just because.

16. On Blackbeard’s flag, a devil-horned skeleton holds up an hourglass, pointing a spear at a brilliant red heart. It’s unclear if the artist ever saw a
real skeleton, or even an anatomically correct drawing. The skull has ears, for example. The thighs are too thick to be bones.

17. Blackbeard’s headless corpse swam seven laps around his ship, painting the water with blood.

18. Blackbeard blockaded the entire Charleston Harbor. He anchored four ships at the narrow mouth of the bay, raiding any craft that sailed in or out. He kidnapped the town’s most prominent citizens, demanding a chest of medicine for his crew who had all contracted syphilis. It took two days for the ransom to land at his feet, after the deckhands sent ashore to collect the bounty wound up getting trashed in a tavern instead. Back then, they called the city “Charles Town.” The pirate captain released his hostages as promised, but those in fine clothes were stripped naked.

19. Blackbeard’s musical was nominated for 15 Arizonis. Critics thought its plot lacked “clarity and structure,” while finding the score “magical.”

20. Blackbeard resurrected all the crewmen that he killed as zombies. He used a magic sword forged in Atlantis, embedded with a sapphire which
belonged to the Greek sea god Triton, that is, until Captain Jack Sparrow tricked him into drinking a mermaid tear, which killed him.

21. Unexplained lights at sea are called “Teach’s Lights,” because they’re often caused by the ghost of Blackbeard looking for his head.

22. A college track coach summoned Blackbeard’s ghost with a spell he found rolled in the handle of an antique bed warmer. Blackbeard’s ghost had to complete one good deed so his soul could leave limbo, but only the track coach could see him. When this rag-tag twosome teamed up together, they redefined the term “school spirit,” according to the trailer for the television re-release of a film based on these events.

23. Blackbeard kept fighting after his throat was cut, splattering blood in his enemies faces. They set down their weapons to wipe off their eyes.

24. According to Corpus Christi Spook Central, an organization “Dedicated to the Research, Investigation and Documentation of Paranormal for over 8 years,” and featured on the Discovery Channel, Blackbeard’s Restaurant of Corpus Christi is haunted. Their menu confirms it. “Jumping salt shakers,” “eerie noises” and “other ghostly activities” have plagued the restaurant since their opening in 1991. Staff leave a “jigger of Jose Cuervo”
on the bar every night for the mysterious visitor. The menu promises that you can see this ritual—and maybe more—if you stay until closing. You can eat there for free on your birthday.

25. Blackbeard took Mary Ormond as his fourteenth wife, a sixteen year old plantation owner’s daughter. He forced her to have sex with five or six of his crewmen while he watched. These, and other cruel deeds were recorded by Charles Johnson, ship captain and bestselling author of maritime true-crime. Scholars debate over whether this captain was secretly Daniel Defoe, the English novelist, and newspaper editor, known for his multifarious pen names and nonfiction hoaxes. Some libraries have already re-cataloged Johnson’s works. Blackbeard’s first thirteen wives are undocumented.

26. Blackbeard’s Signature Sampler comes with two shrimp-stuffed jalapenos, four Buffalo wings, four u-peel shrimp, and an unspecified quantity of fried popcorn shrimp.

27. Blackbeard’s Lodge offers the only game room on Ocracoke Island, complete foosball and air hockey. Pet friendly rooms are available.
28. Blackbeard’s skull was made into a chalice. A judge in North Carolina once drank from it. Then he authored six books of regional lore.

29. Blackbeard’s annual festival features five pirate themed musical acts, a children’s puppet show, and a photo booth. You can pose with Tricorn hats, long haired wigs, Viking helmets, Native American headdresses, eye-patches, plastic cutlasses and pistols, sombreros, oversized sunglasses, a hook, and a blue plush parrot. You can take a class on talking like a pirate. In 2014, over 50,000 attended.

30. No definitive historical evidence exists that Blackbeard personally killed someone.

31. Lasting only two years, Blackbeard’s piracy career was arguably less accomplished than many of his contemporaries’. Black Bart Roberts captured over 490 ships while commanding a fleet of four. Benjamin Hornigold founded the “Privateers Republic,” a trading port, safe haven, and training camp for pirates in the Bahamas. Sir Henry Morgan captured Jamaica. All of it. While Captain Morgan has a rum named after him, and the character “Dread Pirate Roberts” from the Princess Bride is technically a Black Bart shout-out, none of them have a festival, a restaurant, a musical,
or Blackbeard’s countless resurrections in adventure stories, comedies, and children’s books.

32. For 22 years, the Boston Newsletter was the only newspaper in the thirteen original colonies. It took up one page front and back, and was published once a week, printing fewer than three hundred copies. In this trickling news cycle, 1718 was the year of Blackbeard. Almost every other issue, the fledgling nation’s few literate readers were treated to feature stories on a savage criminal at large, the very worst of humanity gathered in one person with flames in his hair and gunpowder smoking from his beard. Blackbeard was America’s first celebrity criminal.

33. Blackbeard’s severed head was traded for a bounty of a hundred pounds, about nine thousand dollars today. Seven men died and ten were wounded capturing the trophy. For weeks, the disembodied head, bloodied and bearded, was left on a pole “erected for that purpose,” for the whole town of Bath to enjoy.

34. The little mates will be worn out after they bounce, slide and tumble their way through Blackbeard’s inflatable Jump Land. Socks must be worn at all times.
Plastic Pterodactyl

When archaeologists exhumed the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro, they expected spears and shields, statues and obelisks. They found clay toys instead. Whistles molded and painted like long-tailed birds, marbles and marble tracks fingered in spirals; six sided dice the size of baseballs, one finger pushed through the clay for each dot. The Indus Valley Civilization had the territory and population of Mesopotamia and Egypt combined. Over a thousand cities in a river basin spanning India and Pakistan. Mohenjo-Daro was their metropolis. Crumbling homes rose from identical bricks. Streets intersected in grids. Their sewage ran under the streets in deep channels. A series of gutters guided the rain between buildings. Enormous dykes lead yearly floods into reservoirs carved into bed rock, terraced to fill one after another.

Thirty-nine centuries ago, the people of Indus Valley abandoned their cities, their way of life arrested by some long forgotten force. We don’t know what they called themselves. They wrote an un-deciphered script on seals the size of postage stamps, no more than five or six characters at a time, accompanied by a picture: a drinking bull, an elephant walking uphill, a man between tigers, holding out his arms as if directing traffic. There’s one of a man sitting cross-legged, resting his hands on his knees. Long horns curl up from his headdress. His eyes appear heavy and closed. The animals are either very small, or in the
distance. The elephant and tiger don’t disturb his meditation. Neither do the rhino nor the bull. A scrawl of symbols interrupts the sky above his head, raised lines that curl and connect. Are they his name or his thoughts? An effort was made to communicate, an attempt to preserve sense, but not for us, for the people who scarred slabs of rock into chess boards, pinched red clay into eyelids, lips, and breasts of terra cotta dolls. They wrote for the ones who played with palm-sized bison, and creatures with wheels for legs, a flat duck-like tail, and a ram’s curled horns.

These are the toys I once lost as a child: one glow in the dark swamp thing action figure, whose arms pumped back and forth with a squeezes of his legs; an oval slice of brown rubber flesh, fitted for the open wound of a Tyrannosaurus Rex; and one yellow plastic Pterodactyl, palm sized, a reward for behaving for the doctor who removed a wart from the top of my big toe, the first time I saw my own blood flow like a tiny volcano. No one knows for sure how long it takes plastic to degrade. I imagine my little Pterodactyl in a glass case under dimmed lights. I imagine someone reflects on their childhood while looking at it, feeling an abstract connection to humanity as a whole.

There’s something terrifying about a millennium. It will definitely kill you. Civilizations disappear inside of it. It’s not just how much dies, but how much is forgotten. The mind can only hold so much, it’s like most of the world never
happened. In the Field museum, I study the mummies. There’s a four-foot tall woman, wrapped in three thousand year cloth. The black fabric clings to her skeleton like paper mache. In the smears of body oil left by children, I can make out fingers, cheeks and noses. Their parents snap pictures with smartphones. Their flashes explode in the dimly lit halls. I make out the knobs of shoulder bones, the hips her pelvic ridge suggests. I trace collapsed calves, pointed toes, and the smooth, polished slope of the skull. There is something human under all of this, under what millennia demand from the body, under the tattered and lacquer-stiff cloth.

Burials began before humans. Neanderthals scooped beds from the soft white stone of cave floors, laid their dead and covered them with dirt. To bury something is to keep it private, to protect from a hungry gaze. Wolves bury half-eaten carcasses, tortoises bury their eggs. Ancient North Americans cached arrowheads and obsidian knife-blades. We cover the dead like we cover our nakedness, clothing the indignity of decay. Three skeletons, a man, a woman, and a child, were lifted from the dark soil of a small island just off of Scotland, where they laid undisturbed over three thousand years. The stone foundation of a building had been laid around them. The woman’s incisors were placed in her hand.
DNA analysis revealed that the man and woman are composites, each pieced from the bones of three separate people. Someone fitted the knobs carefully, reverently, into their sockets. They first seemed so complete, the researchers wouldn’t have tested if the man’s jawbone didn’t look a little too small. No one knows why this was done, whose bodies they combined or why. Was it an even trade, jaw for jaw, fibula for fibula, or were some of the bodies expendable?

Scotland’s acidic soil turns sea shells to chalk dust. Little survives of these lives.

Why does corpse recombination repel me? It didn’t repel my ancestors, who must have found some kind of meaning: these someones, once living, once separate, divided and joined after death. Should our skeletons be kept intact? Should our bones stay distinct from each other’s? The French Writer, Romain Rolland, once described to Freud, an “oceanic feeling” he believed was basis of spiritual life. Rolland was an essayist, novelist, dramatist, winner of the 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature, and an early Western student of Yoga and other forms what we labeled “Eastern Mysticism.” To him the “oceanic feeling” was the sense of an unbreakable bond with the world, a feeling of connection. He argued that all religions sought to harness and direct this sensation. Freud believed the feeling infantile. At our mother’s breast’s, he argues, we could not separate the outer world from the inner. The thirst for milk, the barking dog, our mother’s calming words, all combined into a single boundless self, a self of pure experience and sensation.
Perhaps identity is learned. The word itself stems from “identical,” to have identity, we claim what’s the same as ourselves. We need to feel distinct, to feel that our lives are unrepeatable, that we have something to offer that no one else has. I’m sure we shed this when we die, like the need for water, or the need for sex. Our bones become interchangeable. Our separateness from others dies too. The museum keeps their mummies in the basement. There’s even an infant. The tip of its nose pokes through gauze. There’s a foot broken off at the ankle. The wrap falls open like a bathrobe, exposing toes now the color of coffee. Some were given painted faces. Flat wooden masks in the fabric, embedded like the openings of sleeping bags. On one of them, the paint’s completely faded, giving it a face of blank, gray wood. A failed pass at preserving personality, an attempt to hold onto something recognizable, alive and unique.

Etymologically, the word “existence” only means to stand forward. It begins with the “ex” from exoskeleton or external, followed by the stance that means to stand. To say something exists is to pluck it from a lineup of all things, to affirm its presence with attention. To exist is to be recognized, to be seen, heard, and named. It depends on an act of perception, a willing participant outside our control. There’s a golden record on the Voyager Space Probe, humanity’s most distant object carrying an anthology of images and sounds through spans that only particles have crossed. It comes with pictographic instructions for the aliens
to play its sounds and view its pictures, to satisfy the curiosity about us that we hope they have.

I don’t think the recordings would make any sense without context. The volcano shrinks and flattens to a crackle of white noise, like wind in a microphone. A hissing fades the sound of surf into its faintest edge. I still want it to be found. I want something to hear the tractor engine sputter to a hurried heartbeat. I want them to puzzle out which sounds were living and which ones machines. The frogs and crickets flicker like telegrams. The riveter could equally be instrument or insect. I want them to look at the photographs: woman breastfeeding, school children, conspicuously multicultural, touching a globe, Olympic sprinters frozen midstep, a woman testing a grape in the produce isle. A shirtless worker holds a loose brick to the wet cement. In India five lanes of cars flow up a bridge and over the horizon. A lumber truck rounds the curve between two hills. The difference aspires to imply a complexity. An airplane mounts the air. A rocket points up into the night from its pillar of fire colored clouds, no larger than a pencil in the frame. A tethered astronaut floats upside down as if falling. Bare sunlight bleaches the space-suit’s white folds. His face is blacked out by the helmet. He too is anonymous, effaced as a mummy, reduced to a symbol, unintelligible as a scratch in the clay. I hope someone wishes they could read it.
As a child, I wondered if aliens were watching me. I think it was the Calvin and Hobbes. I asked myself what if the world was fake, if my grandparents, my bus-driver, my gym teacher, if the girl with the pink bike who lived down the street, were automated, some secret, ambitious experiment, and I its only test subject. What if every Moment of my day, from the honey-ham snuck from my grandparents’ fridge, to the way I sat upside down on the couch reading Sunday funnies, was patiently observed and recorded by a fascinated, unreachable other. I too, hoped that aliens would want to know me, understand me. I hoped my loneliness and boredom could unlock some secret puzzle. I thought if someone really saw my life, that they would feel wonder and confusion too. They would feel the way I feel looking at clay whistles crafted for children whose alphabet died before ours was born. I don’t know if it’s connection or distance, but it feels oceanic, it feels like the space between stars.
Target

I find the footage from the helicopter’s gun on YouTube. The machine gunner had a digital zoom lens with a camera. He watched the war through a pixelated black and white T.V. set, and now we can watch it too. I know that part of the reason I am watching this is because the government doesn’t want me to, because Bradley Manning—a 22 year old who reminds me of my girlfriend’s brother, with his pink shaved head, thin framed glasses, and serious, vulnerable eyes—has been sentenced to 35 years in prison after spending months in solitary confinement for believing the American people should see what he saw on this tape. No Matter how naively he may have sacrificed his adult-life, his chance at the years of family and career that we, as Americans, feel is our due, no Matter how long he will have alone with his thoughts to feel doubt and regret while pondering his life’s large, fatal choice, I feel he did the right thing.

After people recoiled at a photo of a naked little Vietnamese girl trying to outrun the flames on her back, the U.S. military has spared little effort in managing the public image of its wars. Soldiers’ blogs and live-journals were censored. Their meetings with the president were scripted and rehearsed on tape. Civilian casualties were minimized on paper, and the experience of Iraqi civilians was eerily absent from all major news networks. This video promises an inside glimpse, the war experienced in the field, unfiltered, and uncensored. The “real” war, I imagine. I approach the tape with an expectation. Commentators I
subscribe to on YouTube insist it depicted a war crime. To a certain extent, I expect affirmation. Since the late-night dorm-room debates as a tenth grader at boarding school, I have always felt that the decision to invade Iraq was deeply and inexorably wrong. I expect to finish the video feeling certain, one more point for my team in petty moral victory that won’t bring back any of the dead.

When I click “play,” the dark square hovers restlessly above a neighborhood in Baghdad, a floating window to a grainy, gray-tone world, with a white pair of crosshairs insistently fixed to its center. I see what the gunner sees. The dark screen twitches when a sudden movement draws his eye. Its zoom lens logs an act of peering closer. Terraced buildings catch the sunlight, bleaching grids across their walled in roofs. Shadows round and deepen in the glare. No one walks. Parked cars shine like sleeping beetles in the street. The crosshairs settle on the great dome of a distant mosque. Its rounded point shines darkly like an unwrapped Hershey’s kiss. The gunner’s voice enters calmly. “Okay, I got it.”

