

CAROLINA GOTHIC

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ABSTRACT

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This creative thesis will contain several interconnected short stories. They exist in the same literary world populated by a revolving cast of characters. Some of them remain innocent and emotionally progressing, while others are flawed and morally stagnant. Class and religion coalesce or vanish within their unusual encounters that often only occur on the written page. Under the context of tourism, rehab, or violence, characters masks are dropped, revealing their deeper inner selves. This display of grace or cowardice under pressure will constantly be revealing character. Redemption will be a key element. Both its acceptance and dismissal depending on the narrator. The settings range from the Carolinas, Nashville, and Key West. Themes include people compromised by community, the momentum of past failures, addiction, familial or neighborly obligation, petty revenge, and love. These writings will strive to stir readers into facing points of view from uncomfortable narrators in order to round out their world view. Told in mostly first-person snapshot vignettes, my craft will focus mostly on colloquial language and rhythm to avoid similar or basic narration. Relying on slang, misspoken words, and the precise use of specific similes that offer insight into each narrator's world view. These distinct voices will contradict one another and subtly inform a plot that is never handed to the reader linearly. Offering a layered unreliability which encourages rereadability. Each sentence will strive to offer plot forwarding energy alongside the aesthetically pleasing oddity of sharp,

specific word choices. Always towing the line between humor and sorrow. Bridging the abstract and the absurd. The depths of depravity explored will reflect the hills and valleys of human emotion and meaning. Natural settings are a key character in each story, both violent and transcendental. Works consulted range from Denis Johnson, Barry Hannah, Ron Rash, David Foster Wallace, Mark Z. Danielewski, Ann Pancake and Flannery O'Connor. To name a fraction of influences. These stories will honor the rich tradition of southern literature while complicating it into new directions. Hopefully filling gaps between writers far better than me. These stories will encourage radical empathy through gallows humor, friction from opposing perspectives, and forgiveness in the face of violence and injustice. These stories will attempt to contribute to readers reality and remind them to enjoy life more introspectively.

SPEED DATING IN REHAB

Before Rehab

The rehabilitation facility was outdated. Lead paint chipped off the walls, floor tiles were cracked, the grout aged black. It smelled like a pack of Pall Malls. Everyone smoked and anyone who attempted to kick that habit was openly mocked. A perennial tobacco haze decorated the building. It was up in the mountains and still on septic. Sometimes the expelled waste from previous junkies and winos would bubble out of the porcelain bowls because too many people flushed tampons or contraband down the toilets: gas station crack pipes, porn mags, razor blades, and for some otherworldly reason, a rabbit was found wedged into the pipes.

The furniture was all maroon and bore suspicious stains. Beds creaked and it felt like you were constantly on a piece of shale or a root. Pillows were yellowed from the dead skin of dead alumni. Bed bugs and dust mites were a weekly threat, and sheets either smelled like popcorn piss, coppery blood, or bleach. The ceiling tiles were pea green and eroding away. LCD lights sprayed a fuzzy light, highlighting every blemish, scar, open wound, and prison tattoo on the faces of the institutionalized denizens. It was like cuckoo's nest without the comradery. And instead of a wise Native American *dues ex machina* to free us, there was just bureaucratic red tape and our vices keeping us inside.

There was a modest library: mostly anti-addiction literature, self-help books, and a lot of Barbara Kingsolver for some unknown reason. Looking at a shelf of books is sublime. A horror. You realize you're only borrowing words. Ideas. Borrowing everything. Your dogeared pages will be someone else's annoyance. You'll be dead and in heaven or hell or nowhere or reborn and they'll still be wondering why you underlined so many non-pertinent lines in *The Sun*

Also Rises. Especially since it appears you never finished it. You start wondering why anyone ever wrote any of them. How could they sit and write when we're all expiring? Who could have time to read when you should be *doing*? Then you realize you're in a state-mandated rehab and maybe Kingsolver has some advice.

Chuck butted out his last bummed cigarette into a stolen car's cupholder. None of the butts matched. Some lipsticked by women now dead. Others chewed off by the man himself. "I smoke harsher shit than this, don't need no filter," he'd said ad nauseum when castrating each borrowed smoke. Palming the pawn shop revolver from the dash, he farted and sighed.

High schoolers greeted him at the motel door. Owning no frame of reference to his western outfit. "Do you have the supply?" a chin pimpled nerd inquisitioned, as if reading lines from a corny movie. He eyed the three teens. Short boy, scared, Red-eyed jock, Sniffly girl, maybe a cheerleader who wouldn't have given him the days' time back in school. He stood in the doorway like an event horizon. The warped doors metallic click was snuffed out by the gun barrel colliding with an adolescent nose bridge. Nerd went down and stayed while Girl shrieked. Jock grabbed Chuck's good arm just to get dropped by the bad one. The gun's aim held its own authority as the fake cowboy said nothing for what felt like eons. Teenagers unpocketed wallets and jewelry as if choreographed. Zip tying them up while a wet limp cigarette dangled smoke in his one open eye, as if this was some aggravating chore. Jock and Nerd converged in defeated silence but the girl couldn't stay quiet. A metallic click punctuated the event. Three people survived.

Outside, the air was thin and low. Chuck pulled his mask off. He was so surprised by the streaming tears in his rearview that he had to reach up and see himself grab them as proof.

Ray Kelly was peeling a trench footed boot loose from his skin, while his classmates were humping on jukeboxes back home. In Vietnam, Kelly lit his first cigarette. His best friend was Roger, a boy from the same dire straits Kelly was brought up in. He knew Kelly couldn't read and instead of ridiculing him for this deficiency, he guided Kelly through the confusing world of shapes. An entire dimension Kelly could now ignore in place of thousand-yard staring for real threats.

He knew Roger and him would be those annoying old pals at Hardees as soon as they opened every day. Solving all the worlds problem with a coffee and newspaper. Morning catfishing and beers with football on Sunday after church. An easy, affordable life.

The man who went tip to tip with him was reduced to muck beneath the lead of a patriot.

“Why the fuck was yall smoking?” a higher-ranking man questioned. “Cherried cigarettes are a death sentence.”

Kelly hunkered to finish the Lucky Strike, couldn't believe the wide-eyed death stare of his companion. Rain dripped down a million leaves in the jungle, each sounding like a footstep or cocked rifle. Tea-kettle ears for the rest of his life. He wanted to fire bomb the woods, shoot pregnant women, bayonet the elderly. This made no sense. As if the war was some flexing field trip, death optional. Kelly seemed to always have two smokes going after that in some fool defiance, inviting death from afar.

Jimi heard these murmurs of death when cutting grass, gossiping with neighbors about their grills, or unclogging children's toilets. He felt his neighbors' limitless thirst for bad news. Did they know his wife was two-timing him? Did that fact or their knowing bother him more? Neighboring communities' lawn mowers hummed in some death-rattled amusement. Out of synch with the machine.

Fentanyl gripped his loyalty. Synthetics smoothed his brain to better muster the minefield of familial life.

"Alone in Alaska," some fool said in an AA meeting once as some example of what'll happen if we white-knuckle life and soberly ignore issues that arise outside of addiction. Alone. Alaska. Sounded orgasmic to Jim and most early married men he converted among in sticky oak-topped bars. Eyeing girls they could have fathered. Pining for his bachelorhood, logjammed into some sexual limbo with his wife. Their sex was clinical, having more to do with dutiful maintenance than magnetic passion. Jimi took to feverishly cleaning his truck. His machine felt like the last medivac out of a bullet-crowded Saigon. Turning the key over in his hand, he could escape to more merciful beaches before anyone realized he'd missed his next E.R. shift.

Mopping chlorophyll sweat from his face, he wondered if the mountains, just out of golden hour view, knew he could cover them with his palm.

At work, babes entering a world of blinding, clinically clean light, had no clue the toll of compromises they had yet to make. Dope sick nurses smacking them onboard. Drooling, high in the morgue, he wondered what these babies knew from the world they emerged? What otherworldly secrets were guarded by these softheaded astral pilgrims? Eternal truths recycled

onto physical matter? Or merely the sweaty result of hopeless romantic clammerings? Another clueless citizen chained to the oxygen of a delicate planet?

The hospital's dope cured him of such unanswerable musings in exchange for more bemusing facts. *We can never be alone, always touched by something. A dead god's hand upon us.* Sex, kids, affairs, all puppeteer drama. Funerals. Wedding. Licking a cadaver's fentanyl patch dry, his pulse became the same on all topics.

Watching his boy grow up was torture. Like going through it all over again. Bullying, confusing erections in gym showers, flu, heartbreak, bone breaks, financial ruin, confused parents. Packing his son into bed at dusk, he squinted at the boy's laptop like some blinding monolithic insight. Some homework concerning Zen kōans.

My barn having burned

To the ground

I can now see the moon.

Cody swallowed a third gas station coffee before the girl pulled up. Sunlight exploding across the windshield in a technicolored blur. Stealing her a chocolate milk, he slipped into character. Like a man surrounded by leather-bound books sorting his affairs before a peaceful, earned death.

Driving in silence towards a building blocked by protesters. Cody fisted the steering wheel until they scattered, palms over ears.

“Don’t be worried now,” he said, sounding uninterested as if already daydreaming the rest of his day after this speedbump inconvenience. “It don’t burn and it won’t take a hair longer than the humping that got us in this calamity.”

“Calamity?”

The word feeling foreign and harsh like some doomsday cult chant.

“Last week you said it was just bad timing.” Her voice higher. “And that we’d plan it out and this would all be...”

Her name rang out from a dead-eyed nurse.

“I’m going to go drain my lizard but I’m going to be right there with you the whole entire time, darlin.”

He felt less bad about lying than he did leaving her there without a car. Gliding his father’s knife, he etched another tiny x into the brim. There were enough notches for it to resemble some pattern Stetson had factory printed. Gas station bells ringing like some funeral procession as he went in and back out with a case of beer from a country he’d never visit. Toting it pompously like some deranged businessman on his way to sell land he didn’t own and might not exist. Holmesview was eight beers away, but he could circle around and around. Boot hardly pressing the skinny pedal, he imagined the speed bumps leading in to be women he’d left behind.

Tammy remembered kissing her daughters as they hopped out of her van for the last time. A car that would have horrified her in college. Her husband was away. “Why do you even pour it into a wine glass if you’re going to hold it like an ape?” was the last thing she

remembered him asking. All the beurocratic red tape was signed for her sister to pick up and watch the boys for an amount of time unagreed.

With her routine evaporated, she found herself parked in front of a church. Catholic pageantry distracted her from the sublime. She was raised noisily southern Baptist. Inside she noticed how dirty her nails were. A bird trapped in the rafters distracted her half prayer. Maybe it saw a snake. Perhaps a premonition of rain. She chugged her drink with a pained face beneath the stained-glass crosses' fragmented light. She noticed that the holy water font was vacant.

In the park, she made three laps until it was hard to walk. Her cup was empty. No trees shared shade. A homeless man ate runny eggs from a garbage can. Twin sisters learned how to control a bike. Both parents present. The drive to rehab was one exit away. Her cellphone had not rung all day. No one she knew wanted to talk. Setting it on the bench, she made the drive with her good eye closed. She couldn't see the creek, but she forever sensed it, silty and green-tasting, running just behind or beside her like some stalking river Styx.

"Happy Birthday Carla" a gold banner reads above her doorway when she awoke. Wiping crust from her eyes, her dreams of Brandon Calhoun, the cutest boy in class, were reduced back into their non-existent inevitability. Her parents weren't in their room. Her grandmother was frying an egg, radio belting out country songs about divorces Carla knows won't affect her and Brandon. Pretending to enjoy the cold egg, knows what a complaint, even on this special day, would produce.

"Where's momma and...?"

"They aint going to be back for some time. No questions now. Don't be having your little fits," her grandmother said slowly.

“But were supposed to go to the...” Scalding spatula pushing her words back in. Egg grease watering her eyes, she limps towards the garage like a disgraced dog.

Beneath the guidance of the garage door light, she slides a milkcrate from the north corner of the garage to the southern corner. On tiptoes she carefully pulls the red and yellow stained cannister down onto the cold concrete. Flipping off the lid just like her father does after the bottles in the kitchen are empty. She blows hard as she can into the cannister before sucking as much of the thick air that will fit in her middle schooler lungs. The world vibrates and her ears wobble. Like a tea kettle skipping on one of her grandmother’s old-timey records. She liked Conway Twitty the best.

Carla contorts her body in practice for gymnastics on the cool garage floor. Her teacher calls her “A natural talent.” Miss Campbell gives her little goody bags filled with deodorant and toothpaste and shampoo and bar soap. It even has the teacher’s phone number with a nice, confusing note. Gifting these when other students are ushered out by the bell. Carla just knows she is her favorite. Carla loses track of time planning her wedding with Brandon, and creeps back into the kitchen.

Glitched ringing in her head from the gas turns out to be the smoke alarm. Her grandmother is on the linoleum floor with food on her face. Choking. Carla can still feel the sting from the spatula. She can’t hear herself pleading with the old woman to wake up over the echoing blood in her ears. She dials Miss Campbell’s number in what she realized years later was intentionally slower than she’d admit in court. Phone ringing to the beat of the alarm. No one answers. She sits on the porch and waits for someone to come along who knows how to fix all of this.

Frank had finally been admitted to his dream rehab.

“Most ya’ll come from jail,” the lady at vocational rehabilitation had told him. “Can’t just walk up in there.” Annoyed and in bemused disbelief of his motivation. “Them’s expensive seats.” It wouldn’t cost a dollar.

Frank was an only child. His parents were boring in their devotion to his success as needs he didn’t know he had were met with machinelike precision. He trick-or-treated solo each year as a vampire. Never spending nights at any friend’s houses or going on dates all the way through college. Journalism.

His dream began when he was drinking a bottle of sangria in the quad. Sunny and alone. When a troubled onlooker invited him to “a twelve-step meeting chock full of folks just like us.” Frank was no *us*. Yet the man’s suspicious generosity persisted. Excitedly, Frank dressed up for alcoholic prom, pomade hair and shoes that could crush a roach in a corner. Blushing to admit he may meet a lovely lady there. Later, he understood this distraction of the flesh to be considered “thirteen-stepping.” Highly discouraged in his new community, but this predatorial sexual motivation, nor any other crime, under god or country, could result in annex from this club.

Present your worst self. These sunken faces seemed to scream. *We don’t mind.* Did you slap your daughters teary face? *Welcome!* Kicked a puppy up an escalator? *Let’s unpack that.* Wreck into an orphanage while ripping a bong with a stolen baby from the maternity ward? *Coffee’s right there. Lucky to have you. You can sit at our table.*

They told stories ranging from abused children struggling to cover up bruised childhoods, to letterman-jacketed teens regretting their bingeing blackout love affairs. Full-time

homeless men committed to letting the bottle kill them a month ago, patiently coached the lawyer who's been court ordered here. Nothing was too taboo or tame. Frank's hungry ears chewed their woe deliciously. He thought he heard rainy jazz music scoring every meeting. Cheap cigarettes and coffee were like Thanksgiving dinner. Caught up in the euphoria of someone else's self-help, he hoped his beard covered his genuinely joyful expressions. Frank could always hear the metronome of the clock above and between each speaker. He dreamed of inserting a catheter and injecting intravenous chemicals to prolong these hour-long Shangri-La's.

With every meeting's conclusion he was thrown back into lonely confusion. Addicts in recovery had surprisingly minuscule time to cohort. Most of their days passed with meetings, volunteer work, real work, and a sickening level of introspection. Otherwise known as "fourth-stepping." Or even the dreaded ninth step. He rushed through each class to any open-roomed meeting of campus.

He dodged puddles and mirrors along his giddy way. Onlookers imagined he was on his way to his dream girl's dorm or had just beat cancer. The calendar above his sink marked this Monday. He recycled a montage of AA meeting stories to convince the vocational rehab gatekeepers he was indeed "one sick puppy with a bad case of the -ism." He'd chosen Holmesview not just for the too-on-the-nose name, but for its location. Totally isolated. Here, the meetings didn't end. He would be allowed one full month of orgasmic trauma. No longer did he have to sit in cafes or hijack a couple's date to gain insight into their lives or feel connected. He thought he'd be there before the staff only to realize some of them lived on site. The semester's failure to align with this utopic dream didn't matter. He wouldn't have even told anyone he was going because there was no one interested. However, they would find his return so miraculous as to encourage them to all pretend to have known the boy who was in the fire.

Matt sat wanly in the church basement. Twelve-step meetings were held here before his sermons, which always attributed to the unstacked chairs, cigarette butts and spilt coffee on the out-of-date carpet. The first thing to go when he took charge. Addicts laughed, slapping each other with jargon on their exodus.

“Let go and let God man.”

Or, “Practice an attitude of gratitude, bro.”

Matt felt these men were beyond help from his God. Feeble part-timers with tiny thoughts. Some of them even considered their *higher power* to be a tree, a pop singer, or their dog. Sniffing the contents from a crucifix vial around his neck, Matt felt reborn. Addicts limped out as Matt’s basement congregation fidgeted in their metal folding chairs still warm from the flock of drunks.

Flipping pages of a Bible, Matt realized it was all he had. Everything to say was just some recycled, Times New Roman parable everyone in attendance knew by heart. Turning his hand in the shine of the fake stained-glass window, he seemed to be reaching beyond the church and into something that preceded its construction. Bible and light both seemed to be some extension of his own tattooed arms. Numbing his throat with every sniff, the people and basement seemed to vanish to white. Gradually, he sunk deeper as he began walking the pews and tousling the hair of those in attendance. Voice like a trumpet, he began his scheduled end time message.

“They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“Y’all broken. Some will die before Christmas. You’re going to hell, bro,” he hollered. “But it doesn’t matter that your woman two times you or your dad’s love is conditional, or even that your lawyer can’t get you out of this fine mess you’ve made with the crying woman at the bus stop with eyes like a racoon.”