A black van nears the building, identified as “the target.” A “target” sounds like an objective or a threat. Its identity begins with being named and ends in destruction. A group of men walks down the street at a relaxed but deliberate clip. A second bunch joins them, facing away from the camera, their heads of hair small like burnt match-tops. The camera zooms closer, its lenses distinct as a microscope’s. Now the men gain faces. Featureless gray smudges peek between
their shirts and hair. I can tell they are talking by watching their hands. One lets a dark object swing by a handle, leaning from its weight. The crosshairs hover close to their bodies, a mosquito that senses their heat.

“That’s a weapon,” says the gunner.

“Fucking prick.” another soldier mutters. The crosshairs crawl over his groin.

The tape divides everyone in one of two categories. The first are seen, but never heard. When they motion to each other, private gestures register obliquely as the opening and closing of a fish’s mouth inside a tank. When they run, their shoes smack soundlessly against the dirt as if it were a dream. The second kind of people are invisible. I hear them talk, uttering curses and code-words. But the looks on their faces are missing. Their voices appear in a crackle of static then wink out like fireflies. When no one speaks, the airwaves simply buzz.

The screen looks down into the street, where the group of men have bunched around a telephone pole, shoulders touching as if trying to listen. Something scattered glitters like trash in the street. We circle, looking down, the gunner and I. When a building comes between us and the target, the crosshairs jerk around the alley like a clumsy hand hunting a light switch.
“Just fuckin—once you get on ‘em, just open ‘em up.” someone instructs. I pause the tape for a second, knowing I’m about to watch people get shot. They’ve bunched behind a building. One steps away on his cellphone, while another approaches. He has almost joined them.

Then gunfire drills through the silence. Registered through a microphone, a 30 mm cannon releasing 5 rounds every second sounds like a riveter or jackhammer, a heavy machine insisting on its function. Vibrations agitate the lens out of focus. Bodies’ edges disappear into the sunlight on the street. For a fraction of a second, the bullets won’t land. Washed inside a growing blur of light, the men finish slow and oblivious steps.

The picture cracks backs into clarity like a dislocated joint popping in place. It catches Iraqis halfway, tucking their chins down in unison, falling with hands on their heads. A blaze of dust ploughs through from left to right. It swells up, like a surge of ocean hitting swimmers at low tide. One folds over, falls. Two run. The first trips and is thrown, rolling over twice until doused by a geyser of tar-colored smoke. I make out the other one sprinting, crosshairs nipping at his heels, until he dives head first into debris. White sparks flash under spurts of dust. A thick black fog hangs.
Wind rinses the smoke. The camera finds a pile of people, slumped like dirty clothes. Through the grainy black and white, their forms appear like an impressionist painting, in muddy strokes of white and gray. I feel nauseous. One of them is lying face down, reaching forward, as if having almost arrived, about to cross the sidewalks invisible finish line.

“Oh yeah, look at those dead bastards,” I hear.

One of the men lies halfway in the alley, his back exposed and legs sticking out on the sidewalk. I can’t tell if his shoes stayed on. Another lies with knees tucked under him, face down as if trying to pray. The gunner zooms out for a second then back, needing a quick glance away. The crosshairs float to someone away from the pile, the one who tripped, lying with one leg splayed out and bent at the knee. Then the frame zooms out, rejoins the helicopter’s flight path. Bodies vanish in debris. Baghdad turns below us like a heavy wheel.

A voice reports “one individual” who “appears to be wounded” crawling away. We have circled all the way the way around the courtyard, and look from the opposite side. The camera finds him lying on his stomach.

He tries to turn on his side, pushing from the pavement with his arms. He moves one leg, loses footing, and sinks back down for a second attempt. He rocks back
into a sitting position. The crosshairs barely leave his body. He gets up on his hands and knees, one foot off the gutter.

“All you gotta do is pick up a weapon.” The gunner talks to the wounded man as if he can hear him. If he picks up a weapon, he becomes a “target.” He steadies himself on all fours. Someone’s tied a string of laundry to the terraced rooftop, and their whites flap in the sun. A man in all white bends over the crawling guy, stooping to listen, holding him up.

A black van pulls next to them. The man in white throws a look over his shoulder. The gunner’s voice cracks in. “We have individuals going to the scene, looks like possibly picking up bodies and weapons. Request permission to engage.” Possibly. According to military protocol, it looks like it’s possibly okay to shoot them. A second man jogs up to join them. His right arm flaps, like he’s not used to jogging. Crosshairs crawl over the van.

The driver steps out to help. Here, if I pause the tape, if I look closely at the passenger window, I find two children, a boy and a girl, faces and shoulders that shift in the car seat they share. It seems so ordinary. Anxious children waiting in a car. I back the tape up, watch them jostle again in the seat. How could such simple movements express the world they’ve been forced to grow up in? They seem to know that they’re in danger, but it’s hard for me to imagine what they
must be thinking. Their point of view is like the faces of the Americans or the voices of the Iraqis. It doesn’t show up on the tape.

The man in white walks briskly around the front of the van to the passenger side. He reaches through the open window past the kids, fumbles open the lock of the sliding door, and pushes it wide with one hand. It doesn’t latch. As he walks back around the hood to step into the driver’s seat, the door slides back until it’s open just a crack. The other two grab the wounded man by his arms and legs, hefting him up from the pavement. The children watch through the window.

“Come on, let us shoot,” says the gunner.

The wounded man is heavy. They set him down and get a better grip. One holds him under the arms, and other has him by the ankles. The driver makes hurry-up gestures with his free arm out the window. The wounded man drags on the street. They have to set him down, and push the sliding door back open. They heave him up a little higher. The door starts sliding closed again, but the one of them stops it with his elbow.

A blurred web of power-lines crosses the screen. The van inches forward, then slows, trying to turn, trying to leave before he’s in. He’s ready to go, but has to keep slowing down; the wounded man isn’t quite in.
They’re given permission. “Roger. Engage.” The firing starts again.

Soon I can’t see the van or the people. Dust covers everything.

The two men at the sliding door bolt as soon as the gunshots begin. They dive behind a wall, kicking up ankles and knees. The crosshairs chase them down, lighting the wall white with sparks. The van drives off from the frame while the gunner chased them. But now it jars back into view, slamming hard against the building, gunning in reverse and swerving sharply. A shiny flake of metal flutters as the gunner strafes its roof a second time. The wounded man is in the street. His legs spin around from an explosion. Then dust and smoke paint it over.

When the dust thins, the gunner takes a close look at the van. “Look at that. Right through the windshield,” he says.

The two men who ran each lie in corners: one against the gutter’s lip, the other with his face pressed where the sidewalk meets the wall, as if trying sleep through a very loud noise. A woman in a dark flowing Burka walks off down the sidewalk, holding a little boy’s hand. When the camera notices the line of laundry, it flicks in, then out, then in again. Like the gunner does a double take but reflexively turns his eyes away for a second, as if looking at a pile of bodies.
At first, he doesn’t say anything to the news from the ground forces, newly arrived. “Looks like we got some slight movement from uh, the van that was engaged. Looks like a kid. Over.” The camera quickly jerks left and then right, as if distracted, not sure where to look. The armored vehicles arrive, and take up the street. Short lines of helmeted soldiers with backpacks and rifles weave between vehicles.

A voice confirms it.

“Roger, I’ve got uh, eleven Iraqi KIAs. One small child wounded. Over.”

Quietly, flatly, the gunner utters, “Ah damn,” and then, as quickly as one caps a fizzing bottle, in the same tone he counters, “Oh well.”

Silence asserts itself. The radio drones like a trapped fly in the shaft between a windowpane and screen. After 47 seconds without speaking or zooming in to look at anything, 47 seconds of floating over palm trees and parked trucks, over bodies and glittering debris, the gunner says, “well, it’s their fault for bringing their kid to a battle.”

Nothing prompts this statement. What the camera can’t show now looms greater than the image on the screen. In those 47 seconds, something was grappled with. Two understandings collide with the force of van in reverse slamming into a
the wall: the memory of pulling a trigger, and the knowledge that children were under the crosshairs.

I try to imagine his thoughts. He pictures someone hearing his side of the story, someone whose sympathies are all for himself, compassionate against the guilt he didn’t choose. Or he debates someone trying judge him, someone who underestimates his character, someone he silences, asserting this is a battlefield. Or he judges himself. Or he rewinds the tape of his memory, zooms into the window where the two kids jostled in their seat. Did he see them? Did light trick him into living with this? Or he relives this Moment like I do, watching a camera, as if he was somebody else.

Something in the silence made him want to push against it, shrug away his guilt. Well it’s their fault for bringing their kids to a battlefield. A lot has been made about the callousness of this statement, and the lack of remorse it implies. What interests me are the 47 seconds of silence before it, where remorse must have tried to assert itself. It’s not his words themselves that haunt me, but the flat, self-contained tone. There’s a note of resignation in his voice, as if he’s lost a little battle with himself, though it’s not clear what’s been given up. What terrifies me most is how familiar he sounds with that note, how little surprise he can muster.
The baby-name site Sheknows.com, ascribes my name two possible origins, an
Irish one meaning “round hill,” and the Scottish meaning “seething pool.” Cory
includes the high and the low, the concave and the convex, but not level ground.

I have made no attempt to verify their sources, nor do I give the website itself
any particular authority. I felt satisfied with these answers after Wikipedia
provided only that my name had “a number of possible derivations,” one of
them an Old Norse name of unknown meaning. That disappointed me. I’d hoped
for something concrete and knowable I could attach to my identity, so I reframed
my search.

My parents didn’t intend any particular meaning by naming me. According to
Baby-Voyager.com, the name Cory peaked in the 80s, at just shy of 1,200 Cory’s
per million babies. I like to think it had a history, and that it was traveling for
centuries from the round hills of Ireland or the seething pools of Scotland, no one
even guessing it would blow up in the days of shoulder pads and hair metal.

There’s also this thing called the Corey Approximation used by engineers in
calculating permeability, the rate at which water saturates and bleeds through
porous media, like asphalt. I don’t understand the equation, but it comes with a
graph of two sloped lines, like round hills on either side of a seething pool. The Corey Approximation is spelled “ey” instead of just “y.” You could say that the Corey Approximation is also an approximation of my name.

On urban dictionary, the top definition of “Cory” receiving 2,301 votes, is “the type of guy that a girl would do anything to fuck, even lick a really fat Puerto Ricans ass crack.” It’s used in the sentence, "Fat Puerto man, I will lick your butt just to get with that Cory!!!"

I met this entry with skepticism. Is this real slang? Do people actually say this somewhere in the country, or all of those votes from the 1,200 per million Cory’s born in the 80s, all of them looking for the meaning of their names in a google search bar? I check if the author’s a Cory like me, but find “Joey Kyle” instead.

An old saying goes you shouldn’t trust a man with two first names. I don’t know if it’s really an old saying. Someone older than me once told me this, and I never questioned its authentic oldness. It’s not hard to imagine how something like this could stick around. The only possible reason to deploy the phrase is if someone with two first names had already done something un-trusty, in which case knowing the saying would give you a chance to flourish the conversation with some folksy sounding wisdom. If a man with two first names turned out to be
completely trustworthy, you wouldn’t say, “Well, I guess that disproves the old saying,” because why would you? Psychologists call this hindsight bias.

Anyway, I don’t trust Joey Kyle. Like the rave reviews Walt Whitman wrote of himself under pennames, there’s something too unabashed in this praise. I’m convinced he’s a Cory like me, immoderately singing the song of himself. Besides, you just can’t trust a man with two first names.

Lately, I’ve been looking in the mirror and noticing a bit of beer belly. Furthermore, four generations ago the Spanish side of my Dad’s family immigrated to the US from Puerto Rico. With a stretch of the imagination and a little self-deception, I may be able to conceive of myself as a fat Puerto Rican man.

As of yet, no girl has licked my butt to get with a Cory, even though there are plenty of good Cory’s out there, most of them born in the 80s. If she did, I wonder if her saliva would permeate the porous media of my skin at a rate so imperfectly calculable, as to require some kind of approximation. But who could provide such a thing?

I’m tempted to make a joke about round hills, seething pools, and rim-jobs, but I’m far too ashamed to proceed. Filth like this needs a penname. Like Joey Kyle I
would use two first names. In a 1.44 in 10,000 chance, both of them are Cory, but the second one spelled with an “e.”
Alms

Sounds like jiffy pop:
trapped grasshoppers
drumming their heads
on the Tupperware lid.

We live at Grandma’s now.
Mom’s wearing casts in the kitchen.
I don’t know where to set my haul,
so I just walk around,
and hold it out like a collection plate
to anyone who looks.
Nuclear Testing

A young mother grabs fistfuls of soil from the dark forest floor, her brow wet from twisting hard roots.

Her newborn lies next to her, its red body peaks from a half-opened blanket peppered with pieces of leaves.

She’s heard that a monstrous birth is a curse on an unfaithful wife, a jellyfish child without bones.

But there’s no word for new shade of blue water turns on the stove, for why the coconuts grow green and a yellow on the same branch, or why women give birth in the jungle alone.

She’s digging a cradle. A name kicks in her mouth to get out. She saw herself, yesterday, teaching that name how to walk.
Packard Street

We taught ourselves to share your bed
with sips of NyQuil,
cushioned doubts in soothing smog
and rocked away
the neighbors’ aimless bass.
All summer long, raccoons
grew plump on pizza crusts
to lumber on the roof.

Some nights, my sight adjusted,
found city light through slanted blinds,
the shine of curly hairs and flakes of skin
on plush, synthetic sheets.

Downstairs, the T.V. muttered by itself.
The Bengal housecat peed brown streams
on boxes left unpacked—
grafted unmet needs
on photographs he glued
in staggered, twisting stacks.
I give away the contour
light pollution penned
across your hip and shoulder.
Ice Flow

The cracking shelves of ice that crept across the lake unseen now house a frozen flow.

We pause because we hear a gasping breath from somewhere through the sloping drifts of snow, a steady rhythmic wordless voice from cracks beneath our feet. A tunnel through the ice becomes a mouth for shadows, blue as ash, that sink in lipless snow. Without my glove,

I reach into the fissure’s lifeless gape, and touch the air sucked in by waves below.
Tire Fire

We’ve lost the way the house once smelled, without our shuffled decks of dried and piled dew. The land we find is turpentine. Along a sky that sips us blind, we stagger through the fragile peas, a city built for two. A crack inside a hollow tree will make our shining will unglue. The wiper blades without our sand, will surely follow you. I guess it wasn’t what we planned, but then again, except for socks, we didn’t think it through.
Web

The spider’s belly dangles like a berry in the sun;

its peach fuzz, cigar ash and sucked pebble gray.

Her web nets a porch-rift where yellowjackets squirm.

One stales, face down like a hooked kitchen herb;

While her sisters scribble cuss words on the wind.
Jonah

I ride, alive, beneath the sea, and wait
in total dark. My skin just flakes away
like paper pulp, unsealed by acid’s burn.
Above the monster’s back, a tidal sound:
those groaning miles of night’s concussive crush
where thousands drown, and bones are nibbled clean.

I sense the lukewarm juices rush, each time
this beast’s cathedral guts contract, release:
a lurching bath of weak but ceaseless flame.
I hold my breath ‘til bubbles come, then gag
a salty reek of half-digested squid.
The bile burns my nose. I’m blind inside.
I kneel on slime and stomach-wall to pray.

With sealed lips, I beg a second birth
and wake up gasping, nudged by waves, to touch
the cold soft sand. The sunlight sticks its pins
in both my eyes. The sea-foam fades my blood.

In Nineveh, the words I spill are Yours,
not mine. Who cares, that You would punish them?
Who cares, that they are saved? I never asked
to be Your love or be Your wrath. I crouch
outside the city wall, with scalding sand
and desert sun against my healing skin.
I never asked to hear Your voice inside,
and now Your sulking errand boy resigns.

You make a tree that shades my face and cools
my sweating brow. But then You make a worm
that rots its leaves and lets the sun break through.
You make the beast with burning guts that glides
the lightless, death-filled deep; that saves me, jailed
in slimy, gurgling walls. You make the storm;
You make the numbly sinning Ninevites;
You force a fish to puke on shore, and make
my second birth; You make your servant, me,
who drowns at sea, but can’t escape the earth.
**The Picnic**

In Grandpa’s new garage
the cool air presses plywood glue
and drying clay. Six or seven
dead people sit by the wall, their clothes
and hair seem somehow clean.
Some heads hang forward
like sleepers in car seats.
Some tip back: dried-out
mouths hinge open
as their opaque eyes point up.
One looks coiled, holding still,
pretending. I tug Grandpa’s
windbreaker’s dun-colored cuff.

He thinks I am ready,
rolls open the mouth
of a soft paper bag, lifts out
my lunch. A dust of black pepper
on folds of pastrami
that peak from white bread.
Bits of ice click in the lemonade.
I picture them, watching us,
folded and heavy, knees
and ankles strewn across the floor.
Sawdust floats up between rafters.
Grandpa looks up through it,
crunching romaine.
Coming Home

The shapeless clouds above the night receive
a city’s leaking lake of light. I see
the sky through radiating streaks that rise
behind the trees in artificial dawn.
I slowly drive on lonely roads. I search
the names of streets on hidden signs, by fields
of summer’s dried and dying corn. Alone
while stoned, I hear the list of words I should
have said, and see her curled, away in bed.
Now just the sky’s dim fingers show me home.
Night Swim

Beyond the lake, your pale body breaks
the settled night, a lamp to keep the shore.
The moonlight paints itself between the reeds.
My movement’s ripples slide across a slick
of sliver ink, whose film reforms behind
each passing wave. I paddle out from shore
and see your brightness shrink between the trees
that shade the water’s edge. I see a sky
now cleared of clouds by passing summer storms.
It falls away, a perfect, endless well.
I think I hear you calling out my name,
but feel the water’s seal inside my ears.
The stars I float below are holding still.
Guantanamo

It was simple. Walking through those gates,
I left it all, kept with razor wires
in a country I’d never see again.

When they handed me those papers
promising to keep it secret, locked inside,
I wanted to sign them. It was simple.
I didn’t want people to know.

You know,
the cells were only chain-link fences—
all the sounds bled through.
Some days,
nothing stands between me
and the bruised face
of a man my father’s age.
It happened when I took him
to the showers,
and they clapped
my back congratulations.

Some days I’m sure it’s worse
when there’s no one to tell
that I’m still listening for sounds of struggle
under softly muttered prayers.

But when I’m thinking of a man
getting a rectal exam
while the lube lies untouched, with its cap tight
on the table,
and I hear the laughter after,
My wife makes me jump
when she asks me what’s wrong,
and I tell her I’m tired, it’s been a long day,
She looks at me, thoughts locked up
behind her eyes.
Wrong Ends

The hissing jumper cables start to spark
as smoking plastic spews an acrid smell
of braided plumes that pour from sudden flame.
The orange handles glob apart and stick
to metal plates, like burning eggs, to ooze
through tarnished iron ribs that reach
inside the clots of grease. Exhaust inhales below.
You watch as light erupts before a sound
that rattles dumpster lids and spooks the birds
who crouched and hid in slowly melting snow.
Old Growth

After a century of wrestling,
the tombstone has lost to the oak.
Now it lies face down,
thinned by the years
like a slice of old soap,
or a candy sucked
sharp by the rain.
I just want to read
who’s buried beneath;
whose coffin now brittle,
intruded by roots.

But when I hinge back
the slab, the name hides
in a scab of black mud,
and I open the arteries
gleaming with ants,
their larva, like bright
clots of cream.
Krokidil

She hikes down the skirt
of her hospital sheets,
peels off what stuck to the wound.

A gray thigh splits
like leathered clay.
Inch-long staples tug
the fissure’s edge.

What’s left? A camera flash.
A zipper left open.
A coat that won’t keep out the cold.
Closing the Chinese Buffet

Saturday’s octopus thaws
in the sink; implausibly purple,
its tentacles curl
like a tea-blossom waiting to steep.

The line-cook leans against the grill.
A Marlboro-light-one-hundred
sizzles to its filter in his fingers.

The last family jingles the door-chimes.
The music clicks off, and the young waitress
staples her credit card slips.

The dim warmth of dishwater lingers,
like touching a dog put to sleep.

Out by the dumpster,
cloud-cover sops orange light pollution.
Cakes of snow slump over cars.

The waitress peels out,
and I peer through the windshield,
to see if she looks back or waves.
The Playground at Midnight

You search the shadows spilled across your lap, the swing-set creaks beneath your rocking weight. Your silence spreads, the night is calm and cool. Your thoughts keep turning far away. My speech is lost on empty trails between. The slides and jungle gyms are quiet ruins. Here, the moonlight wets their brightly painted bars. You turn to me, I pull your torso’s warmth against my chest. The dawn is miles away and only day will pull our lives apart.
Infirmary

In the microwave oven,
a frozen rat thaws,
its whiskers unstuck from white fur.

There’s a note in the prickerbush,
a towel on the floor.
A slow hornet lands on my hand.

I stole you a pepper
but now it is wrinkled.
There’s a face in the grain of the door.

On the six o’clock news,
when we murder our parents,
they ask if we took it too far.
Labyrinth

The big-kid puts his hamster on the drain-plate of an empty bathtub where it quivers, stilled before a maze of wooden blocks. Its whiskers shine like bits of fishing line, as it trembles in its wooly auburn pelt. The big-kid peels a slice of Colby-Jack from the exit. He wiggles it close for a sniff, almost gives him a nibble.

The rodent’s eyeballs shine like black, glass beads. His nails scratch like pen tips when the big-kid slides him forward. Now he’s in. The hamster sniffs two ways, runs the long one. Dead end, so he knocks the block down with a fumbling lunge to scramble over. He stops confused, his nose putters like the way a cat purrs.

The big kid’s hand rests on the faucet’s handle. He turns it just slightly, lets a trickle start to pool beneath blocks, lifting and turning the wood. The hamster sniffs air, exposing white chin fur. As water grows, the corners curl, the halls dissolve, and paths tangle open. Purpose peels away from choices leaving only will to claw against a shore-less, spreading lake that turns with floating walls.

The hamster clings to a block like a kickboard, fore-legs skinny under soaked and flattened fur,
soggy cheese clutched
in his teeth like a cure.
The Sandman

At night, he’d snatch out children’s eyes if they forgot to keep them closed. He fed them to his own kids who lived on the moon, their mouths like baby birds’.

This isn’t about the Sandman. In LA, a man was arrested for eating the eyes of his four year old son. He had taken PCP, and sat in a wheelchair after chopping off his legs with an axe.

I’m not sure what to say. Tonight, the moon gleams as white as a manhole left open to a day-time above.

I close my eyes, imagining blindness: the childhood sounds, a crinkle of unwrapping Christmas bulbs a hand pawing into a bin filled with Legos, its crashing of small plastic waves. Adults whisper outside the door.

I wonder if his father imagines this also, in prison, where sobs echo, muffled through floors of cement. I wonder how he remembers the action, a face small and soft in his hands.
Ernesto

I notice the tube
of his catheter, how
its bubbles slide touching,
like beads on a string.

The Mattress-back scaffolds
his head—a blossom
too dense for its stalk.
I can’t tell you one thing he says
when he reaches to feel the snaps
of my jacket, his voice
like heavy paper slowly torn.
His knuckles remind
me of fishbones.
On the snaps of my jacket,
his fingertips flutter and quake
like a moth I once found
thrashed by fan-blades—
how it shivered and stilled
under pieces I can’t quite call wings.
MEMOIR

Little Souvenirs

To whom it may concern,

A few years back, I was in the Rocky Mountains up near Cripple Creek with my best friend from high-school and his girlfriend at the time. A ways off the highway, up on the mountainside, we found a trailer I believe was yours. Someone had busted the windows.

The plastic leather opened in strips, revealing fissures in the seat-foam stiffened into little canyons by the rain. Grains of shattered glass clung like salt. You left a thick paperback novel. Its pages turned the color of margarine, and splayed out like an old broom. Green beer bottles shone in the back. There was broken glass in the bed, so we thought you didn’t live there anymore.

You left some Polaroid pictures. Do you remember which ones? There was a portrait of a young man with sunburned cheeks and blonde stubble looking out from under a baseball cap, looking into the camera as if waiting for something, probably just for the picture to be taken. He looks comfortable, but I can’t tell if he loves the person holding the camera. Do you know who he is? I imagined he’s you. We found it on the front seat facing up, like someone chose not to take it, instead of simply forgetting. There was another one underneath. It was a gravestone with a woman’s name. Judging by the dates, I imagined that she was your mother.
Anyway, we took your pictures. Little souvenirs. You left them. I guess we felt entitled, having discovered them, excited by the mystery. A complicated life, an unfinished life, an abandoned life. A record of our adventure together. A time when something unexpected broke into our long drive up the highway, each in our own separate thoughts. We were young. I think I went out to Colorado to escape my life in Michigan. I lived at home and went to community college. I had a prescription to Adderall, and hadn’t made many new friends. In Colorado, my best friend and I still hit the road together. Life could surprise us.

I suppose you kept the picture of the grave for sentimental reasons. If you miss it, if you’ve gone back for it ever, if you still want to look at it and feel sentimental, I can try to describe it for you from memory. There’s a flat, rectangular stone. If you could imagine the size and shape of a board-game box. The stone is light gray. Like an overcast sky, but you don’t think it will rain. The grass is shaggy. The colors are washed out from sunlight. There’s a woman’s name on the stone. I don’t remember what. And some dates. I want to say, born in the 50’s and died in the 90’s, but I’m kind of guessing. Anyway, you would know better than me. Just try to picture the stone. I haven’t lost the picture, I don’t think. It’s still in a box at my Mom’s.

I had a dream last night. Do you want to hear it? I was standing on a high dive over a pool. You weren’t there. Actually, there were some guys at the pool I didn’t know. Maybe
you were in the dream and I just didn’t know it was you. I jumped off the high dive. I had never done a head first dive that high. I meant to go feet first but I tilted the other way and suddenly went for it. The heavy green water flew up, but somehow, I nailed the dive and slid through. I fell to the bottom of the pool as if through thin air. It had to have been 20 ft. I landed and sat on the cement floor at the bottom of the pool, feeling I’d achieved something special. I thought to myself, it will take a while to float back up. Then it did.

Do you know anything about dreams?

I had another one that same night. I was going to try out for a band. I had the white Fender Stratocaster I once tried to learn back in middle school. We were scheduling the try-out. Did they know I don’t know how to play? Did I? I was sure I could learn in a week, but there was some doubt. Maybe I’m in over my head. I don’t know what happened to that guitar in real life. I haven’t talked to my best friend from high school in years. Do you still think about the young man in the Polaroid? If so, please send me a letter. I could try to find it for you next time I go home for Christmas.

Best Wishes,

Cory Ferrer
Twice, the officer fingerprinting me said I had good looking hands. First as I rubbed lotion in between my fingers, then again spreading them across the scanner glass. I suspect he gave the compliment a second time because he felt it didn’t really land the first time. I was seventeen and stoned. I did my best to smile coolly as they snapped the mugshot, pretending not to care, as if getting arrested was some kind of joke.

I had never thought I had good looking hands. As a little child, I never clipped my nails, and white crescents grew from my fingertips, with a perpetual dark band of dirt underneath. Three stripes: pink, black, and white, like the freeze dried Neapolitan astronaut ice-cream in the museum gift shop.

My high school girlfriend said she thought my hands were beautiful. She always looked at hands because she played harp, she explained, running her fingertips over my knuckles. I suspect she anticipated that I would take ‘beautiful hands’ as an embarrassingly feminine quality, a bit like the long, dark eyelashes my second grade teacher would mention whenever I took off my glasses.

When I still saw my dad on weekends, he told me my hands were like his. We had short fingers, but wide pad-like palms, which is why we could play point-
guard in basketball. In fifth grade, I would try out for the team. The coach subbed me in if were winning or losing by about ten points. When the score was close, I would watch from the bench, chewing little holes in the T-shirt I wore under my jersey, then pull of wad of wet cloth from my mouth to shout “good hustle,” to my friends.

They gave me one phone call. I couldn’t remember the number for my Mom’s new apartment. This was before everyone had cell phones. In the holding cell, I sat next to a middle aged man with four missing teeth in the front. I was wearing my Coal Chamber t-shirt, black with white skeletons. “So you’re one of those bad kids,” he offered. I guess that’s what I had been going for my sophomore year of high school with my Hot Topic jewelry, my spiked belt and studded black bracelets, none of which really made up for my thick glasses, slim wrists, and curly brown hair. “Not really,” I countered. He told me they arrested him because he dropped his cigarettes while driving home, and swerved while reaching down to pick them up. He was technically drunk at the time. “That’s not even the worst part,” he told me. I’ve got chickens and cats at home without any food.

The officer led me past ‘suicide watch’ cells with Plexiglas walls. A bearded man paced in a green jumpsuit that fell like a robe from his shoulders He trailed the walls with two fingers, as if checking its pulse. When he turned to look at me, it
felt like someone aimed a flashlight in my face. His eyes didn’t move in their sockets, but rotated instead with his head as he turned toward the glass wall, eyelids wide, as if terrified by something very far behind me. When I looked down, the handcuffs left bracelets of pink, tender skin.
The clouds that you walk through will just look like fog. You have to hike through it to look back and see familiar cumulus formations sliding over mountainsides and mesas. Once, while hiking through a cloud, days from the trailhead, I heard a crowd of strange animals bleating in the distance, and saw fresh green piles of droppings at my feet. Another hiker later told me there was a shepherd summering from South America, training his new dog while herding. His sheep grazed on the mesa while the clouds swept through their flock.