Both hands up now, clenching and unclenching to some rhythm only his heart heard. “Because...” His mouth moved but only the sound of echoey blood in his ears was clear to him. Most in attendance were weeping. He didn’t care where his fiancé was, or about his crippling doubts, or how empty the crucifix was. He didn’t realize his eyes were shut, as he emerged back in phases.

The church rank and pale smelling. Someone in the first row whipped a booger on their neighbor. To his left, someone snored, mouth agape. Another kid farted and cupped it towards his own face. Hand raised into a fist as if he could punch through this moment like a wet paper bag and pull out some firmer reality more form-fitting. The windows sunlight was gone and replaced by a flickering streetlamp sending a hypnotic effect over the scared children. Parents knocked at the door like barbarous infidels. Matthew emptied the crucifix to his nose like the very infiltration of gnostic knowledge. Children reared back as if bumping into a puss covered leper. A man caught in some bland reckoning only he understood. Hand flying to chest. For refill or redemption, he didn’t understand until after the fire.

Benji walked into the view of the party, framed by a half-open door. His frowning face not giving off the confidence he hoped for. Burning plastic ruined the air.

Machete gripped tightly, a skin headed man was testing the integrity of the hardwood floor.” You must be the little boyfriend.” Grinning. “How bout that money she’s been bragging about.”

Flexing his ankle, he knew he could turn a heel and forever be unknown to these men.

“Close the door,” he thought he heard his father say. But it was some other man shaped like a refrigerator, chopping up shallots in a maddening rhythm. His father’s wallet wouldn’t feel the phantom pain of what seemed to be a big score to these lesser-thans. Slapping money on the bar top felt good. A physical act solidifying his power. Or transferring it.

Passing him a joint, just this side of polite, a woman who voted in both Bush’s, studied his face for motivation. “You look like some lawyer’s son.” She laughed. “Don’t sue us if this coke’s not up to snuff.”

“Where’s Victoria?”

“See, he sounds like a lawyer’s son,” someone said.

“I’ll fetch her from the shitter,” said the man with the sword.

Stepping out slowly like a kid in detention, her eyes repelled his like magnets in chemistry lab.

“Just them onions making her cry’s all,” said the woman on her way out.

“Now she done stole from us. Didn’t admit it. Just got caught. Normally we’d get the money off that international currency she’s got between her legs. Think just how crazy boys go over a piece of that and here she is having to tote it around all day.” Machete gripped tighter.

“Feel like they getting off easy to me,” the man in the kitchen said, still cleaving.

“Bank of America wouldn’t let you just pay back what you took see?” Machete twirling as he paced the chopped floor like an inmate. “Can’t tax you.”

Onions chopped to the beat of Benji’s heart.

“Don’t be scared. I got my money owed. I can’t just cut off your tiny hand. This is America.”

Victoria seemed to unwind as if less air was in the room.

“I’m just superstitious is all. Palm reader, tarot cards, moon signs, crystals. All that.” Gripping Victoria’s hand softly in his he studied it for some secret only he knew. “This is a good sign here, sure enough.”

Under the gaze of the man, Benji sat down beside them.

“Oh, soft hands. Oh, y’all different sure enough.” As quickly as he’d snatched it up, he released the hand back to its owner. “I’ve seen what needed to be seen before y’all came here.” He was no longer smiling.

Like some doomsday premonition, Benji began to believe the man’s voodoo.

Grabbing his neck from behind, the other man slammed Benji’s head against the table. Then, as routine as dinner, Benji’s thumbs were stretched out as if on some medieval racks and cleaved by the dull blade. The first blow ploughed through his finger with ease, while the second thumb seemed to crack and wilt. Resulting in a lack of symmetry.

Ears rang, like his mother's teakettle signifying the family dinner he'd missed for this. Time moved at a glacial pace. One eye smooshed into the table, he focused on the rain outside. Amazed by its inability to drown out the hollers. Their screams of agony and pleas of redemption mixed in some pack-like howl. A scene mimicking the dinner of some dysfunctional madhouse cannibal. Adrenaline convulsing his body, Ben couldn't tell if his thumbs crawled away like inch worms off the kitchen table or stiffened not unlike rigor mortis frogs from Chemistry lab.

Pale-faced and wrapped in impromptu menstrual pad gauze. The car's wheels seemed to be turning against the earth's axis. Begging him to go backwards. As if throwing the gear to R would allow him to backpedal past the machete and onions and Victoria and first joint and squad cars, and back into his mothers' warm arms. Baby hand intact, gripping its mothers' breast as her tight lips hum and sing and promise him. "You are safe," she swears. "No one can hurt you now."

In Rehab

Dr. Carol Miller had never exchanged sexual favors for drugs or money. She only smoked marijuana once and got paranoid, sinking into a friend's couch. She drank red wine every night alone. Divorced empty nester. Proud of her athletic sons. Mythologizing her hum drum days with wines from different country sections from Ingles. Last night was a Chianti. Dry. Earthy.

She lit another candle in her office before the newest batch of addicts arrived. Would it be the jovial gallows humor group similar to last weeks'? Or one of those maudlin, self-consumed, pretentious meetings no one grinned in? She preferred the sad introductions. Dead

kids and missing teeth and felonies lancing tears from sunken eyes. People who pawned stolen lawnmowers holding hands with fentanyl nurses and high schoolers just beginning the ninety-nine miles of bad road ahead of them. This drugless woman with a degreed wall was some stiff final judgment. She couldn't afford to love these people. They would drown her.

The rehab rec room was a minefield. Dazed junkies, drained without illegal nectar, wiped boogers onto the bottoms of their shoes, too lazy to get up. Rhythmic hollow knocks of ping pong balls were an offbeat metronome to the dull days grinding towards systematic meetings and eatings.

“My wife doesn't love me, kids don't love me, a week-oner hollered. “No one fucking loves me.”

“So, what,” two people said at once, as if this was all already accepted by their hive mind.

As if the destruction of self or acceptance of failure is vital in a life forever shadowed by drugs.

Some tall kid in a red onesie ripped out pages of a book after reading them. “Hell is when we meet the person we could have been,” he said. “Some people can't move until they are on fire.” Most of them realize they aren't done hurting yet. The rest have a lot of hiding left in them.

Chuck

Assville Tennessee. Home sweet home. Well, not really, that'd be South Caroline, but I get out there as much as I can. Go ask your degenerate friends where they dream of going. It

ain't Disney. This here's *malt* Disney. The trim's just falling off the limbs down here. New broads each week. Hotel close by for a little R & R. Perfect set-up. Hell, you can just dress up like a cowboy and get some root. Pretend you just got off stage and goddamn, if it ain't her luck, it's your last night in town! They fall for it. A whole mess of em's just divorcees. Visiting town for a no strings attached booty call. I provide a service really. I get to play dress up and bang college chicks, milf's, angry wives, and old grannies who get caught up in the spirit of it all. They like the Conway Twitty digs best. I'm just here cooling down in rehab now to calm the wife's nerves. You know how ya'll get, honey.

Ray

And so, this one time, after the war, I was working at Wendy's and it was the first time I smoked crack. This body builder named Willy was learning me how to clean them fry machines.

"Now don't be moving so fast and step on one of these motherfuckers," he'd warn. "Seen a guy's whole foot peel off like a sock one time when he stepped in this here grease."

After showing me the fast-food ropes, he needed a ride home. He stole sixty chicken tenders to take to his dealer. I drop him off at Alphabet Street and he's inside long enough to cook it up hisself. He walks back towards the car with his head on a swivel like a damn barn owl. Sounded like one too. I asked if he got the rock and he keeps saying, "Who? Who?" "Does your feet fit a limb boy?" I ask him. He's biting his lip and his eyes are wide like two Cooper tires. He lays a broken yellow tooth in my hand. "Smoke this. Leave and smoke it." He sprints back inside and I peel out of there like its grenades in the trunk.

I get to my buddy's house and show him. He snatches the rock and gobbles it like hard candy from grandma's purse. "Mu fazz num" he gargles.

"Spit it out shithead."

He puts it in a little brass one hitter and we go to the moon. Harsh shit, carpet bombing our lungs. Wheezing like mud cats. I've been in here since that next morning. We burned down his house. I don't remember nothing much. We didn't know the dogs was in there.

Benji

The first time I got arrested wasn't my fault. It was my second tenth grade. We were competing in the triple c Olympics. Triple c's are the coricidin, cough and cold pills. You gotta go get the purple pack. More Dextromethorphan. Those maroon little beauties come twelve in a box, six in a pack. Pushing them out that metallic plastic wrapper was easier with thumbs back then. You need at least six to feel anything. Of course, now they keep them behind the counter thanks to us. We had a bet on who could work their way up to the most. I was on twenty-eight that day. I haven't had a cold since. My emo girlfriend, Victoria, told me she was pregnant. She had been cheating on me the whole time with boys and girls from both high schools in town. "Is it mine?" I wondered. "Yes," she said. "Of course, it is." She sauntered off but didn't sound too convincing. Who knows with these things? But I loved her. Or thought I did since she was my first. Hard to say now but I did then.