‡

I could never keep up with Mac. It was just the two of us, for six weeks, 412 miles on the trail, except for the people we met on the way. I would hike for hours alone, and then find him sitting next to his pack, reading the guidebook, whittling his walking stick, or staring off through valleys and foothills. One day, we got separated. I missed a fork and walked several miles around a pond where cattails rose above my head and muskrats broke the stillness of the water. My path rejoined the main trail, but only after Mac had gone looking for me. A group of hikers who had met him told me to turn back. I found his pack lying on a fork in the road. We reached camp late that night, setting our tent on the side of a hill to get out of the rain.
We brought a two person tent and a propane stove with a folded shade of foil for the wind. We brought duct tape for growing blisters on toes and heels, and fungicide for itchy skin. We brought a slack-line to string between trees and practice balance as a pastime at camp. It was popular with anyone we camped near, and a quiet girl who rock-climbed could cross it backwards and forwards without looking at her feet. We brought a bag of *Jolly Ranchers*, to keep up our blood sugar, we justified. Some of the hikers we met told us that they knew when they were catching up to us by the cellophane wrappers that’d slip from our pockets on switchbacks. We brought drug-store ponchos that ripped at the armpits letting our pullovers soak up the rain. We carried out gear in identical ten-year old external frame packs that bulged above our shoulders. Our cook-gear clanked with every step. Another hiker nicknamed us “the Kitchen Sink Gang.” We brought a harmonica, hoping we would learn how to play. We brought cayenne pepper, instant coffee, and packets of Cool-Aid. I didn’t bring my wide-mouth plastic bottle of prescription Adderall or my half-finished pack of Pall Malls. I had thrown both in the dumpster by my Mom’s apartment back in Michigan, before getting on a Greyhound for 48 hours of riding to Denver. I don’t remember very much from the trip. I brought a pocket copy of the Tao Te Ching. “Strong is the bough that will bend,” I read to my friend the by the glow
of a dwindling campfire while we leaned on gnarled logs, airing bare feet in the
cold. By the end, all of its pages grew black dots of mildew.

‡

Lost Creek was appropriately named. It vanished under balanced boulders: slabs
of rock wide enough to walk across with grass and tiny blue flowers growing
layers of soil that covered their tops like black frosting. I looked through the
cracks between boulders and saw weak sunlight contour ropes of water
splashing through the hollows underneath. I didn’t think about the long ride
back to Michigan, the living room in my Mom’s apartment where I’d piled all the
furniture that would fit in the back of my Ford Ranger from the one room rental
house I’d left without time to clean. I didn’t think about the fall semester at
community college and the classes that would still be open in late August when
I’d return. As I crossed, I knelt to feel the moss between rocks, wet with
condensation from the stream.

‡

We met a hiker with trekking poles doing 25 miles a day. He joked that he’d been
hoping the trip would be a spiritual experience, but all that he could think about
was pizza. Some days we ate spoonfuls of our butter. Once, I found Mac waiting
for me at a switchback, and he told me he’d been thinking about inventing a new kind of no-bake cookie with honey, oatmeal, and nuts. I countered with my visionary project for a burger with potato pancake buns.

‡

We saw eleven miles of the Hayman fire burn area. White skeletal pines covered the mountainside. Between dead branches the sun dried the tall grasses yellow. Aspen saplings were the first to return. Most were taller than a person, but their trunks remained wrist-thin.

‡

When we met Shane, he hadn’t spoken to anyone in three days. While we were eating tuna helper made with water boiled from a mossy creek that danced with mosquitoes, he brought over a Nalgene of whiskey to share. Shane graduated from NOLS outdoor leadership academy. He had a battery powered water purifier that somehow used ultraviolet light. He had a tent that weighed less than three pounds and a down jacket he could stuff into its own pocket. He had a carob colored pit-bull who shivered and hid in his tent. Shane said he liberated her from tweakers who used her for dogfights. She had a small bite missing from
the tip of her right ear. Its stiff dark seal would open in the rain and dye the fur above her left eye red when she tried to shake herself dry.

Shane said he had a warrant in Denver for a grow operation in his basement. He was going to turn himself in after finishing the trail in a month, and would say he didn’t hear about the warrant because he was backpacking, that was his alibi. He told us that he wasn’t running from the law, only putting off going to prison. He had a cell-phone with a few hours of battery-life and mp3s of Lil Wayne and “Radar Love” by Golden Earring, the only music we heard on the trail. We would set the phone up on a log and sit around it, leaning in to listen. That first night, Shane asked me if I was interesting in ever trying 2CI, a hallucinogen I hadn’t heard of. I said yes, thinking that he meant it hypothetically. Then he pulled out a little plastic zip-lock with a line of gray powder at the bottom, dipped his hunting knife into the powder, and carefully brought the tip to his nose, all while eyeing me to read my reaction.

Since then, I’ve been told that there are better ways to take this drug than snorting. The first five minutes of the trip, all three of us spent holding our faces with pain. “You just have to get past this part,” Shane said. I didn’t move much from my seat for the next three hours. It’s not that I was paralyzed, only that my central nervous system seemed to have lost confidence in itself, as if every cell in my body were likely to declare independence and strike out on its own. As Mac
put it, “it’s like rounding up a herd of cattle: before getting up, you have to make sure your entire body is on the same page.” At no point were our bodies ever actually out of control: only the emotional certainty of this control was lost.

Everything I saw, the backlit orange embers, the patterned substrate of bark-flecks and dry needles at our feet, the notched bark on the dim-edges of trunks all around us, all appeared to be made from the same material, like in old computer graphics. Some kind of secret plastic coated everything.

When distant lightning lit the edges of the sky, Shane joked that World War 3 broke out, and we saw the flashes from Soviet Nukes. Mac laughed. I had lost my sense of humor. At some point in the night, I told them both “I just remembered, I am on the Colorado Trail, with my friend Mac from High School, and I am tripping on something called 2CI.” Mac said, “I don’t know where you’ve been, but welcome back bro.” Shane laughed. His pit-bull whined from his tent. He’d check on her throughout the night. Sometimes he’d even try to coax her to the fire, but she insisted on lying curled in the sleeping bag. He gave her his down jacket for an extra blanket, then sat down closer to the campfire, thinking. When I looked up, the stars were connected by straight pale lines, as if black, fitted tiles made the sky.

‡
Giardia, an anaerobic flagellated protozoan parasite that lives in lakes and rivers, causes vomiting and diarrhea. All three of our water filters eventually broke. The repeated use of hand-pumped suction pressure on their moving plastic parts will eventually cause something to snap. We got used to the flavor of iodine. We trained ourselves not to take the huge first gulp, wetting throats with small sips from our sun-warmed bottles until we reached another stream.

‡

The equestrians we camped with one night were committed to cowboy fashion. They had the wide-brimmed fedoras, the leather leggings thrown on over blue-jeans, the high-heeled boots, even the broad metal belt-buckles. They brought cast iron skillets and quarts of tequila. They had three horses per person of gear. They brought pancake batter, smoked brats, and paper plates. They brought folding camp chairs, and a tarp to make a canopy. They threw empty plastic potato chip bags on their bonfire, “leave no track,” they joked, mocking the conservationist slogan. As Mac and I sat by their fire, feeling well-fed and drunk for what felt like the first time in our lives, the oldest cowboy began telling me about frequencies.

He said that every substance gave off its own unique frequency, and that the human body could be healed by plants that matched its frequency. He told us
about a new drink he’d discovered, made from seaweed, called Frequensea. He claimed it made his chronic back-pain disappear, and his thinning white hair, grow back fuller and darker than before. Then he took off his fedora to show us his hair. Not only was this healing drink for sale, but a young man could make a lot of money if he joined the Frequensea family as a salesman, he said. The next morning, after a filling pancake breakfast, he gave us his business card and told us to give him a call if we were interested. We got free samples of the drink, which came in little plastic pouches, like Capri Sun, and he promised us it cured hangovers as well.

‡

We found a forest stricken with plague. Massive growths swelled under blackened bark that split and orange sap bled out. For miles, every tree was stricken. The trunks of huge old pine split and oozed. All of the saplings were already dead, overwhelmed by flabby masses under folds of wrinkled bark. We hiked quickly, saying little, without hearing squirrels or birds. It took five miles before a river broke the silence.

‡
Mac and I sat down on a grassy ridge and waited for the night to end. It was our second to last morning on the trail. We had stayed up all night feeding twigs into the campfire, and then hiked back up to watch the sunrise from the continental divide. We waited as miles of mountains around us began to take shape in the sunlight. A valley widened with fields of high grass and wildflowers slowly regaining their colors. A canyon opened between cliffs of orange granite that sparkled with quartz. As the sun entered the bottom of the sky, shadows lifted from the sides of mountains. The earth was a giant brown ball, slowly rolling. There were no mountain peaks, only endless curving ridges pinched from bedrock, filling the miles below colorless clouds. A lake of snowmelt shone from the top of a cliff, a round mirror resting on a table of rock and meadows. We knew that at some point, we’d have to go back. A forest nested in the valley, where a river ran down to our camp. There were waterfalls fading to mist on the red canyon walls. The sun was over the horizon; we walking down the trail with our backs to it, already crossing the stream.

I made it to the next site by the early afternoon. There were train-tracks, raspberry bushes, and charcoal left by other campers’ fires. Mac had stayed behind to nap. I lied down on the sandy soil, hoping he would catch up soon. I closed my eyes. A light rain landed on my chest and forehead. In one more day, we would be off the trail. Mac’s Dad was going to meet us in Durango, in his air-conditioned Jeep Grand Cherokee, where we’d hear radio for first time in a
month and half. He would take us over winding mountain highways. He would take us back to Colorado Springs, where mule-deer wander watered lawns of wealthy suburbs, where the training air-force pilots practice in the sky, where radio towers from the NORAD command center sprout up from their mountain like a tuft of glowing hair, and where I would have to catch a bus back home. But first, Mac’s Dad promised he would take us out for burgers. He knew a place with all the toppings: the sautéed portabellas, the caramelized onions, the fried egg. They even have milkshakes, he said. I imagined the taste, lying with my eyes closed in the cool August rain.
I shake yellow powder into the sauce pan, where the water turns a muddy red, floating with the flakes of marinara sauce baked to an almost black crust, and softened by the scalding water. Yellow rubber gloves cling to my forearms, their inner skin long overcome by the dishwater’s inevitable spread. A plastic apron, beaded with droplets, hangs around my neck by plastic band, thinned to a string, like the handles of a plastic grocery bag heavy with cans of soup. I gouge into the sauce with a threadbare wire scrubber. I bunch the stainless steel curls, and feel the filaments’ hard edges dig into the fingers of the yellow rubber glove. Even when you scrape down to the bottom, there’s another layer of darkness underneath. The perpetual soot. Accumulated years of other scrubbers falling short. They moved on to the other jobs, but the sauce pans keep the stains that beat them like the rings of a tree, that dim the steel to a weak sepia, crosshatched by needle-width scrapes.

This summer I smoke my first cigarette. It’s awful, but I look like I’m enjoying it. I suck the smoke only as far as my mouth, and I still get a headache. One of the boys has already had sex. He’s a stocky fourteen year old with a scar in the shape of the number “69” on his bicep, from when best friend heated coat hangers on the stove to give each other “tattoos.” At least, he talks a lot about all of the sex
he’s had. He told us he once gave a girl twelve orgasms in one session. The girls

call him “Big E.” Can you guess why, he asked.
Over the Ice

White cracks covered the windshield, like fibers from heavy, unraveling ropes. The seatbelt held my back against the plastic leather of the car seat as an ache ebbed and rose in my neck. The grains of shattered glass remaining on the windshield’s teal-tinted plastic glittered in a weak but growing sunrise. A solid sky of pale clouds bled like the first stroke of my mother’s water colors: {the band of spreading blue that marks the bay from my grandparents’ window; or the sepia she’d blow with a straw to grow twigs over wet, heavy paper.} The passenger window appeared strangely clean. Outside, a field of snow sloped gently to the forest’s edge, a sheet of white broken by saplings and wheat-colored cattail stalks. The Toyota Tercel leaned deep against a snow-bank that concealed the ditch in the bend where we had spun into an oncoming car. When I reached for the window, my fingers only felt the icy February air. There weren’t even chips of glass stuck to the window’s narrow gap, a thin crack newly opened to the air lined with black rubber blades like windshield wipers that slapped over un-melted frost. I remembered how I’d sat perfectly still before sunrise, believing the pain in my neck left me paralyzed. I’d imagined watching from a wheelchair as the boys in my grade chased a soccer ball out of my view. But now, I could move my hand. I felt the cold air through the window as if dipping my fingers in water.
We were driving to Zack’s house. In the mornings my Mom would drop me off there before school, and his parents would take me the rest of the way. Even though we belonged to rival stick forts on our playground in the woods, we would play catch with a Nerf ball in his basement and be friends in the morning.

Today was Zack’s birthday. His party began after school. Next to me, my mother leaned against a sagging airbag. Her eyes were closed. Her glasses were gone. Black hair fell over her face. The airbag had rubbed a small circle of skin from her nose, and blood grew in beads from the soft, exposed flesh.

‡

I don’t remember the paramedics arriving. I don’t remember their faces or voices. Instead, I remember the white rubber gloves, tight on their knuckles but loose on their wrists, as their scissors sheared open my jeans in two strokes. They cut my belt. Where would I get a new pair of pants before school? In the ambulance, they wrapped me with a clean gray blanket before fastening the stretcher’s black straps. The adult sized stretcher reached down past my legs. I wore a plastic neck-brace and a breathing mask like one from the dentist. They needed some blood. I felt a dull stab in my shoulder as a metal point pressed through my skin. I could only look up. A white light swayed above me as the ambulance slowly rocked over long country roads. I couldn’t help looking once at the plastic bag.
growing fat as it filled with dark red liquid. Once was enough. They held my stretcher steady with their hands as we leaned around curves in the road.

‡

We were running late that morning. I had watched the digital numbers on the console, guessing the time it would take. My grandparents’ house on Old Mission Peninsula was a great place to visit on holidays, but now that we lived there, it was a long drive to school. I thought about the first time I’d been late. All my classmates looked back at me but the teacher didn’t turn around. I quietly pulled out my seat and sat down. I didn’t even take off my coat or put my backpack in my cubby. I’d felt hot inside my winter jacket as I tried to find our lesson in my neighbor’s open workbook.

‡

I don’t remember checking in to the hospital. I remember when I got there, I was asked to lie still in a tube where a bright light circled my head. After, they gave me a Gameboy. I picked out Battle-Toads from their basket of cartridges, but never got the hang of it. In a black and white world I could see through a screen, I died over and over again to electric rhythms of repetitive minor key chimes. Each time, I returned to the level’s beginning. The character on the screen shifted
his legs as if walking, but the speed he crossed the scrolling trail never quite matched his motions. Under the hospital gown, white plastic sensors were wired to my chest. A clear tube sprouted from needles held in my arm by a square of blue tape. A nurse came and said I could visit my mother. They brought me in a wheelchair even though my legs didn’t hurt. When she looked at me, a sudden smile pulled creases through her puffy skin, but her eyes still shone the way they did when she would pick me up from visiting Dad’s house on weekends. She started opening her arms to hug me, but a sling held back her arm. Black plastic braces closed over both wrists. Her left leg was elevated, wrapped in plaster to her thigh. A wire frame braced her chin up from her shoulders, and bandages circled her head. A small beige Band-Aid crossed her nose. Her glasses were still gone. I stood and started towards her but then stopped and threw up on the tile floor. “He’s probably not used to seeing you like that,” the nurse told my mother, as she led me away from the room. No, it was just my stomach, I wanted to say. They gave me a gray kidney shaped plastic tray to throw up in as soon as I returned to the bed.

‡

My Dad came to get me that evening. Zack’s party had already started. I imagined classmates smacking a whiffle bat into a piñata that would dangle from the PVC pipe on his basement ceiling. I saw their plastic forks scrape frosting
from damp paper plates. Dad brought me a change of clothes, and a picture he
had cut out from a magazine, a close-up of a bob-cat on the snow. “Next time we
will see him,” he had written with black marker on the bottom of the page. It was
about the time we snow-shoed through a swamp that winter. Several feet of
snow had piled up on the ice below our feet. We walked between bare trunks
whose creaking weight was all that broke that silence. My Dad was following the
tracks of a Bobcat. I followed my Dad’s tracks; they were long mesh ovals
pressed into the snow. I looked down at the trail ahead, while he searched the
fields and trees around us for a trace of movement, scanning back and forth with
his eyes. He followed the trail for what felt like an hour. My legs were getting
sore, but I had learned not to mention it. There was something he had wanted me
to see in the woods, but it had eluded us both. The bobcat in the picture looked
back over its shoulder. Frost stuck to the tufts of fur and whiskers under shining
yellow eyes.
Mac had a saying about Jacob. He said life is a thin transparent veil, and on the other side of it is mayonnaise.

We called him Coitus, after watching the Big Lebowski.

When he wanted to be called Jacob, and Mac made him hold an “identity scepter” which was a fluorescent light bulb that he had to hold vertically in order to be called Jacob.

He tried dip once, Mac gave it to him while Jacob was watching Mac play some computer game on Stan’s computer in which you navigated a matchbox racecar over a kitchen table, using the arrow keys on the keyboard dodging spilled Cheerios as obstacles. Jacob never spit. He just swallowed all the dip spit, and eventually threw up in Stan’s toilet.

On turkey cutlet night in the Cafeteria, we all went around in a circle, saying, “I’m going to shit in your mouth, Jacob.”

Bill was tripping on morning glory seeds, a pastime I had given up after the night I vomited up several flakes of my stomach lining from forcing myself to
throw up over and over again. The deal was, and I don’t know how this got started, but apparently if Bill and Jacob made out, with three tongue pumps, Mac would dump an entire cup of dip spit over his head. We all egged them on. It happened just like you would imagine. I think that was Jacob’s first kiss.

Mac tried to get Jacob to sell us his nipple. One thing lead to another. We had over two hundred dollars in donations. Mac offered to freeze it with a can of aerosol, then perform the surgery with an ordinary pair of scissors. Jacob seriously considered it, and told us he had to try something first. He went into the bathroom, and pinched his nipple as hard as he could to see if he could take it. He re-emerged and said he didn’t want to. Later, Bill reported that Jacob had told him, you guys know that I’d do anything for you.
The lights were off, but yellowing September light still poured in through the windows of Miss Nancy’s kindergarten classroom. My classmates had all closed their eyes and curled down on kid-sized cuts of oval carpet, rolling fall jackets for pillows. Miss Nancy rose from her desk, a knee-height table cluttered with picture books and Xeroxed outlines of the Alphabet People waiting to be colored. I looked out from my mat under a table deep in the corner. A Formica canopy dimmed the light and chair legs enclosed me, like the bars of a shark cage from the National Geographic VHS tape my oldest brother Raf would play when asked to babysit. Miss Nancy patrolled a narrow zigzag between sleeping mats with practiced quiet steps. When she approached, I closed my eyes, lay still and imagined the ocean around me, a blue, hazy vastness where sunlight glimmered in weird little strings. A dim abyss opened below me. I forced my eyes open to make sure the mat was still there.

Miss Nancy was already walking away. Her sandy blonde ponytail swished. Younger and less likely to scold than my gray haired pre-school teacher, she was the first teacher I liked. However, I had never spoken to Pam, the teacher’s aide, a large, middle aged woman, balancing a nest of brown curls on her head. She usually sat next to David, our classmate with Down syndrome, giving him fresh sheets of paper so he could keep coloring without pressing through to the table.
When Miss Nancy turned on the lights, it startled me when Pam, acting on cue, came to my table and looked through the bars of my cage. “Cory?” she asked, not sure she had the right kid. I offered a nod. “It’s time for your counseling.”

I had been to counseling before, but never in school. Once a week, I used to visit Greg. He had white hair, a calm, welcoming voice, and an entire cabinet of board games. The best was Play-Dough Pictionary. Greg would flip an hourglass, and in minutes I would pinch a lime green ball into a swimmer’s hooked arms, or the wedge of a crocodile’s open mouth. The worst was Candyland. We only played it once, and you have to do whatever the cards tell you. I lost. Sometimes, Greg would lose focus on our games, and he would ask me how I felt about my life, or about my parents splitting up. When I knew the answer, I would tell him. When I didn’t, I would shrug.

Once, after Greg and I finished Connect Four, Mom asked me to play on the swings while she and Greg talked alone. After what felt like an entire day of looking through a spinning tire swing to watch my shadow turning on the sand, Mom came back and said, “You won’t be seeing Greg from now on.” I was stunned. “Why not?” I asked. “He says you’re fine.” It was meant to reassure. Once, in his office, I drew a monkey next to a waterfall flanked by palm trees and coconuts. Greg had an enormous marker set where every color snapped into a little plastic groove. He taped my picture to his wall. Another kid who visited
drew a splotchy imitation, and Greg taped it next to mine, proudly telling me how impressed he had been with my picture. I could be an older brother, I thought. I imagined myself telling a wide-eyed preschooler the ways of coloring and monkeys. Greg was a good friend, for an adult.

But counseling in school? This felt like an ambush. My classmates were rubbing their eyes, stretching their arms out, and yawning, the way everyone wakes up in cartoons.

“Why?” I asked. “Can’t I stay here?”

“This counseling is for all the kids whose parents are divorced,” Pam said, trying not to sound impatient. Following Pam, I searched my classmates’ faces to see who had to join me. She walked straight to the door. As I trailed Pam out, Miss Nancy sang the counting song without me.

The hallways grew huge without kids. Their glaring light left streaks across the polished tiles that could follow my eyes where I walked. Every doorway held the muffled sounds of third or fourth graders, giving their mysterious recitations. A whole class dribbled balls in the gym, like thunder through a muted trumpet. Finally, Pam opened the door to an office, where five or six older grade-schoolers had all scooted tightly to a circle-table, with a woman I had never seen. I felt like I was interrupting. Then I recognized a mop-head of black curly hair, and a blue threadbare sweatshirt. My older brother Loren had to come to this too.
I knew Loren changed at school. Only two years older, we were friends at home. We’d make up X-Men mutant powers, running through the woods: I grew wings and a scorpion tail, while he lifted bad guys to the treetops with his mind. We’d build interconnected orbital platforms with cyborgs and scientists, pawing parts from bins of half-chewed Legos. Loren had a favorite blanket he would carry when we played indoors, navy blue with faded hounds tooth underneath. His favorite blanket made his favorite sound. He would pinch the outer layer of fabric in between his thumb and pointer to part it from the filling, and rub it back and forth next to his ear. When he didn’t want to play, Loren would wrap himself up in his favorite blanket, suck his thumb, and listen to his favorite sound.

But at school, Loren was a second grader. He waited for the bus with friends who didn’t know me. They laughed at quoted lines from shows you only watched if your family had a kiddie-pool-sized satellite dish jutting from their yard. Our family still finessed T.V. antennas like divining rods, coaxing pictures through the static. Even though we only caught cartoons on Saturday morning, Loren still laughed with his friends. Maybe they taught him the jokes. But this time, I saw him holding his hand on the plastic seat next to his, letting everyone know it was saved. “It’s okay,” he said, when I climbed up beside him. “I’ve done this before.”
These chairs stood taller than the blue ones in our classroom. My Velcro gym shoes wouldn’t touch the floor. The counselor passed around pencils, crayons, and sheets of paper. Immediately, I envisioned a robot with flamethrower eyes. It was Mom who had always encouraged my drawing. Even when I emulated Raf’s Far Side books, and drew babies on a slide to a pool that thrashed with alligators, she would still keep white-out on hand for every time I threw a fit because my pen-lines didn’t match the picture in my mind. Then the counselor asked us to draw our parents’ divorce. Oh. I looked up at Loren and whispered, “How do you draw a divorce?”

He paused in thought. “I’m doing when Mom and dad told us.” I closed my eyes but I couldn’t remember.

“How did it happen?” Maybe I’d copy him.

I couldn’t whisper quietly enough to keep the counselor from coming over, and bending down to ask if I had any questions. Her long black hair hung in my face.

“He doesn’t remember,” Loren said. “He was too little.”

She gave an alternative assignment: draw the reason why your parents got divorced. I had an answer, but I didn’t believe it much, even then. My Mom was reluctant to tell us much. When I had asked her, she paused for a Moment, scrunching her lips as if choosing her next card in Hearts. “Your dad wouldn’t
help with the housework.” Pressed further, she admitted that was only “part of it,” but wouldn’t budge on the rest.

At least that was something I could draw. I kneeled up on the chair to plant my elbows on the table, and took a pencil in my fist. I started with a squashed oval for my Dad’s bald head, added two more for his eyes, and put rings in the center for pupils. I tilted the pencil on its side and rubbed it back and forth in short, connected strokes to add the texture of his beard. Mom required glasses, which were tricky. After starting a second oval for her head, I added two large circles for her lenses, connecting them with a small, downturned curve.

Drawing the glasses first was a trick I picked up to avoid compromising between the shape of the glasses and eyes that were already drawn, one I was quite proud of. This made a problem for the nose, which would now get squished between her lenses. I made her nose very small, and decided for myself that it was a stylistic choice, and didn’t look that bad. Her hair was darker and straighter, so I pressed hard and made curved, chin-length lines down her profile. When Mom picked me up from the babysitter’s her hair would sometimes smell like the outdoors, like the cool wind in fall, and when she hugged me, I would furtively smell it, trying keep her from seeing.
I divided their bodies by articles of clothing. I gave my Mom a skirt so you could tell she was a girl. Several unconnected lines created the illusion of shoelaces vanishing in the mysterious holes adults used to tighten their shoes. Mom and Dad each told separate stories to teach tying shoes, both required rabbits. Mom would ask me to make loops for the rabbit ears, and tie them together. But for Dad, the rabbit was smaller, a little pinch of shoe-lace that had to run around a tree and through a hole. Mom’s way was easier. Dad’s mystified. Finally, I drew a broom between them, in my mother’s outstretched hand. The parallel lines that formed either side of the handle weren’t as straight as I had hoped for, and it was wider than a broom handle should be. I hung long spikes for the bristles, crossed by a couple dark lines for those stiff strings that hold brooms together. I knew the broom would be tricky, so I drew my parents standing far apart, facing each other.

For the finishing touch, I added a speech bubble floating over Dad’s head, filled up by the two dark letters, “NO.” The imaginary scene was captured. Mom foisting a broom at Dad. Dad refusing it. The reason my parents got divorced. The other kids were still drawing, so I filled in the background with a kitchen counter, carefully tracing an invisible line through their bodies to imply a continuous surface behind them. This was the counter where Mom and Dad would try to talk me into eating meatloaf, even as I gagged on the crunch of its onions. If it was just Mom, I could usually win. When Dad was there, I couldn’t
leave the table until gagging down each awful bite. I filled in cupboard doors below the counter, and added four-squares for a window on the wall. Their feet stretched a little too far below the cupboard doors, as if the counter was a few steps behind them. I didn’t trust myself with perspective on floors yet, so I let their feet dangle, imagining a floor.

We went around showing our pictures. Proud as I was of the likeness, mine only repeated something I had been told. When holding the picture up, I qualified my source, beginning, “One of the reasons my Mom told me they got a divorce, is Dad wouldn’t help doing cleaning. Here he is not helping.” Listening to the grade-schoolers, I still felt apart from them. They understood why they were here. They remembered summer outings with parents together and families whole. They all lost something and showed up to grieve. Still, they included me. I looked up at a boy with pale gray skin and curly red hair. His nose was running, and he smiled down at me, sympathetically, with watery eyes, the way you would look at a friend. He cried when it was his turn to speak, and now he felt closer to all of us, even me.

I didn’t know how to feel about Dad moving out. I only remembered a few things from when he was home. He came back from work after I was tucked in bed. Sometimes, I would lie awake waiting for him in the room Loren and I shared. Dad would lean in to kiss my cheek, and the bristles of his beard
scratched my face. He wore a powder blue polo shirt whose breast pocket had a white sewn-in lining, like a clean, new sock. Sometimes I would ask him what was in his pocket. He would tell me, “nothing.” Then I would reach in and pull the lining inside out, declaring you’ve got this in your pocket, and fall back on the mattress, laughing at my own little joke.

Once, when it was just him and me in the house, I tried running up the hardwood stairs, slipped on the first step, and scraped open the first translucent white layer of skin. I ran crying to my parents’ bedroom, where Mom would have gathered me into her arms. Instead, my dad gently forced a pair of yellow foam plugs into his ears and waited for me to stop, watching. Gradually, I warmed up to the understanding that the pain was bearable, and I heard my sobbing quiet to a sniffle before settling into little more than heavy breathing with my eyes still warm with tears. He pulled out the earplugs, looked down as they slowly re-inflated in his palm. “These things hardly work at all,” he told me. “I heard you crying the entire time.”

It felt natural to me that he was far away now. Safer even. On weekends Loren and I would sleep over at his one room apartment, where he’d blow up an air mattress for the two of us to share. I would watch its blue felt inflating, thinking it looked like a strange, breathing animal, as its limp, cloudlike humps would grow firm. I would get to pick out the movie, and we would watch Ghostbusters,
sharing a big, metal bowl of pop-corn from the hot-air popper we remembered from Mom’s house. But Loren was always there with me. I didn’t worry about being with Dad by myself.

Then it was Loren’s turn to share his picture. I saw our parents’ room in profile. The floor cut though the bottom in a straight, dark line. Mom and Dad were stick figures. Big teardrops interrupted the lines of their heads. Their bed filled up most of the page. I was a weird little doll on the bed’s outer edge. Loren laid in the middle of the bed under a blanket cut open for a cross section view. He lay face down, curled in a ball. Bigger than even our parents, he looked more like a bear in a cave than a boy.

When Loren shared his picture, he seemed so grown up to me. How confident and world-wise he appeared, able to name how he felt, able to share it with grade-schoolers. He held his picture up for everyone and said, “This is how I felt when they told us. I wanted to hide in a blanket.” I didn’t have a name for how I felt. Sometimes, I would cry in school. When Miss Nancy asked what was wrong, I’d say I missed my Mom. That was true. I wanted to be home. I wanted to feel safer, even if I didn’t know what I was trying get safe from. I wanted the world to hold up and wait for me. I wasn’t ready to sit Indian style with 30 kids I didn’t know and sing the counting song. I wasn’t ready to spend recesses walking the playground alone. I wasn’t ready to sit in a room full of grade-schoolers and
draw my parents yelling at each other. I wanted to feel at home, for Mom to be happy and pay attention to me. I wanted Dad to love me, but I didn’t understand him. I didn’t know why he would rather sit in silence, staring at a wall, than talk to me.