I followed her past the gymnasium towards the crusty, black and white tiled cafeteria. She was walking too fast or maybe it was the cough meds. Some muscular kid with gauged ears picked her up, tickling her. I looked on horrified and embarrassed as he dropped her down enough stairs to kink a slinky. I run over but the school resource officer beats me there. This was

post-Columbine in South Carolina so the cops were roaming the halls. He told us all to beat it and didn't care if she fell. Or if she was knocked up. "Little whore just saved the tax payers at the clinic," he shrugged. "Can't arrest gravity," he said with a wicked mouth painted on.

I was stunned but stiff-legged it to the courtyard. Tail between my legs. I saw a text from her saying that it was over and she never wanted to hang out again. I took a handful of klonopins and washed it down with a Mountain Dew. I chewed Xanax totem poles like bitter Skittles and sat down in the cafeteria. Looking back, it was one of many half-hearted suicide attempts. And I'd've been lucky if that really was the end with Vicky. The cop was following me. I could only hear the blood echoing in my head from all the pills and not him.

I came to in a lawyer's office. "Look, see his eyes are all darting around." Then cut to me naked in a green tiled shower. "Did the officer do that to you?" a lady cop asked. My shoulder looked like it had been rubbed with a cheese grater. They let me sober up in Liberty county jail, then tossed me in here. Heard that cop got shot by some dudes in their pajamas on Alphabet Street. You're still wondering about the thumbs? My girl did that in her own way. That new guy they call Snubby got his chopped by the same dealer. Makes me feel less alone.

Tammy

My dreams are plumb full of nightmares. I fret about my daughters every waking moment, but in dreams my fears distract. In some dreams, someone's knocking down my front door. Usually bigger than my old man. With a gun. I claw at my nightstand to grab my HI-Point, but it always jams up before I can pull the trigger. If it ain't that one it's not being able to throw and connect punches. Like I'm underwater. Or sleep paralysis. I never see no fat demon on my chest or nothing. Just can't move. Can't catch my breath or sit up. Feels like eons of drowning

pass by the time I can waggle a big toe. Sometimes I hallucinate and shake until my husband wakes up. But in these fever dreams he just shushes me and puts a pillow over my face. I hope them parts are dreams anyway. Not like he'll be there when I get back. Anyway, I'll hear something clawing at the door or slivering across the hardwood. I clamp my eyeballs shut and try to shake myself awake like a paint mixer. I worked at Home Depot before they fired me. It feels like forever, but I usually bolt up before I see anything otherworldly. Too scared to sleep, I just read or scroll through a catalog of strangers. My dogs will be staring in the corner like they're in timeout. The punctuating nightmares are hackey. Snakes, naked at school, sex with a neighbor's husband.

Worst one's about my momma. She used to have these fits and had to be held down and locked up. She snuck out one night and they found her floating face down, in her wedding dress up a river. "Dead and free," my aunt used to say. Confusing until I got here. It was definitely an accident. I ain't got depression in my family at all. Beyond that cafeteria window, I watch deers wander them hills behind the building. I reckon they're drawn to that same water girls in my family are. So that's why I need the Ambien in here. Will you give me some?

Cody

I was fixing' to have 2 kids. They mommas decided to get abortions though. Aint my third rodeo. Can't blame them really. Kinda relieved. They were always bitchin about me munching them old morphine pills. I got em off a Jehovah's witness. They ain't supposed to take no medicine. Says his grandma got these little orange pills and figures since I'm a party type, I'd buy em. I lied and told him they weren't no good. But I'd do him a real solid and buy the whole bunch for fifty bucks. They worth at least seven a pill round here. Was a Walmart bag plumb full

of little loose pills. They has gunk on em like they pulled out a junk drawer or some dude's soggy cup holder. I chewed on them things like Skittles for a couple a months. It made driving hard. School too. That was the year I dropped out anyway.

The abortions then too. I offered to pay for em. They like five hundred dollars round here. One girl ignored me. The other one matched me. Gave her the money in one of them vanilla folders so to be more polite and official. She didn't seem to notice. You just can't win with some people. My daddy says it's the way they was raised. She still wanted me bad. I know. I got a second sense for this type of thing. My daddy used to say I was part dog. The doctors just say its mood stabilizations. I stopped going when they cut out the Xanax bars. Now I just scrape by on the pills I can buy round here. I don't need much to get by. My daddy says at least the girls is good sports about this whole mess. My mom really wanted to be a grandma so she's hurting. But ill shit in my Stetson before I have a pissy eyed kid. I'll get my GED after I graduate here and my uncle says I can work with him down at the Electrolux despite the tattoo. My daddy says you gotta have a plan. I ain't violent and I don't want to get tossed out but Frank gives me the creeps, asking more questions than the staff. Still better than Kelly though, I taste blood when he walks by.

Carla

I was at a bar that had been shot up the week prior. You can still see the bullet holes. They found close to 30 shell casings. One man, the target, died. Two others were just shot a few times. They were hollow points so one lady's knee got wrecked. Her boyfriend took it in the arm. "Surprised that .45 didn't jam on him," one man reckoned. The tiny bartender had a new expensive looking necklace on. I joked to my husband, Brandon, at the time, that he snatched it

off the corpse. He accidentally overheard me but remained silent. He looked like a miniature underwear model. The bar only closed for one day after the pandemonium. One of the waiters matched with me on Tinder but doesn't mention that to my old man when he delivers the food. Tempeh bowl, hold the eggs. A tall gin and tonic alongside a double Jim Beam and Diet Coke. I have a sophisticated palate. I read that liquor hits you harder in diet drinks. And on planes. The hardest it ever hit me was in this bar.

I was losing real bad at pool here once. I'd lost enough cash to buy my own pool table by closing time. The night before I'd made a lightning bet on a basketball game they were showing. That's where for every point made over the final score you choose, you get or lose a hundred bucks per point. But, if you bet under, you lose a hundred per point. Fuck the Lakers. I was five hours deep into the weekend's bender. All gas, no brakes. This Indian guy starts flirting with me. My husband got pissed and left. He's always throwing a fit at bars. The Indian fella was wearing a shirt that said "EYEHATEGOD". I lost interest in pool. I cracked my knuckle on the rim of the corner pocket. Behind the eight ball yet again. Blood on the felt looked like Christmas and here was this gorgeous present dropped in my lap. Luckily, he would be leaving the country soon. Headed off to Cuba. Training for the Olympics. He said he's a wrestler and they only get three hot meals a day if they win in practice. Losers don't eat and eventually get washed out. He showed me a picture from a previous match. He looked like an ancient man. Like an action figure. He had a "Solider of God" tattoo above his pubis. The next morning my husband brought me straight here. On my birthday no less. Can't tell if he's more buoy or albatross.

Overheard

“You’re what my grandmother would call a real piece of shit,” the one-armed man said.

I heard myself respond but couldn’t understand what I said. The one-armed man had many such sayings to share with the other patients.

“You don’t know your ass from a hole in the ground boy” he’d say.

“Useless as tits on a boar hog.”

One woman was constantly scratching her groin. So, he’d say, “Don’t scratch it. They got legs on both sides.”

After doing his chores around the facility he’d say “Watch it, floor’s slicker than a minner’s peter.”

A one-armed man can only mop so fast. He’d shuffle up to us in the rec room wearing a soggy brown mop on his head and talk in a bad Jamaican accent. He’d brag and say he used to cut up bodies for the mob or some gang called the Pajama Boys. I pictured them running away from a shootout with their butt cheeks flapping in one of those onesies’ kids wear.

A local prostitute was being admitted and her shirt was torn open. “Ma’am, I think you lost your baby.” He cackled despite her sobbing.

He told many tall tales about how he lost the arm. He told Ray (Crack. Cannot read.) it was a rival drug dealer. Matt (Came to rehab in a Lamborghini and covered in Jesus tattoos. Cocaine.) heard it was from a train accident. Cody (Neo-Nazi. Methamphetamine.) thought it was a birth defect. Jimi (Nurse. Fentanyl.) insisted the man had cut it off himself. Possibly eating the useless appendage. Like some bath salt mad ouroboros. The one-armed man told me it was

taken by his father. “Why do some guys get to be John Wayne and Charles Bronson?” he wondered. “Why did my dad have to do me in the woods?”

What do you say in times like these?

“Anybody can pray for rain,” someone in a cowboy hat said, “but you best get busy digging a well son.”

Jimi

No chance I’d entertain sobriety without my sons. Suicide? Not an option. That wino mother of theirs in charge? Might as well let Tammy baby sit. Benji will beat me in a thumb war before I forfeit custody. Yeah, that’s my truck out there actually. Sick right? Gotta warm her up every day beneath this cold front. Maintenance? Why, maintenance is vital.