The counselor smiled proudly, thanking us for sharing. I looked down at my picture, noticing I was the only one who didn’t include himself. The bell rang. “Seeya on the bus,” Loren said. Pam was already waiting outside the door. I followed her out to join the other kids, carrying the drawing. I didn’t want to ruin the image by folding it up in my pocket, but I didn’t want anyone to see it. Following Pam back to class, I held the paper at my side, trying to be casual, wishing I had somewhere to put it.
A Test

I am standing in front of a toilet I’m not going to use. I have opened the zipper of my jeans, and hold a small plastic cup in my hand. A wall length mirror hangs to my left. I had to pee just a minute ago. I told the man I was ready, that I had to go, that I could fill the little plastic jar. I’m wasting his time. I’m sure that he’s looking in the mirror and can see me. I turn on the faucet next to me, telling him the noise helps me go. It doesn’t. Sometimes it helps me forget that I am being watched. I can slip into a private space in my mind, like closing the door to the bathroom, where no one looks at me like he expects me to sneak out a concealed bottle of urine, where no one looks at my back, wondering if I’m nervous because I’m going to fail: that I’m one of the ones who refuses to listen, who can’t handle life on life’s terms, who won’t even speak up in the meetings in church basements where addicts come to change themselves word by word, confessing their sins over Styrofoam cups of black coffee. I am one of the ones who sits quietly, gets his sheet signed, and leaves. The imposter in recovery, sharing cigarettes and hugs as if I had a sponsor, as if I too, found Jesus in prison, pocketed fistfuls of twenties from my cash drawer at Target, or blacked out behind the wheel on OxyContin with two kids in car seats. I imagine him looking at my back as if he knows I am only going through the motions of reforming myself. I know that my urine is clean. I know it’s been months since I coughed from a scorched hit from my brother’s glass bowl, or opened up the capsules of
the Adderall from the bathroom drawer to empty a few orange beads out of each before rubbing them to a fine flour with my library card. I have to pee. I have to. I downed two SoBe’s from the grocery store across the parking lot, one Fruit Punch, one Orange Cream. I got here at five when they opened, and sat in their waiting room for an hour and forty five minutes while they played 98.1, Northern Michigan’s very own Classic Rock, The Bear. Williams Chevrolet is issuing an S.O.S. “severely overstocked selloff.” They have to move this inventory. They’ll beat any dealer’s price.
11 Chances

1. Prologue:

Ann Arbor, 2009

A damp August night settles on the tarpaper roof like the warm body of an animal curled up to sleep. Sweaty voices ring. Waves of conversation lap and overlap like the ecstatic chorus of a thousand frogs trying to fuck in the swamp. Palpitating heartbeats of dance-heavy bass bounce between the homes. The kids grow up; adult-pitch voices ring. Welcome Week in Ann Arbor. Raccoons feasting on pizza crusts, waddling and fat from the carbs. Tropical force of their body heat filling up basements. Spilled beer dries sticky on couch cushions. Body spray and perfume soaks up the spent breath that’s left. Their voices sound like possibility and eager laughter, smell like berry flavored vodka. Welcome Week. Frat-boys make fender benders. Tennis shoes dangle like Christmas ornaments. One house on the street stays silent. Packard Street.

A six toed cat who doesn’t know his name is Jericho explores its unlit halls, looking for places to perch, for bags to tuck himself inside and peep at the world. From his sixteen inch viewpoint, the ceilings stand cavernous. He paws down the staircase, rounding the corner, his pads with claws surgically removed silent on each step. No one is home. He knows which step creaks and lands with practiced lightness. The sound of block parties rises and falls like the sea. Jericho slides in a half open cupboard. Someone’s unloaded their canned goods, the
house is halfway moved into, half rental space. Caught in between. Hasn’t found itself yet. Doesn’t know the people who move in and out every year, who toss cigarette butts from its rooftop, who gather like moths to its porch-lights.

Someone’s pickup rattles like a toy through the streets. Someone looking for the house, someone looking for a chance at a new self with friends and a sense of direction, for a self welcomed to his generation’s party, someone looking for love and adventure, someone ready to sink into the sea of hopes and excitements he still doesn’t recognize are just like his. Someone ready to stop feeling like a truck spinning its tires in the driveway he’s failed to shovel and hopes will just thaw, someone ready to leave behind a self who madly confesses secret failings with the stoned, scratching pen of 3am. Someone rattling down, a muffler whose lifespan will be measured in months, someone who is ready to get the joke, someone who is ready to stop seeing himself as that loser, that guy who mostly hangs out with people two or three years younger than him, that guy who smokes bowls on couches believing that life is a gift only the future will give him. Someone who didn’t even unpack all the belongings from his last place, and carries boxes of odds and ends, reminders of a life to throw away, cracked C.D cases, crumpled prayer flags, notebooks and papers where he scribbled a disposition to life and little else, handwriting that says I can succeed at this without adult effort, handwriting messier than self-indulgent modern art masterpieces. Someone promising himself that this time he’s quitting smoking
for real. Someone, who, just for this trip, purchased a box of only what he’d like
to smoke the least: the most awful menthol mini cigars he could find. He’s already smoked most of them, driving 90 to make the trip in four hours in a truck two-thirds his age. Someone stopping to flip open his map, pulling over in a driveway, someone finding the street that cuts diagonal across the grid, someone pausing for pedestrians exiting liquor stores, short skirts and popped collars crossing the street in bunches of stumbling laughter. Someone finding the driveway, pulling in, clutch at full guttural, pulling around the back. Someone cracks open the door downstairs, carries a box upstairs.

Jericho slinks out of hiding, pokes his head around the door, smells mentholated mini-cigars. Sees a young man with shoulder length curly brown hair in a yellow T-shirt made skintight with sweat. The bright, lonely eyes of a kid in a new town.
I’m back in Traverse City, standing in Uncle Jimmy’s T.V. room. I see clean carpet and black leather couches. 32 inch Flat screen HD TV. Uncle Jimmy leans back in his armchair. Black leather matching the couch. Reclines hammock-flat, Ipad resting in his lap. Not at all like Mom’s house, with her shag carpet with bits of birdseed and the vague smell of Pomeranian puppy pee. Male. Duck feathers from the fall slaughter stiff and pasted flat to the kitchen sink.

“I hear you’ve been feeling down,” starts Uncle Jimmy. His eyes glint with mischievous kindness. Salt and pepper tufts of hair spring up above his ears, flanking his bald head. Uncle Jimmy wears whitey tighties. Nothing else. A man who knows how to be comfortable in his own home. What he said was true, though. The motivation I’d imagined before summer break looks more like a daydream now. My newfound free time leaves me with piles of dirty clothes in my room, piles of Red-Bull cans, piles abandoned poems, inspirations unable to hold onto my interest. I don’t know who told him I’m losing a war with myself. Uncle Jimmy is smart, I can tell. I’m usually better at keeping my secrets.

“There are two kinds of solutions,” he continues, rising from his armchair with bare, hairy legs. “There’s the slow kind: Keep doing what you’re doing. Try to keep growing in secret. Let everyday feel like a battle. Get scared when you feel...
yourself backsliding. Beat up on yourself.” Sounds familiar. “Or,” he continues, standing up straighter, tight Jewish curls covering his pale, barrel chest, “There’s the fast way. Change yourself for good.” He rests a heavy, warm palm on my shoulder. He pauses a second, as comfortable in his monologue as he is in his living room.

“I usually charge up to ten thousand dollars for a brain surgery.” He lets it sink in. “But for family, I’ll do it pro-bono.” Uncle Jimmy isn’t really my uncle. He’s my sister in law’s dad. But I like that he sees me as family. We could bond over this. And besides. Brain surgery. Cutting edge. “Does it really work?” I ask. Uncle Jimmy smiles warmly. “You tell me,” he says, bending down and pointing to dark, hand-length scar crossing his head. Funny how I’d never noticed it before. I think for a Moment, scrunching my lips to the side. Would this be dangerous, I wonder. He looks at me, waiting, then gives an encouraging wink. If nothing else, it will be a new experience. I can look back on this and feel proud of taking a social risk. It might even give me the confidence I’ve been looking for to feel like my old self again. “Yeah,” I say, trying to sound sure of myself, testing how it feels to be the confident young guy anyone would be proud to call nephew.

“Let’s do it.”
Uncle Jimmy sits me down in a barber chair facing a mirror. “Hold on a sec,” he says before leaving the room. I look at myself in the wide panel mirror, trying to smile. This could be a real opportunity for me. It appears in my eyes.

Uncle Jimmy comes back brandishing one of those spatulas you use to scrape spackle over cracks in the drywall. It looks used. “Did you get that from the garage?” I ask. “I keep my tools clean,” he responds, a little defensively. “Just hold still and keep your head tilted forward.” He gently parts my hair, using lil’ smoky-width-fingers for combs. He gingerly lines up the blade with the seam where by skull-bones once fused as a baby, holds the handle straight up, as if setting up a nail. In the mirror, I watch my eyes widen, flashing their whites. Uncle Jimmy raises his right hand as if to Karate chop. He smashes the handle with the butt of his hand. The spatula stands straight up like a Mohawk from my skull. I’m surprised at how little it hurts. Instead, I feel suddenly aware of the sensitive outer casing of brain, brushing a dull metal edge. “Don’t worry,” says Uncle Jimmy, “The logical part of your brain is over here,” he informs, running his fingers through my hair on the right side of my head. “Only your emotions are affected.”

I admit, by now, I’m a little uncomfortable. “Do you usually use anesthetic?” I hint. “How could I forget? Follow me.” Carefully rising from the barber chair, I step after him, keeping my head perfectly level, and holding my hands up to
catch the blade should it wiggle and fall. I follow Uncle Jimmy to the kitchen. He has one of those big silver fridges with double doors and a pullout freezer drawer beneath. The countertops shine in the glow from a skylight. He fetches two glasses down from the cupboard, then pulls a half-finished bottle of Grey Goose from the freezer. “Ice?” he asks. “Sure,” I answer tensely, keeping both hands hovering around the spatula handle. He pours one for himself too, neat with a couple green olives. “This will help steady our nerves.”

When we got back into the living room, I sit down in the barber chair and Uncle Jimmy plops down in his recliner, pulling back the lever to stretch out his mostly nude body. “We’ll take a little break and finish our drinks,” he said. “It takes the edge off performing a brain surgery.” In the mirror I tilt my head slightly, testing the spatula’s hold. It’s jammed in there pretty good. I take a sip of vodka on the rocks, straining to suppress the involuntary sour face that follows each swallow of its cold, repulsive burn. Uncle Jimmy flips on the T.V. It’s one of those procedural crime shows with DNA tests and forensic jargon, except all the characters are in the Navy.

His expression softens and congeals as the vodka makes its way around his veins, coaxed on by the banter between cyber-punk, tech-genius girl and her Harrison Ford look-alike commander. “Let’s finish the brain surgery some other time.” I offer.
“Alright,” says Uncle Jimmy, “this is my favorite episode anyway.” He gets up, takes the scraper by the handle and yanks. Little strings of white snot cling to the blade. Jimmy wiped them off with the side of his thumb. With sudden seriousness, he peers at the jism-esque ball of cranial goo on his hand. “These are your feelings of unworthiness.” He states. “Looks like we got ‘em all.”
3. Connection

Ann Arbor, December 2009

It wasn’t the first time this happened. He’d be stoned on the couch, letting his mind wander over memories like a child explorer, holding up worn glass and shells to the light at his grandmother’s beach, stepping outside its usual games of fantasizing about books he’d someday write, about the impact they would have on others, or indulging the rarified melancholy of seeing one’s life as if from the outside, as if realizing for the first time he was actually himself, he actually lived in this house with its tapestries, with its fruit flies, with its television constantly running like a portal to the world where everything is important enough to deserve colors that pop out, and tight facial close-ups with quick-fire camera cuts, the kind that make fleeting Moments of joy and excitement look permanent. The commercials were all fatuous enough when considered, but convincing when one didn’t think, or when one thought of something else, or when one wondered, stoned, how is it some people’s lives are so full of excitement, when mine is more like this. And he would be sitting on the couch, and suddenly he’d realize that he was alone. Not alone in life, but alone in this Moment. Why, just a few minutes ago he was sitting with his girlfriend, Jane, who would cuddle up with him on the couch and watch T.V. smoking bowl after bowl. But now she was gone, and he couldn’t remember if she had simply gotten up to go to the bathroom, or if she had gotten up to be away from him because she was mad at...
him, and now he had to face whatever it was he had done and figure out how to make things right again because they lived together.

And so, he explored the reasons why she might be mad at him. His habits earned her disapproval. She was right. He was thoughtless. When people were around him, he was kind and attentive, and had a way of making people feel like they could open up to him. Then as soon as they were out of the room, it was as if they no longer existed, as if they had never been there, and he had to be reminded of any sense of obligation to them. No, this is an exaggeration. But still, on auto-pilot, he was self-centered and lazy, he felt. He was always saying the wrong thing. He was doomed. If he told Jane the truth, that he loved her, but he was never 100% sure that this relationship would work out, that sometimes he fantasized about their break-up conversation, and liked to imagine that being the one who was least invested in the relationship gave him a certain power, an autonomy of selfhood that he felt was taken away by her need to have him always around.

They were mismatched. Her damage made her seem somehow safer. What he feared most wasn’t being in an unhealthy relationship. He feared judgment. That’s why he went with her over Janet. As someone else who was insecure, who was less socially adept, she was in less of a position to judge him, he felt. He felt, maybe, he could come out of his shell to her. Maybe, she would give him the
chance at honesty and disclosure he had secretly been dying for since the years of Adderall and reclusiveness, since renting a one-bedroom shack. Since the time of being avoided by old friends, since the time he looked back on, embarrassed by a craziness he lacked the courage to explain. He was immature. He still lived as if life was something that would come in the future. As if his time didn’t matter. He lived as if he knew a secret that no one else knew, that one day, he could flip a switch and be somebody else, somebody who knew what he was doing, someone who would share his thoughts on television, and everyone watching would enter a state of permanent excitement, their faces repeating their smiles. Ever since then, he’d been trying to remake himself. This was his chance. Ann Arbor.

So he considered his options. Get up and look for Jane. Stay put and keep watching T.V. If he gets up and she’s not mad at him, then he might have to explain that he had forgotten she’d just gone to the bathroom. She might sense that he was worried she was mad at him, and then she might wonder if she has a reason to be mad at him. If she was mad at him, would he even want to talk to her? Would he want to straighten things out? Or would he want to sulk in his nook, or go for a walk up campus, buy an energy drink and a slice of cheese pizza from the Turkish party store up the street? After what seemed like an uncomfortably long period of deliberation, he got up, went out onto the back porch, and lit up a smoke. Jane emerged from the bathroom. She looked for him
in the living room, then found her way out to the porch. She looked slighted and confused, a question in her brown eyes.

“Why’d you start without me?” she asked.

“Sorry.” he said, and smiled at her, so that she smiled back. Her red brown hair shone in the sun. He would finish his cigarette before her and wait for her. He would feel antsy, and would be tempted to light up another one. What would she say? No, he would be patient. They would go in and watch television together. He would put her arm around her, and she would lean into his body. He would try to be good for her.
Benzie County, June, 1990

Early summer. The cloud-shadows migrate over us slowly. Patches of sun fall between, warming backs of necks and lighting knee high-stalks of spotted knapweed; their purple flowers splitting in fresh, springy strings. A meadow of tiny flowers and stiff stalks of grass sprawls out past the dirt road from our house. If two cars drive in opposite directions on our road, they will have to slow and pull over on the shoulder, letting motors sputter idly as they nudge their dusty hoods around. We stand in the meadow. Me, my two brothers, and my dad. Dad bought us child-sized bows and arrows. Real ones. The string is so heavy and stubborn, each time I let it go, it chafes the pads of my fingertips, leaves them raw and singing while I wait my brother’s turns.

Dad keeps the bows out of reach in the attic. It’s cold up there, and sometimes we trade toys with the attic. I give it the toys I don’t play with, and it returns toys I’ve forgotten. They look so babyish, they must have belonged to some other child. I have never seen the attic-toys before in my life. The boat on wheels with yellow plastic showing through the paint-scuffs of its froglike bubble-eyes could have never had a place in the private adventures of my bedroom floor. The attic smell has seeped into the threadbare plush hide of the little stuffed gorilla with a pleather nose shaped like a dog’s. The acid scent of drying pine. I press my face
to the gorilla’s palm-sized gut and take in the aging of cardboard for boxes of Christmas, marinated in faint notes of mouse-musk and varnish. The bows and arrows were gone from our lives for so long I’d forgotten them. Dad has the power to move them in and out of existence, through a ply-wood trap door you lift standing on a ladder.

The house keeps secrets up the ladder like a silent Dad brooding alone on his thoughts. The house sits and stew on the objects we keep from our lives, as if it only thought in oddly mundane pieces of a family’s former selves. From time to time, hot-blooded wood mice vector its floor’s empty radar like unspoken wishes that stir up a mind. The mice know the secret spots, the columns of air between drywall and baseboard, lightless and swimming with dust. They cache the dry halves of split peas, curled and concave like ears, in little piles. In winter, they’d spill across an unswept hardwood floor, pouring from mittens and boot linings smelling like last winter’s sweat. They’d mapped the crawl space in the floor beneath the tub where the Tabby snuck down to give birth to its litter unbothered by toddlers fated to harass its young into choosing the woods over the house once and for all. The mice left their perfect black rice grains of turds on the windowsills, they wove pathways like threads through the wall’s hidden chinks. They alone could breach the attic’s drywall veil. I stood at the ladder’s base and peered into the missing square of ceiling, wide and dark like a Manta Ray’s gaping, pragmatic mouth. To a sound of heavy creaking, Dad descended to
the hallway halfway lit with sun, a heavy-shouldered silhouette emerging into a bristled chestnut beard and brown glinting eyes. With one hand, he fondled the ladder for balance, and in the other, he held several child sized bows and a quiver of arrows, concentration shining on his great, bald brow.

We stand in the meadow on the other side of our house from a winding dirt road, where sun warms the sweat-bees awake. The pads of my thumb and forefinger quietly burn from two shots. Dad kneels behind me, reaches his arms around, and sights down the arrow. The tips are metal. Not sharp, but they stick in a paper target tacked to a hay-bale with a heavy, intimidating thwack. I try to focus past the blur of tall grass on the hand-painted red circle pierced and torn open by missiles, sticks of straw hanging down. It blurs into the thicket of knapweed, milkweed, and thistles, vanishing in dry yellow grass. I try to focus past my brothers’ voices shouting impatient encouragements. I try to focus past my Dad’s boxy arms, his breath on my face and his bristles of beard by my ear. I try to focus past his corrective coaxing whispers buzzing like a sweat-bee in my ear. “No, that’s the wrong way, Cory, keep your eye on the target.”

No one knows I need glasses. Not even me. The day has not arrived when I first feel a strange, cool weight of glass and metal on my face, and pick out every crisp and jagged outline in a leaf-pile, so stupefied with wonder I regret the tantrum when Mom and Dad pulled me away from Ninja Turtles, mid-episode, to drive
45 minutes to the optometrist’s. The world remains a blurry place. I don’t know how to aim. My dad whispers in my ear, “a little higher…relax your elbow.” I release the neon pink and yellow feathers dyed to make the arrows easier to find. They hiss away. I hear a crack. Suddenly my dad’s excitement takes me by surprise. “Whoah, you hit your brother’s arrow. That was just like Robin Hood!” I’m not sure if I actually hit it, and anyway, don’t feel like I take credit, having barely seen the target. Dad stoops closer, leaning his hands on his knees, raising his voice to the exaggerated enthusiasm one might try to get a puppy excited. He wants me to feel happy and proud, as if I was a natural at archery, as if something other than luck was involved. “That was just like Robin Hood!” he tries a second time, searching my eyes for a flicker of excitement.

Insects fill the silence between words. Dad stands up and goes with my brothers to gather the arrows. They fade into the haze that surrounds my vision like the shadow-filled forest surrounding the clearing. A strange sadness creeps into me. Not the kind that makes you cry, but the deeper, quiet kind that makes you pull inside, and look around as if seeing a meadow in summer for the first and last time.
5. Authors

It’s a guided tour of the library for future employees. A narrow, pod shaped elevator carries us to the center, with carpets the color of putt-putt greens and radiating bookshelves with hardcover stacks to the ceiling— the faded maroons and navy-blues of encyclopedias untouched for years. The group follows the tour guide, learning the names and responsibilities of each level. The library is built like a tower. For some reason, all the walls slope inward as they near the ceiling. I begin to notice the shelves sloping inward as well, as if the books were all housed in a giant seedpod, tapered to a point at its tip. It smells like every library. The soothing musty closeness of another generation’s wisdom, made accessible and sanitary as a kindergarten classroom. I like it here. The stacks sponge up the echoes of the other students’ whispers, leaving only a smooth, acoustic ambience, empty of even wind or cars.

It feels like I’m getting away with something. The other students are here for professional training. Their innocent eyes glint brightly with both opportunity and promise. Jane is with me to encourage my biblio-pursuits. I’ve smuggled a book from a lower shelf, and hang on the edge of the group with my back to them, reading, pretending to listen. The book I’ve found is called “Diary of an Auto-Cannibal,” the true story of a pioneer woman who ate herself back in the 1850s. I find her candor too engrossing to follow the path of an assistant
librarian. My narrator ate herself slowly, cutting off a digit or appendage, cauterizing the wound with a clothes’ iron heated on the woodstove, cooking it up with some lard in a cast iron skillet, eating it saltless, then writing a new entry after each meal. It’s getting harder to do everything with one hand. I will have to move on to my toes. I’ve gone too far to back down. Soon I will disappear, and my final grisly entries, I trust to your imagination, dear reader.

The book comes with a little doll made of meat, so that you can eat its author and subject in effigy. Except it’s a library book, you’re not supposed to eat it so that others can enjoy the book too, imagine their teeth parting slick chunks from its plastic bones to deepen their experience of the text. Today I am getting away with something. With a brisk, backward glance, I turn my shoulder to the group and raise the little doll to my mouth.

I don’t know how long the library’s had it. The meat feels and tastes like wet, gray clay wrapped in chicken skin. The little plastic skeleton underneath reminds me of the bones you find beneath bites of frog leg, bulbous and smooth, somewhere between fish and mammal. Soon I’ve picked it clean, but swallowing the meat proves a challenge. The chicken skin forms a rubbery wrap, tangling clay in a bunched, greasy membrane I can’t quite break down.
The other students pile back into the elevator. It’s time to move on to the next floor. I don’t want to join them. I haven’t finished swallowing my musty voodoo doll. I remember that Jane is with me. “You don’t like crowded elevators?” I ask her, pushing the mush in my mouth to one side with my tongue. She nods. Perfect. “We’ll get the next one,” I tell them. “We’ve got room,” they insist, flattening their bodies and cozying against each other’s shoulders to showcase the person sized empty space on the floor. The elevator has the same putt-putt green carpets. “Jane doesn’t like crowded spaces,” I say, shrugging in a genial apology. They let the door close. I return to my chewing, absorbed in trying to force down the memoirist’s body. “What the fuck are you doing?” asks Jane. Like a dog whose cheeks are squeezed in by its master, I empty my mouth in the trash.
6. Closed Window

*Ann Arbor, May, 2010*

I opened the apartment’s back door just a crack, wide enough to slide through backwards watching the cats so they wouldn’t bolt between my legs while I wasn’t looking. Our five bedroom apartment took up the top two levels of a three story house, and every morning, I would smoke a cigarette on the roof we called our back porch, a cozy space under a fire-escape nailed from unvarnished two-by-fours. My roommates had two cats; the first, a full grown male Bengal—one of those specialized part-jungle breeds that cost thousands of dollars. His smooth fur was marbled and striped like a tiger’s, and his eyes were the color of sliced open honeydew melons. He could jump onto the top of the fridge from the linoleum kitchen floor. When moody, he peed on unpacked boxes of clothes in the closet, or sulked behind a doorframe to maul my ankle when I passed until it bled. The cat’s name was Mazik: Yiddish, meaning “trouble.”

Our second cat, Alice, was a street kitten. Jane found her cornered and hissing under my rusting, forest green ’94 Ranger. She was a gray shorthair with bug-like intensity, who could chase a feather-toy six feet up a door frame and cling like a rock-climber, not sure how to get down. She was never fixed, and once every month or so, would wander the house all night, yowling at the top of her lungs, and would lower her belly with scrunched knees, cock her tail to the side,
and try to back into your leg. Jane brought her in wrapped in her arms like a baby. She was smaller than a squirrel, and we sat in a circle around her while she lapped up milk, and then made herself at home on each of our laps, like an orphan trying to charm her way into a family.

The cats never tried to escape down from the roof, but insisted that it was their right to go through any of the house’s doors, and would make you chase them around, waiting for you to approach, and then suddenly bolting between your legs until you cornered them, scooped them up with both arms, and held them tightly, gently incapacitating their ability to leap back down to the roof and start the game again.

There used to be another cat, Jericho. This was my roommate, Aiden cat. Aiden was almost 30, no longer in school, and well-traveled. He smoked hand-rolled cigarettes and wore a faded tan cap like the kind I picture on twelve year old boys selling newspapers before child labor laws. Aiden played hand drums, seemed to know everyone in town and would go for long walks by himself to stand on the roof of a parking garage where Ann Arbor was quiet and distant. He took me up there once. From up there, everyone walked through their day at a slower pace. No Matter the worries or hopes, the mental conversations they rehearsed with imaginary spouses and parents, no Matter the spiraling chatter of panhandlers, gutter punks, teen girls laughing away from their homes, or yuppie
couples in new jeans and form-fitting pea coats, their lives slowed through quiet
streets covered in wind, progressing like the hazy silhouette of a jet-plane
through a wide, cloudless sky. Aiden liked to go there alone, and he would
sometimes smoke a splif, watching the streetlamps flick on.

Jericho had been the first cat in the house. He was the first presence I met, the
day I moved in. It was welcome week, and crowds and crowds of drinking
strangers filled our street, their blended voices pitching like the ocean
underneath the slow pulsing bass that overlapped from several houses. There
were hundreds. I didn’t know any of them, so I stayed in my room, and Jericho,
with six toes on each paw crawled onto the bed, and into my lap, closing his
eyes, and offering his chin to be scratched. Jericho had been declawed. Aiden had
to confine him to his bedroom after Mazik beat him up until he hid beneath the
couch and shrunk away from the sharp claws and long Bengal reach. Only one
male cat. That was Mazik’s rule, apparently. Eventually, a relative offered to take
him.

By this time, I’d mastered the art of sneaking backwards through a crack in the
back door to keep out the cats. Aiden’s room was on the third floor, looking
down onto the smoking porch. When I smoked at night, the pale light of movies
on Aiden’s computer would paint the slanted boards with flickering blue light.
Sometimes, I’d look up at him, eyes and beard, lit blue as well, emerging from
the shadows. But this late summer morning, lighting my first smoke of the day, I looked up and saw his blinds drawn, their white dust-covered plastic slats crawling with flies. So many, I almost didn’t believe it, fat black and shining. His room had always collected half-finished dinners left in their cookware, cream of mushroom soup congealing to an inedible porridge whose leathery skin cracked like dry clay, and mugs stuffed with the crushed ends of unfinished cigarettes. Now, three days into the summer’s first streak of 90 degree humid days—the kind that cooked roof-tar untouchable and baked dumpster bins to marinate the street in the whiffs of spoiling meat—the flies have turned out in improbable number, taking off and landing, pausing, redirecting, humming in and out of the gaps.

Lately, Jane had voiced complaints about how Aiden keeps cook-wear for weeks in the bedroom, how he leaves half-cooked meals on the stove, but neither one of us has tried to talk to him about it. I go back, and open the door—just a crack to keep cats from exploding through. “Hey Jane, wanna see something gross?” She sneaked backwards through the crack, and looked up, but didn’t join me for a smoke. “Eew,” she said. “We’ll have to talk to him about it this time.”

That morning, I rode my bike downtown to the office of a nonprofit environmental advocacy group where I’d worked as a canvasser, driving out to the suburbs in Lansing and Royal Oak, knocking on doors with a clip-board, and
reciting a canned speech asking for checks to keep the Great Lakes free of Asian Carp. All employees were kept on a trial, probationary basis so long as you pull in a quota of 150 dollars a day. Three days without quota terminates you. I’d lasted two weeks. I had one last paycheck to pick up before asking myself what to do next with my summer. The whole ride over, I imagined explaining to someone how glad I was not to work there anymore, how they had mandatory training and travel time that were never clocked into your hours, how the supervisors got dodgy when asked what the money would go to, how convinced I was that most of it just kept the organization afloat. Still, climbing the stairs to their office, listening to this week’s recruits put on their enthusiasm to stutter their way through a half-memorized pitch, seeing the faces of those from my week who’d survived, I missed the week when I felt I was part of a team making a difference.

My phone rang in their office. It was Jane.

“Come home now,” she said gravely.

“I’m about to head back. What’s up?”

“Just come home when you’re done.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you when you get here.”

I thought she was mad at me about something. Halfway home, I stopped my bike and called her, unable to stop myself.

“Just tell me what’s going on.”
I wanted to know what kind of conversation I’d be going back to.

“Aiden’s dead. Patrick found him. In the house.”

On the back porch, Aiden and I used to fantasize about turning the roof into a Bedouin tent. He would point out corners of the fire escape where we would hitch the edges of a tapestry. In the summer, we would unroll rugs across the blacktop and carry out armchairs. The sunlight would glow like stained glass through the canopy, and we would each invite our friends over to lounge and smoke and talk away the summer evenings on our roof.

For weeks, I’d close my eyes and see his bedroom window: gray trim chipping on its wooden frame, white plastic blinds. Horizontal stripes of shadow cross the inner edges of plastic slats. They all crawl with flies.
7. Theatre

I am standing on a vast black stage. The light glares in pointed streaks across its polished boards, and in the stage’s center stands a black metal staircase, the kind with heavy rubber coated grate, where you can almost put your fingers through the holes. The stairs don’t go anywhere. They just stop. The rest of the cast are chattering on this staircase. I assume they are a cast. It’s a coed group of white, middle class twenty-somethings on a stage. I assume this will be a rehearsal. No one’s cheeks are smeared with rouge, no eyelids traced in charcoal. The stage is empty. No plywood forests interrupt its open space, no loveseats nor barstools, no wall-length acrylic skylines, just a darkly shining staircase centered under calm acoustic grandeur, a space that makes the voices of the cast return like echoes at a public pool.