Anyway, consider my marriage botched. She has a way of making you feel as small as the stars. Littering a perfectly content and slick ebony sky with miniscule blemishes. Small. Pygmy sized, just like my old man could make me. Still noisily shiny after all these years of death. Was your father like that? Some interactive echo? Sucking the air out of every room like the plunger in a syringe?

Holmesview? Yuck, too on the nose of a name. I feel fragmented. Like I can’t reach through all this white space and touch the others. We speak but there’s no memory or penetration? Wrong word. There’s no synergy. No meaningful enrichment. If my sons were still dead or unborn in my body, I’d avoid sobriety like a hippie does an epidural. I remember this hedonistic existence. Unmarried, unchained by children. But it’s been divvied up and painstakingly sectioned out into various compromises. Having a family just makes you weaker.

So, to answer your question, no. The sunglasses stay on and once I get the job back, I'm shedding this forced sobriety like so much charred epidermis.

Frank

Some of them were armed (and unarmed) robbers, rapists, drug dealers, drug addicts, murderers, thieves, arsonists, and sex traffickers. Barry shot a guy's kneecap off with a .38 over money. Chuck tied up and robbed college kids buying pot in hotels. The women were no more innocent. Tammy let some of her kids drown. Cindy crippled her cheating husband with a 12 gauge. Carla sold heroin mixed with baby laxative to high schoolers so she could shoot the primo stuff. Melissa had sex with a middle schooler in her chemistry class. Ashton broke into houses when her neighbors went on vacations. She got caught when she reported her neighbor for having a room full of child porn in their basement. "No good deed goes unpunished," she says daily.

Tim was picked up after almost killing a cop in a bar fight. All his clothes were too big or tight for weeks. He came straight from jail and only had access to the lost and found of previous apparitions that were committed to these rooms. Where do you think they are now? Are they self-actualized and living out their passionate dreams? Did they shoot or hang themselves? Or worse, are they passed out in Carolina trailers or crying on barstools? Alcoholism is just a socially acceptable form of suicide. These people are savages, beyond any help a hospital can afford them.

In my journalized version, they'll all be stylized and gussied up (or down if you're Chuck) and the violent introspection of their redemption or destruction in the third act will be how I'm remembered.

The staff wears the same clothes every day. For months. Smoke filtered into the rooms from the rusty vents. Someone thought it was from the old-school furnace. Some figured it was essential oils to calm our nerves. Others claimed it was some mind control micro agents being forced into our bodies to reprogram us. For what purpose I'm not certain. "We are the next generation of sleeper spies. We're gonna be eating Chinese takeout every day, working behind a post office counter until the code word 'Wyoming' is spoken to trigger our political assassinations, you wait."

I was too embarrassed to tell the others that I'm here voluntarily. They all came from jail. This was their final chance. A man wearing a shirt saying "7/11 was a part time job" with George Bush's face on it was my first roommate. A sleepwalker who also suffered from night terrors was my second. Third was a man crippled by tinnitus who had to talk constantly or have a fan going to dull the high pitch chirps in his head. He was my only roommate to exit prematurely. Finally, there was a war veteran. An American born Muslim. "I killed my own people for you," he'd brag. Unsolicited. All he talked about was football. The dialogue in his life's play would be mere small talk punctuated by murders and speed balling with heroin and meth. "I put my syringes in the freezer and let me tell you mister those humdingers make you think you hear a train coming. I'd be standing naked in my living room with the 5.56 peeping out the blinds for wooly boogers. I'd stand there so long the carpet had sweaty footprints when I walked away."

I'd wake up to piss around four and he'd be sitting upright still talking to me every night. "...and so yeah I'm fucking this one girl like best mossy jaw ever and she's scrawny like a gunny sack filled with antlers and she's my cousin's girl but he's outback looking for a rock I said I dropped and she's inside and she's moaning like a cat trapped in a washing machine for

me and I'm railing her and then she's helping me look for the rock I said I dropped except I didn't drop it I've already smoked it but I'm pretending to help them look and..."

I don't think I'd have graduated from rehab if he had been my first roommate. I hope he is dead. Truly. For your sake.

Pat was the first to leave rehab without getting kicked out. His family held a homecoming party at his house. Called a sober dance. Two words in opposition. Someone shot him and his grandmother in her driveway just after dusk.

What do you say to his girlfriend beside you when the news breaks? You hope and assume it *wasn't* random. It couldn't happen to me or my grandmother. He did something to deserve it surely. Perhaps his grandmother was guilty of some unforgivable crime? Like when you hear someone's died from cancer. The first question is, "Did they smoke?" Feebly grasping for some explanation. A cause. Something to separate your fate and suffering from theirs. An alien vaporizing them with a ray gun would be more settling. Some natural calamity such as an avalanche would be comforting. A rageful and bitter jilted lover, or a racist cop. Anything to explain away the fleeting vortex of our helpless mortality.

They served pork chops, black eyed peas, and collard greens that night. It was New Year's Day. My grandmother cooked that same meal every year until she died. Diabetes, it couldn't be helped.

Matt

Every night, local AA, NA, and Baptist church members came to enlighten us. The yellow cafeteria bathed in red thanks to a man-sized neon cross. Some shared testimony. Some

chastised us, assuring eternal damnation if we didn't accept Jesus. As if they knew the way of the one true God. One blind preacher even passed around a tithe mason jar.

"I was turning tricks in cars and eating out of garbage cans," one man confessed. They confessed all their sins to us. "I sold my son's dialysis machine for dope." Another man one-up's him. And this is more proof of God's wonders. The fact that this place is here is proof of God. I'm not supposed to be here. Our family lawyer messed up the paperwork but my fiancé will indeed drop all the charges. More assurance that Jesus is king.

This crucifix I keep reminds me of life before and what's at stake, what can happen if we falter. I got a big cross shape in my heart that coke can't sneeze at now. At least I'm rid of the whore from Babylon. My parents, that's a marriage to strive for. Reading the good book each and every night. So late sometimes for my dad they sleep in separate rooms so as not to wake one another. Everyone always makes a face at that one. But they stuck it out. "Thank God for the fat ones because they make the skinny ones look better." My dad said that about girls but I apply it to hard times. I think that's what he meant anyway.

Hereafter

Cody had come to rehab with a Xanax mouth and no intention on sobriety. But the structured community somehow complimented his violent trajectory. He took up with Barry and Alan right away. Referring to him as "Big Nasty" made him feel superior and protective over them. Alan was puny and dope sick, but carried himself with misguided confidence. Barry was old but maintained a lifer's prison physique. His dentures whistled making him no one's favorite person to eat across from.

Cody had done more acid than anyone in the Carolinas, riding it out like some false alarm tsunami. He was the last to know what was happening. Every other patient was stumbling around like they were looking for something they had lost. Cody felt more like hiding than searching. Wading waters the others drowned beneath. Like some armored knight in some old-fashioned book, immune to dragon's fire. Boots crunching over crispy sober villagers.

He felt the coffee more than the dose. Less susceptible to sentimental sways of hallucinogenic bias.

Running through the fogged building, other inmates resembled some lunatic's shoddily cropped snuff film. Like someone recanting rumors of something surreal they heard. A dyslexic stenographer's fever dream. Tommy barked on all fours in the courtyard. Matt misquoted bible verses, Jeremy yelled, "I can see myself getting younger." Into a broken mirror. A nerdy teenager broke his hands on a second-floor window. A woman screamed his name but he couldn't see her in the smoke. No sprinkler sprayed a safety film of water. No alarm alerted anyone outside of their relapsed pyre. Barry's teeth must have been boiling in a cup by his bed, as he mumble-pointed towards a fire exit.

"You're gonna leave ugly bones when you die boy" Kelly hollered at him, locked in the library after what he did to Carla.

Cody shook off sweaty memories towards the staff exit. Bumping into someone in a letterman jacket. Stairs felt wobbly, not up to code, and he rolled, impossibly crunchy and inflexible towards the bottom stair. Smiling like a corpse at the thought of Kelly confused and impotent in a room of words that might as well be lasered in some Martian font.

Lighting a cigarette, Chuck slogged through the fog. Holmesview's dimensions grew less reliable. He clutched the shirt tail of some androgynous being before him. Staff member and patient converged into some maddening flammable conga line. The next thing he grabbed could be a scalding door knob or fire extinguisher. Furnace or exit right before his nose, no way to tell. Some disoriented hand held onto his now, through boiling halls. In this fleet of unknown size, everyone trusting the person before them, buoying themselves for the ones after. Chuck wondered how long the fog would last. Perhaps they'd all survive and Carla would organize some high school reunion-esque meeting yearly to commemorate the time they caravanned home through the flame. Perhaps they'd settle down.