One of them approaches me, slightly older than the rest, and guides me to the staircase with a hand laid on my shoulder. Speaking with a teacher’s calm, assertive warmth, he inquires, “Why don’t you come meet us? There’s work to be done.” He smiles a genial smile, pulling pale stubble tight across a wide, flat chin. He has gray eyes, and a wisp of blond curls floats up like sea-grass untucked from his ear. I’m sweating. I don’t know where I left the baby.
It couldn’t be too far. I want to dash off searching madly, but somehow feel trapped by this play, by this cast, by this calm man whose hair doesn’t stay where he puts it. Most of all, I’m trapped by not wanting anyone to know something’s wrong. I can’t remember anything. I know I have a child to hold onto and care for, but I can’t remember the last time I held it. I can’t remember if its eyes are blue or brown, or what I’ve whispered, coaxing it to sleep. I can’t remember a name or a gender, or looking at Jane and seeing a mother. All that I know: it’s mine to look after, and far from my arms. The cast is trying to include me in its conversations, pitching characters and themes, but their words blur into background chatter while I nod pretending to invest myself, thinking, trying to remember. Then a quick and awful question ices from my spine. Did I leave it in the oven?

I don’t remember doing so, but reality soon coagulates around the possibility, like nothing else I’ve thought, as if its gravity were powerful enough to make it true. Now, I think I might’ve. It would’ve only been for minute, unless I forgot. I interrupt the cast and whisper to the man who led me here, “I have to find to my kid.” He follows me into the wings, our footfalls, warped and growing. I make a show of looking other places first, not wanting anyone to know, between the tripod legs of gel lights, under the extension cords’ bright tangled coils, as if it could be anywhere, as if to excuse myself, as if one suggestion didn’t tower over all other thoughts, plunging me in private panic.
I find the kitchen. I swallow hard, and pry open the oven door. On the top oven rack sits a baking tray. On it, lies a pile of fine black ashes. Reaching from that pile, standing like a stalk of coral, rises a perfectly formed little arm. An open palm and five little fingers, black and fragile the charcoal bark of burnt out logs, shines like a beetle’s black wing. Perfectly preserved lines cross its tiny palm. Each finger keeps its digits, even the glossy hint of fingerprints remain. There’s no face, no tummy, no tubby legs or pudgy cheeks. Just a crispy black hand rising from the little heap of ashes, like a staircase on an empty stage, a pillar to what was once hoped for, a record of wanting to be saved.

The quiet man gives me a Moment, mouth pursed as if waiting for the perfect time to speak. He asks, “Are you ready to get back to the play then?”

“Okay,” I manage. As if forgetting all other words.
8. Cereal

_Benzie County, 1990_

I am walking around with an open box of Cheerios all to myself. I am having a conversation with Garfield the cat from my cartoons. He laughs at everything I say. Cereal spills from my fist. If Mom and Dad were home, I’d have to pick it up. They’re gone. We don’t care. I’m showing Garfield the house. Here is the sliding door, and the vent with its little metal bars like a jail on the floor. I step on the Cheerios and turn them into tiny piles of dust on the hardwood floor. Whoops. Crunch crunch. How fun. We can step on cereal and it doesn’t even matter. Garfield doesn’t care. I drop a few on purpose, just to step on them.

It’s strange, but sometimes you remember things you already know. Garfield isn’t really here. I’m home alone with a box full of Cheerios. How long did Mom say it would be? I take in the house. Here is my Mom’s piano with the bench whose seat lifts up in a secret box for sheet music and for some reason, a little plastic bag of dried peas that the mice will tear open and leave in our winter boots. There is the white couch with zigzagging jagged black stripes that folds out in a bed, the one my brother and I jump down onto after climbing backwards up the varnished life sized Lincoln Logs that form the wall. Here’s a trail of cereal dust on the floor behind me. Like it was left by someone else.
9. White Lab Coat

While no one looked, the buildings grew. They loom above me like an ancient forest. This is the patchwork city. I’ve been here before. Long ago, the buildings built themselves from another city’s ruins, or at least that’s how it looks. Mismatched construction parts cling to each other the way barnacles cover the pillars that hold up a wharf, shining exposed at low tide. Slices of corrugated tin stick to the structure’s sloping sides, where bent black girders cling like ivy. Twisted sheets of chain-link wrap their curves. Heaps of loose shingles tessellate like shark scales. Broken windowpanes glimmer like crystals of salt. A weak, cloud-diffused sunlight coats everything. Have you ever seen the casing of a Caddis fly larva? Anything from the river muck: pebbles, wet twigs, and discarded snail shells, are all glued together into cylinders, a mosaic mottled and shaped to seem somehow alive. That is what the spaces that used to be storefronts and homes have done with this wreckage. The buildings have grown into sea-shell shaped towers, coldly luminous in their mysterious absence of life.

You will never run into anyone unless they are trying to find you. The windows are empty. The streets stretch in silence, like long dried up rivers. I see them through a window specked with watermarks. I stand on the ground floor of one of the towers. A peeling wallpaper with faded lemon stripes tells me that this is a house. Bare studs appear under rents through the paper, like a skeleton trying to
wear clothes. There’s a huge T.V., the deep, boxy kind with a curved, black windshield of glass. It won’t turn on. It’s the black window no one can see through. There aren’t any chairs.

I’m not alone. My companion looks just like my brother. He has the same dark hair, cut short and balding. His nose and chin look just like mine, but now, he’s playing someone else; he’s adopted an identity, as if leaving his old life behind. He wears the laconic gaze of an informer in a Hollywood spy flic, one whose motivations are meant to come off as ambiguous. I earn his company by acting like I don’t notice it’s an act. His inflection drips casual gravity. Someone has been kidnapped. A high-schooler, mentally handicapped. A chance to make justice and learn who were are. We have no connection to the case. Only the knowledge of wrongdoing. Our mission is sponsored, I’m told.

A white station wagon dirty with strange light pulls up to the door. We get in. The kidnapper has sent a car for us. The seat cushions stiffen, accepting our weight. They’re wrapped in a canvas as fibrous as duct tape, the kind they haven’t used in years. In the front seats, two men smirk, flashing grins in the rearview. We pull out and drive off. They don’t say where we’re going. Brimmed hats cover spit-slicked dark hair falling over their ears. Their skin’s the color of the grease that congeals in a leftover chicken pan left in the fridge. One holds an antique Thompson submachine gun like a sleeping cat on his lap, one with a real
wood stock. We enter the woods. We jostle down a two track, where abrupt sunlight cuts in and out through the trees.

The car stops at a clearing, a valley somehow covered in the blue-green turf of mountain tundra. I see their leader. He has to be seven feet tall. Looking up at him, we are children. We’ve returned to the memories where size creates two distinct worlds, and giants move around us with mobility and knowledge from the other side of some kind of dream. He wears a long white lab coat whose seams stretch holding his shoulders in. He’s not human. Forearms burst from the splitting cuffs, covered in a bark-like carapace of calloused scars. Greasy black hair, long like a bead-curtain, dangles down the back of his coat. He doesn’t even need to look at me. I am standing off to his side and just slightly behind him, too scared to move. From the side of his head, I notice his cheekbones, protruding enormous and exaggerated, like the kind you see on eight foot tall men with pituitary gland conditions. Two baby goat horns bump up from his scalp. Sometimes you just know things. I see Satan.

At the bottom of the hill, stands our mission’s sponsor. They tied her to a tree. She looks brave and un-phased. She’s wearing an all-white skirt suit. She’s a powerful ally, a middle aged career-woman who’s sat in on tables where power and money get handed in secret. I hope she has planned something. By this point, I feel like a spectator. We came here to rescue, but now we’re captives of
the situation. I hope the Demon doesn’t look at me. I haven’t seen his face. He hasn’t even turned to acknowledge me. He doesn’t meet anyone’s gaze. He’s a prince. No one makes eye-contact. This is his show. He raises his arm with the slow, empowered drama of someone who knows everyone’s watching him, waiting for him, someone who sets the pace and directs all the stage cues. An enormous dagger juts out from his right hand, curved like a scimitar, and cruelly serrated. I realize, then, there’s no deal. No hand off. They brought us here to watch.

I hope he will harm someone else, just to leave me alone. That is his power. In this Moment he makes me wish ill on others to protect myself from fear, from knowing how I feel, overpowered and eaten, experiencing a flattening of the will into animal panic. As if obeying my command, he leaps down to the woman in white. He moves with the power and grace of a leopard, his weight as light to him as if this were the moon. He doesn’t look back. He knows everyone watches him. He slits her throat. She bleeds out maroon like a Salmon. My companion sneaks off with his trophy, the innocent kid that we came here to rescue. I think they let him get away. Keeping him was never the point.
10. Videogames

Ann Arbor, May, 2010

The last night I saw Aiden alive—the last night I heard his casual, quiet voice, or heard his heavy footsteps clumping up the staircase to the third floor—we played Mariokart 64. 5 or 6 of us were over. By the end of the night, all but two of us had grown tired of the game, Aiden, and my friend Clyde, who didn’t come over as often, and wasn’t nearly as tired of the game as the rest of us, who’d been abusing it all month to deal with finals week.

Clyde let Aiden pick the track. Each time he chose Yoshi Valley, the one where all the players choose their own paths over winding canyon ridges, where you can fall into the gorge at any Moment if you take a turn too sharply, where no one knows who’s winning till the end. I want it to be some kind of metaphor for life. I want it to mean more than it does. Clyde had played this map too many times. He set his path between the porcupines and followed it robotically. Aiden lost five in row before quietly saying goodnight to us, and slowly lumbering back up the stairs. He was a good sport. Games like this draw out the competitive little boy in me, and I’ve been known to start cussing, or blame a friend’s victory on an unfair power-up. Aiden never seemed upset. But even if he lost four, he wanted to win just one. Clyde won every time. Then Aiden said goodnight.
I want to say that when a friend takes his own life, you can tell a lot about him by the way he goes about it. I’m not quite sure what you can tell. After the funeral, when 30 people responded to a Facebook invite for a memorial potluck at our house, we realized almost everyone there had spent time with Aiden at least once in the past month, and most the week before he died. He had taken the time to see all of us, as if saying his secret goodbyes. No one suspected anything. His little sister had studied abroad in Israel, and he waited until after she got back, so she could tell him all about it. The month before he died, Aiden would periodically suggest we have another pancake breakfast, like we did back in the fall. Our whole house had come together and treated it like some kind of event. The girls wore pajama onesies and drew posters with markers which they hung around the house. Aiden was our main flapjack flipper, and made up a song about pancakes. Every time he suggested that we do another, we would respond “yeah, definitely!” but no one ever took the helm.

That summer, he was going to turn 30. Just weeks away, Aiden had made plans to move to Portland with his best friend Patrick, and Patrick’s girlfriend Judy. Aiden had liked Judy first, he once told me. I’m hesitant to claim either of those as motivations. To die, he used a tank of helium he would have to have purchased online specially for that purpose. Once, I was having a smoke on the downstairs porch, when a package arrived for him, a heavy, oversized cardboard
box. I thought it strange, the way he signed for it, and turned back upstairs
without even acknowledging me. He had a distant preoccupied look in his eyes,
like he was in a hurry. Though taken aback, I rationalized it as a gesture of
familiarity. We had become so used to living with each other, we were no longer
obligated to speak just because we ran into each other on the porch. He must
have been thinking about dying for a long time. When he did it, he didn’t leave a
note.

A couple times that month, he mentioned to me he’d been feeling down. I
noticed that he ordered delivery subs and salads for dinner, more and more,
when cooking had always been one of his favorite past-times, potatoes sautéed
with rosemary being his specialty. I wonder how long he had planned this. I
wonder, if we’d had our pancake breakfast, if he would have been his usual self,
tricking us into believing that he planned to live, that he planned to move to
Portland with Patrick and Judy, planned to keep playing drums, keep cooking
potatoes, keep singing songs about flapjacks. Maybe, this other side was there all
along, under the surface. Maybe the preoccupied look in his eyes when he signed
for the package always dwelled in the silences that steal upon our conversations
like a swift, low cloud. Maybe it was under the song about pancakes; we just
couldn’t see it. I wish that we hadn’t played Mariokart. I wish that I had asked
him why he’d been feeling down, what he thought it was about. It seems there
were two lives inside him, each on its own separate path. I wonder, if I could go
back to that night, would I see it in his quiet brown eyes if I knew what to look for, when he returned five times to Yoshi Valley, concentrating on hugging each turn at the edge of a chasm in the small, fake, brightly lit world we had chosen, where each outcome was just slightly less than was hoped.
11. Blackout

Ann Arbor, July, 2010

The power went out. All week, I’d been thinking about whether Jane and I would last. We were both very needy. I needed solitude to feel like myself, to let my mind move freely without the fear of judgment I piled in on myself around others, to brood on the memories I could only fantasize about sharing with others, to pour confessions into empty word docs in the raised nook in my walk-in closet where only the cats could come visit and walk on the external keyboard I used to replace the laptop keyboard I’d spilled an orange energy drink across, just months after deciding against the warranty. Jane needed someone around her at all times, someone to make her feel less unloved, to keep her protected from the space in her mind that terrified her into thinking she’d never be well, and made her sob with fear, like some tiny part inside her had broken, leaving her emotions on a loop. How long would we keep enabling each other? How many more days would we get high and watch cable, leaning into the security of each other’s arms, while the T.V. distracted us from how little we talked?

The power went out. The summer night filled the house. We’d hated living here ever since Aiden died, and the white space on the living room walls looked so unfamiliar now that his parents had packed up the tapestries. The first week, we’d take constant little walks around the neighborhood, grabbing flat slices of
greasy cheese pizza with pepper flakes from the Turkish party store, or looking up at the dozens of shoes hanging from the power lines by tied laces on Forest street, or walk to campus reminiscing about our old route to class when Jane would make me wake up to walk with her, holding gloved hands in the cold. Anything to keep ourselves from making sad memories, dirtying our home space with pain.

The power went out. The summer night filled our house, and the sounds of the neighborhood, the subwoofers rolling in the summer’s latest club hits, the videogame gunshots, and voices from T.V.s, went out. The sounds of the house, our own T.V. droning commercials, the plastic box-fans’ heavy thrum, even the overlooked insect-like hum of the fridge all gave way to a new quiet anything could fill. Jane and I climbed out on the rooftop, the front ledge past my bedroom window, and sat in the dark. A row of three story houses, all built generations before their inhabitants, faded to silhouettes in the night. We had never seen this side of our neighborhood. We heard small conversations the way you hear birds in the woods. The long sighs of individual cars rose and fell off in the town.

Jane started telling me a story about how the power went out when she still lived with her ex-fiancé, Ron in Detroit. She used to be sure she was going to get married. She lived with him in the black part of Detroit, and told me about parties she’d go to, and the house where Ron bought drugs. It’s strange, but
sometimes you remember things you already know. I remembered, as if learning it for the first time, that Jane had lived an entire life before meeting me, that in all the months I’d spent growing tired of her clinginess and need to smoke bowl after bowl, that I would always be able to keep learning new things about her, that I had an entire person to talk to.

Eventually, we’d pack up and move from this house. Then we would break up, but try to stay friends. Then we’d talk to each other less and less. Tonight, we sat in the dark of our neighborhood, experiencing real night as if for the first time. I wanted to tell her what I had suddenly realized, how I remembered that I could never stop learning about her, how she could feel as new as this night to me. It sounded stupid in my head, so I didn’t. The lights came on. We heard a quiet cheer go up around the neighborhood. Jane went inside.
WORKS CITED

Introduction


Finding Tuwaqachi


**The Flaming Hot Cheetos**


**34 Facts about Blackbeard**


Ullian, David L. *What Everyone Should Know about Blackbeard the Pirate*. Amherst College. Web. 7/9/15

**Plastic Pterodactyl**


**Investigations of a Cory**