Here and there, some fool exited the uniform line, in search of some magical trap door shortcut out of the heat. With everybody stumbling so fast on the unknown floor, you had to make a game-time decision on betraying your trust in the group for the hopeful unknown alleys beside you. Chuck reckoned if he hit some barbecued dead end, he'd turn heel and revisit doors he'd mistreated with his hastily laid mistrust. Unless these doors were flamed out and the heat had eliminated hopeful retreats and meaningless past regrets so totally. Perhaps he'd keep running with his group where you couldn't tell who was African or female or anyone at all. He realized his hat was gone. Likely he was unrecognizable now. But he might empty his diaphragm with all the screams he was reloading on, before he got the chance to speak. What if he sat down and waited? Perhaps anything could happen. For a fireman to introduce the outside's cold into the smoky labyrinth. For a father to stick around this time. For a horny babe to release him. For a daughter to forgive him. For the smoke to dematerialize and for some other thing, anything, to be before him instead of himself.

Benji was teary-eyed in the relentless light peppering the wet window. Around him, patients drew hand turkeys for the coming holiday when they were allowed to leave, for one day, if desired. His page was blank and his hands looked like a botched magic trick. Fins, more adept for swimming away than drawing or playing piano.

“I aint no doctor.” Alan said. “But I bet you aint no good at hitchhiking.”

As he shuffled off to the rec room, the coffee began to uproot his sense of self. He’d read once that if one could manage to stare upon their hands in a dream it could be made lucid. Controlled. “But what if you don’t have thumbs.” He realized he said it out loud. A hot pine smell short circuited his sickening level of introspection. Smoke billowed out of the vents. This is his reality now. Thumbs and girlfriends and sobriety can’t matter. All seeming like some movie he only saw part of long ago.

Mindful of real permanent death, he pined for a future he didn’t realize he had. Shattered hands weren’t hereditary. High school girlfriends can be forgotten. Maybe god was dead or fake or indifferent. But his brain beat like a heart with these constant resets, nap like and seemingly growing thicker ridges in his new brain, brain like a liver, cleansing itself with every step. He was the only one calm enough to try the front door. Outside, Jimi’s truck was crushed by a tree. Some uninsurable act of God he figured. Still, all of them could be saved and worthy of the saving.

Carla straightened her dress after Chuck left the pantry a non-suspicious beat of minutes prior. She worked the spatula over crusty eggs onto the next patient’s tray. Thinking she smelled smoke over the memory of it. Mrs. Morrison, the staff cook, reminded her of her grandmother. Some bizarre kind version that listened instead of waiting to talk.

Tommy lingered in reeking of gasoline. “Goddamn yellow jacket nest bout blew me up.”

She thought she might faint. His skin was the color of a CPS worker’s van.

Before the nightly AA meeting visitors arrived, she was chored with preparing the coffee. A simple, sacred act providing something tactile for the stream of memories about drinking ready to pour over them. The pot was already full. Styrofoam cups lined up with evil intent. Frank already sipping one in some suspiciously welcoming stare.

During the meeting she felt her eyes vibrating and clacking like pool balls. A meeting like every one before. Tales of a sordid past shared. Some feeling like polished parables while others seemingly held no plot or purpose even to their speaker. Comedy and tragedy merged as everyone found something to identify with in stories stemming from drug and drink filled egomaniacs that thought little of themselves. Experience, strength, and hope were shared freely, which felt suspicious to Carla, who’d rather place bets on who would stumble through a boring story versus who would deliver a heartbreaking speech about forgiveness. After all the cheating, stealing, using, and fights, they’ve come here. To walk each other home. Meeting in the middle of nowhere to discuss a shared problem. Like some anti-passion. On the crest of an epiphanous wave, she hears it. A panicked smoke alarm. Bolting up she realizes no one else hears it and they all have their own troubled vibrating faces lost in some horrible past. Same faces, different masks.

Just before Ernie bursts in screaming demands about “not panicking” and “single file” and “hellfire” she doesn’t imagine where her husband is or how he feels or care that she could have saved her grandmother or even feel fear like all the bodies sent in dizzying directions

around her in different octaves of horror. Like startled insects with no compass or foresight. She wonders if the Lakers will cover the spread tonight.

Jimi couldn't hear the panicked crowds' hum over the glow of the moon. Palm raised, he blocked out the lunar shape but its light vibrated past his hand's edges. Never noticing, but somehow understanding the ocean wave's attraction to the glowing rock. Featureless compared to the camouflaged blue of his home planet. He was embarrassed by the rain's inability to snuff out this bonfire inside. He rolled his key in his hand, grounding himself with the thought of movement.

The last month of sober clarity was drowned by the spiked coffee. How could he go back knowing he should leave when he has the chance? This illegal truth serum seemed to swim up his veins like enlightened trout. He'd confess it all to his wife and employer. He'd start over in a small apartment punching clocks at dangerously grimy factories if he had to. He wanted solitude. He didn't want a yard. He needed space in place of status. He could never see his children for who they were with all these shadows blotting them out. His needlessly thick shadow.

Tammy had wandered well past the designated meeting place in case of emergencies. Running through woods, bobbing tree limbs and tripping through kudzu until her shoes sank. River water cold and sharpening her kaleidoscoped senses back into piecemeal portions. She thought she heard little lungs filling. Rain sailing a wedding dress downstream in some cyclical generational drama not lost on her. Pelleted by fat rain drops, a sheet metal barn covered a family of deer on the other side of the water. One, maybe injured or dead, was halfway covered by the shelter and half in the rain. The rest ready to flee at any awkward move from the crying woman

before them. Her feet carried her into the water and she felt no fear. Guilt like rocks in her shoes. Her blood had been here before and would not come again.

Matthew had suffered these visiting fools long enough. Their voices lacked cadence and conviction. Non-believers spreading some vaguely hopeful message. As if redemption could be simply commodified through pithy statements in place of action. Under the cloth of the L.S.D. he realized he wasn't serving the drugs. They served, bettered, him and his preaching. Without them he was flat and unconvincing. For sober, he was unconvinced himself of the existence of Christ. To be a fisher of men, he needed a buzz. As if the book named after him, these other lost lambs came alive as proof.

Blessed be Chuck. Tammy shall be comforted. Ben would inherit the world. Frank would be filled and Jimi granted mercy. Carla would see God himself of which Cody was a child. Theirs was the kingdom of heaven.

Newfound faith making him whole, Matthew didn't regret removing batteries from smoke detectors so he could smoke in his room. He didn't regret ignoring his chores of furnace maintenance, for at his new church in the strip mall downtown, he would be permitted to inform his flock that he survived the furnace as well as the gnashing of the teeth from the naysaying lawyers and lying fiancé. He would rather waste his seed on the ground than in her. His harvest was plenteous. His labors few. A tightly closed eye hallucination displayed his god before him. Fresh from his skull-sized kingdom. Thick forearms, one caressing a babe in heat, the other cleaving a... He cheered and was forgiven under the pale blue heat of Carolina's moon, spinning not unlike a squad cars siren right there, within tasing range.

Kelly, having no use for the worthless pages lining the walls around him, had no distractions while he waited. The paperbacks couldn't generate enough force to break the doorknob. He might as well have been surrounded by kindling. A library with no windows to climb out of or ceiling tiles to reach would be his tomb.

He thought he was going to die once before in Iraq. A patriot from that country had shot Kelly just under the knee. The shooter stared blankly into the American's black face as if they didn't share the same human template. This Iraqi turned his back to Kelly and walked away as if he'd remembered the stove was on back home. *Bet his gun jammed before he could do me.* Kelly had told himself for years. Fidgeting sweatily with his sidearm, Kelly squeezed and added some red to the man's uniform. Shooting the man in the back felt cowardly and magic all at once. A perfect solution to his current fear. A hot ruby body of blood pooled between them. Joining as if it wanted to get out and converge. Was there some memory to its coalescence? Had any of their ancestors travelled together or fallen in love or fought to the death? Was the boy showing mercy and retreating? Kelly seemed pleased with the answer here now.

Kelly assumed the smoke would end him first but the flames moved miraculously, jumping like desert heat waves, some aesthetic to a memory he wanted to forget. Double-fisting cigarettes, he watched his only friends from the last month burn or flee through his thinning viewpoint. Unaware or unconcerned with his entrapment. As he was holding his breath each one felt shallow, more restricted than the last. With a cinder block chest, he remembered a note from his first love interest.

Dear Ray, will you dance with me or kiss me? With little check boxes for yes and yes of course, surrounded by smiling faces and uneven hearts. Or, at least he imagined that's what it

said. Being too embarrassed to ask for a love translator, he threw it in a trash can in front of her. He had encountered no needle that injected a nirvana so instantaneous and permanent since, despite trying day after day. If he wrote her now, if he could write, he would have said:

Sarah, the last twenty years have mauled me. I've shot and killed men, I've been shot, I've been a creep to most women. I ran over something on a drunk one night that I hope was a fat cat and not a kid, and I've missed you. After shooting my way out of a country I didn't really want to go to I'm about to burn to death in a junky library.

Closing his eyes under the weight of the smoke, he lost count of his breaths. If this was water and not fire, he figured he'd be at least deep enough to reach out and grasp the catfish his dad used to catch for him. Looking up he could almost hear his father. The metallic click of his father's tacklebox sounding like a door opening but Kelly was too scared to open his eyes under all that aseity dark water.

Frank, having never taken a drug, purged the AA coffee into a murky toilet bowl. Being sick himself was a tiny gauntlet to camouflage himself as another victim and not the perpetrator. Catching his reflection in the bowl he finally had the physical world affirm his existence. His story would be unbelievable. Kelly as the illiterate messenger boy alone was a hilarious detail putting the tragedy over the edge. Finally, a story he could sell. He was used to shouldering the weighty gamut of human emotion with no chemical bulwark. But he had not prepared for the fire. Or Carla. Throwing up again, he noticed a yellow jacket nest in the drywall. Organized and truthful. Same intent each winter.

Outside, his car window was obsidian in the black rain. Instead of being transparent, it threw his own ominous face back at him. Within this new dimensional light, he saw himself in

the years to come. Wiser and rich, more attuned to the weighty chords the rest of the world sang to. He knew Carla would be in the kitchen, lurking for some dead grandmother she failed to save twice, but he told himself the rain would make soggy ash of the building soon enough. He closed that door and headed anywhere but home.

Outside

The jaywalkers darted across Coxe Avenue. Hunting refuge in a corner bar. It's all here. They're the same everywhere. Sticky oak bar top, stools that whine when you sit on them, yellow foam busting out of the leather sides, tattooed bartenders that ring a bell after good tips, too dim to read the menu, and unsanitary despite the ninety-eight hung above the window. Not a floor you want to drop your last piece of bubblegum on. Bathroom walls telling the towns story. *BE GAY DO CRIME*, *Bitches love asparagus*, *R.I.P. Buck*, and numbers inviting you over for a good time. Different fonts assuring said good time. You suddenly start to wonder why anyone wrote any of this. You wonder why you're there. There's a woman screaming "Shit fuck!" at a Lakers game. Gamblers circling around a pool table like predators. Like the table contains some otherworldly knowledge that can break them out of the traps they've built for themselves. The momentum of their past precisely knocking each consecutive ball into the corresponding pocket. The agony of sliding the eight ball in prematurely. The ecstasy of pocketing your rivals' greenbacks. Setting *them* back. Catapulting *you* forward.

A HARD MAN IS GOOD TO FIND

Dead deer for mile markers, punctuate gray roads leading in. Black tarred cracks shimmering as snakes under a dehydrated Tennessee sun.

Broadway street is littered with broken glass shining like counterfeit diamonds from a scalding glow of neon lights. A long row of brick buildings line up like tombstones towering over drunken pilgrims. Its claustrophobic.

Ramblers, hell raisers, and degenerates converge on what seems like a collection of each town's seediest bar.

A portly man wearing a confederate flag yarmulke berates a homeless man for preaching an end time message. Warnings of a honky tonk Sodom and Gomorrah. Serpentine lines of ten-gallon hats and bedazzled cowboy boots parade blocked off streets.

It's swamp ass hot. Frat boys in matching Hawaiian shirts pump their fists and holler at timid, outnumbered cops. Women stagger in heels, stepping over last night's vomit stained pavement. Draped in sashes reading things like *A HARD Man is Good to Find* and *Wife of The Party*, wielding phallic lollipops. Rainbow striped dildos, cigarette butts, and crushed PBR cans litter the street. A bud light is nine dollars. Pool halls still allow eyewatering cigarette smoke. Waiting in line for a BBQ joint called Hogsuckers takes over an hour. Bars have three stories with bands on each, cranking out the pantheon of country music. Old winos pine for lovers that got away while tourists que outside of a strip club called Déjà vu (home of the fifteen-dollar couch dance).

Memphis- Working the circuit here in Nashville sucks ass. I used to work as a dominatrix. Now that's fast money and good times. Walking on guys faces, burning them with cigarettes, and dressing up like the gestapo and tying them up. Calling them later to insult them over their voicemail. They done beat a path to my door. Those weirdos I can handle. Control.

These girls here ain't too keen on it. A client today says "Tell me something dirty" So I says "Why, my friend found out she was pregnant and used a hanger to" "Ah, jeez I get the picture" he interrupts. "No just to loosen the screws on the window and *then* jumped from the third floor. After patching her up they charged her for crying during her appointment. Eleven bucks for brief emotional support." He didn't much care for that one. I like going for older guys though. You can swipe some of those OC80's from their medicine cabinets. I gotta use that pill identifier website to make sure what I cop isn't herpes meds, blood pressure pills, or mood stabilizers.

My boyfriend don't mind. He's one of them cuckholds. Another form of control. Idiot shares me with his friends every Sunday while the Titans play. I make a mean queso dip.

Men tell us their most sacred truths here. Why they cheat their wives, despise their sons, and confess their dirty secrets. Admitting murders, thefts, secret second families, and religious doubts. We reveal everything and so do they. My therapist says all kinks are born from childhood traumas.

This club's doctor shoots us up with penicillin weekly. Men don't trust us. They make us clap our hands while they're in other rooms. So as to avoid us from stealing. Men have no power over us still. We're like ants to them. But they don't know all ants are female. Colonies make male ants once every while to mate with the queen. She holds their seed like a bank until she

needs it. Like sacrificial sex slaves. Gigolo cattle. They die shortly after their job is done.
Harvested.

Before work, I swallow two Xanax bars and a klonopin down with some margaritas and everything looks like it's underwater. But every day I pull up here, I wish it was on fire.

Abe- The uber driver's breath reeked like an open grave. I held my breath to shield my innards from his stench. His full colostomy bag operated as an essential oil dispenser. I didn't want to inhale his shit particles.

Hard to believe we're from the same species. Hard to believe we have the same type of brain. Amazing the shit that spills from his cerebrum and the self-actualized brilliance, from my own.

It looked like he lived in the rusty sedan. Burger King wrappers, Mountain Dew bottles, health department paperwork, a box of adult diapers. I refuse to wear seatbelts in uber's. Impossibly filthy seatbelt crevices that you normally wouldn't ignore for safety, are well beyond the pale. Just trust some yokel hurdling us forward in this hick town.

"You know these peddle bikes downtown don't actually require you to peddle?" He mused, "kinda like false advertisement if you ask me." I didn't. And anyone who's not inbred knows they're electric tourist traps. My eyes leaked from undeodorized flesh.

Trying to hold my breath like I wasn't drowning in his sweat. Opened windows offered little comfort. His radio played aggressive gospel. "I'd rather be an old time Christian than anything I know. There's nothing like an old time Christian with a Christian love to show".

The broad I'm with tries to make small talk. We met at a rooftop bar and she had her Venmo QR code painted on her ass. "At least ya'll have Derrick Henry down here winning games!" she blurted out. "Don't much watch football no more. I liked them Titans but that whole Kaepernick military thing didn't sit right with me." he whined back. Two dummy's yucking it up. "There is traditions for a reason, national anthems go back to days of Greece Olympics". He's giving me a headache. "Oh, sorry did you serve," she won't shut up either. "No but my whole family did," he admits. Weakly.

I tell him to speed up because the coke I bought off some meter maid, must have baby laxative in it and I need to drop a deuce. I gave him one measly star and no tip. Fucking redneck. His granddaddy fought in the big war so he could chauffeur drunks around in overpriced Miranda Lambert merch.

I'm only in this hick town to bankroll the new salt cave and can't suffer these bible belt fools lightly. I wish the temporary housing I'm in would burn down. The neighbor is a cop. I'm praying he gets shot because his dog is always barking. Sometimes I drink an entire bottle of scotch and bark back at his dog under the moon, on all fours. I *accidentally* ran over his last mutt. I'm gonna kill his whole family one day. No matter where I go, I find someone to hate.

Earl-Theys two types a bitches down here. Disney adult goofball tourists, or shithammered drunk sluts. Which type you think I like?

I love getting tore up on Broadway. We usually hit Printer's Alley though cus it's cheaper but the whores are busting out the frame over there. We'll leave a job site and head straight over to Kid Rock's bar. It's the best cus it's got a big gold eagle that says *American Badass* besides a neon sign saying *Cadillac Pussy*. At cool or what?

Ricky's in love with a bartender there. Kate. He holds the dumb end of the measuring tape and can't be trusted with a sawzall much less a woman. Is he a sorry sack of shit or what?

He sold me his granddaddy's 30 ought 6 to afford tickets for that Tanya Tucker cover band she likes. Who fucking cares bout Tanya anymore? He whines about killing himself if he can't have her and killing her too if she finds a man. "Yeah, it's cold in the winter time too aint it?" I says to him. Man up, ya know?

After he embarrasses himself again I get bored. "Yall ready to leave" I says. "Place is packed out like big girl panties, huh?" "High time for the titty bar." I order. What's better than bossing morons around? Only problem is this strip clubs liquor license got suspended. You believe at? And they only told us once we's payed to get in. "How's at fucking happen?" I ask some trollop working the door." Nice cans but could stand to lose a few. Real last call typa girl. She ignored me. Probably too nervous. But I don't pay no mind when they's boobs everywhere.

The girls across town never notice my counterfeit twenties. How they gonna tell in all that dark? Some blind guy gets ushered in and his, like, handlers take up a whole first row of seats. What the hells a blind fella got use for in a titty bar? I'd sooner take his pay and sat him in front of a bait shop and tell him its lady's night. Plus, he's got his chick with him. Why bring a girl here?

My old lady never would a showed. She smelled like an old tackle box anyway. We're eating nachos and seen Ricky is standing like a turd burglar in the corner. "Ay, cheer up man" I says, "If you end up having a kid with Kate yalls daughter could end up working here at least!" Who wouldn't laugh at that shit?

I end up blowing 500 perfectly counterfeit bucks there. Rented one of them VIP rooms like I play for the Titans. Probably would have too hadn't been for that forklift accident. Once I leave the commode, the skank working give me a decent lap dance and got naked and that's it. Why the hell didn't she do more? What a scam. She wasn't fit to be a damn door greeter at Walmart. What's wrong with this town? Why can't I meet a good girl like you in this town?

Guess we shouldn't have left the salt cave so early but that AA coffee had me zooted. I only go there for the skirts. Probably should have reinforced them pillars instead of selling the rebar. I think it only crushed some dumbass tourists anyway.

Daniel- You really find out what you're made out of when you shit your pants in public. Trust me. I trusted a fart I ought've with some chick in the car once. Had to duck walk into a gas station and waffle stomp my poo down the trucker shower drains. Had to buy some nut hugging tight sweats from Love's.

I got the worst luck with girls. Nobody has worse fortunes than me. Like one time we arrived at this dude's house to get him out a tub. He was big as me and needed to be pulled out to break the suction. Soon as I hear a wet pop, I fall face first tween his sweaty cheeks. A decayed sandwich rested under his gut. Some cute EMT with me pretended not to care but that courtship died in that water. My comment like a turd in a punch bowl. I might as well have told her I'm a eunuch. At least I'd have sympathy.

I call them douche chill moments. Just awfully embarrassing exposures of the true loser I am inside. Confirmations. Last double date I went on, now that's a shit show. Let me tell ya. We're fishing this gorgeous river out near where they shot some Alan Jackson video and I step behind a tree to drain my main vein. My bud hollers out "Hey, we aint fishing with shrimp

Daniel”. This got a huge laugh. His girl piped up shouting “Sounds like that piss got a long way to fall, man!” Ugh. I should have drowned myself right there. They compared me to them Vienna sausages we use for bait.

Being pudgy don’t help. Just last month some dickhead uber driver told me I’d ruin his ride if I got in. “Gotdamn hoss, you gonna grind down my shocks”. Right in front of my date. They actually flirted the whole ride like I wasn’t there. When we got to Olive Garden, she stayed with him. “Don’t capsize my shit stepping out too fast now.” I had to share a meal with a mariachi band I’d hired. Even they wouldn’t split the bill.

And I have the comedic timing of a stroke on Christmas. Just worse than anyone’s. Like one time I told this girl I loved her over voicemail. She calls me back the next day as says “Dan, honey, you’ve already confessed your undying love to me twice. Maybe lay off the sauce?” My heart shattered like a pizza stone dropped in the driveway. I quit drinking after that. But that lasted bout as long as Pat stayed in the army. Being a paramedic working late nights don’t help. Well one time we arrived at a DFO. Sorry, that means “Done Fell Out” on the EMS circuit. Anyway, we pick up some homeless midget guy who’d took a spill off that rooftop bar and busted his pegs, at Tootsie’s, and he’s laughing as we wrestle him into the ambulance. Little man says “I aint no organ donor. Y’all best revive me!” Bill asked that kickable fella why he’s so jovial since his leg is snapped like a KitKat bar. “Body lice ha-ha I got body lice” is all he said.

I had a date the next day but couldn’t quit itching my damn arms, head, and buttohole the whole time. “Are you like, ok?” My blind date asked. And like, I can’t tell her I had to pack a dwarf into a meat wagon so I just lie. “Might be the shellfish in here.” She graciously apologizes and orders me a curry with pineapple and tree nuts in it while I’m in the shitter. I’m halfway

done eating when I realize she's ordered something I'm actually allergic to. My head swole up like a dog munching a wasp. Just bad luck for me all around.

Most girls think I'm light in the loafers. That's why I need *Déjà vu*. Cus how else am I supposed to get any affection. This club is like a sternum rub to my confidence. Keeps me going while I'm waiting round to die.

I was the first responder to that salt cave collapse. 32,000 pounds just flattens you out. They all looked deflated. Only their clothes helped hold their guts in. Popped like them canned Pillsbury biscuits.

Chuck-Home's a place you go where they have to let you in. So, I'm back in Assville Tennessee baby. I just love that grease trap smell downtown. Like sulfur.

That old ball and chain had me in the doghouse after seeing me cuddled up to some tramp at rehab. I was sweating like a whore in church man. She'll be crawling back. Treat em like dirt and they stick to ya like mud. She went all to pieces but I'm back darlin. Something called proximity desirability according to them counselors.

I'll put a new wrinkle to the prune out here this time. Doing bachelorette parties. I show my wiener in hotels for 200 bucks a viewing. You gotta learn by doing. Its plumb full of suckers out here. First time I was nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full a rocking chairs. But I threw one of them tart Viagra's down my gullet and boom. Harder than a punk in a pecker patch.

I meet this one honey at a gig. She aint missed a meal. Same tupa bad as me. Same smoky blue eyes too. Hotter than a two-dollar pistol. I'm just in your club for promotional purposes. Glad I got banned from that salt cave now. Least their bodies will be nice and

preserved. Shit they's a real market for male talent in this town. I gotta keep on rambling. I was born on a train.

Gabe-Gotdamn, they proud of their gas up here. And you couldn't squeeze a fart into this Nashville traffic. I hear horns honking in my dreams. Just elbows and assholes downtown too.

Thought I'd have to shoot my way out of White Castle one night. Just hoodlums out. Drunken bachelorette parties aint much better. This one girl complained about some dude stalking her. I left her. You just can't stop for every lost dog on the way home. Hours are long, especially in wedding season. I need some of that black AA coffee, it'll put some hair on your chest. Dr. says I drink too much caffeine. So, I take them trazadone's now. They'll put your dick in the dirt.

We on motel time down here. What is it about vacations that make us savages? One fella shot out of an uber at a stop sign. My ears been ringing all weekend. He would have never done that back home, said he's a Doctor with kids. This town brings out that decadence. Hell, I've had six Millers in the shower each morning I lived here so far.

Drank too much yesterday. One of them nights where you just lay one leg of your bed and one arm holding the wall to balance the room from whirling. I'm like a meter maid with a gun working beats down on Broadway. Got seventeen rounds in my Taurus. If at don't do the trick you best turn the last one on your own self.

I was here when that salt spa went down. That's why I do my shifts sober now, well, soberish. I had taken a couple dabs of sunshine blotter acid that faithful day. Thought I seen God raining down some kaleidoscopic brimstone.

Had to wrangle some asshole in a suit down to the detention center. Preacher says “One day this city on the plains gonna be decimated for its wickedness. That collapse is a monument of their folly. Lot’s wife reincarnated only to be slain. Hard pressed to find ten righteous souls on Broadway.” I’ll take that couch dance now honey. Gotta ramble on home soon. It’s the wife’s birthday.

Delilah-Friday. Woke up, took a poop, got out of bed early so I can beat my face. I drink double Tito’s and sodas. (Gotta watch my figure) until everyone’s ready. I drink five songs worth of vodka crans at some place called Loopsies or something. I snap a pic for my Instagram and some guy from last summer sends me a dick pic on snapchat I respond “aww...” and block him. Tad is blowing my phone up and I buy drinks with his card. He thinks he owns me because he bought me that abortion for Christmas. Fuck him. Gotta piss but the lines long so I go in the men’s and get catcalled. Some old guy presses the soap thing for me and hands me paper towels and mints. Creep. Close out. Hop into some place called Roberts and it’s all old people. So, coke in the bathroom and poop. Wrote my mom a text I never sent. Outside the old people music sounds kind of pretty. Charlotte cries. Wander Broadway for cute guys but they’re all douchey bachelor parties or fake cowboys. Don’t let anyone fool you, Tennessee if full of total ugos. Unfuckable slobs. Bump into some bitch I pretend to remember. I lie “Keep in touch!” but her breathe stinks. Smoked a joint with two cute guys. Turns out they’re gay as a two-dollar bill. Watch a cop tackle a homeless guy. See an old man have a heart attack or seizure or something lame and the band keeps playing. The paramedics drag him out and his wife slips on his spilled beer. They both get carried away. No-one cares. Some weirdo older couple asks me if I’m down for a threesome I say yes although I’m not sure. They take my number and we do more coke. I dance with this really stupid hot cowboy who says things like “This song is very allegorical!”

and “You’re an old soul”. He leads me to the bathroom and I give him a handy. Why not. Fucks it. Ditch him. Toss up more Instagram stories. Pop into the sixth or ninth bar. Some fat paramedic guy buys me a drink. But it’s like a kombucha beer or something and it taste like feet. Get an autograph from Brad Paisley, I think. Max calls but I can’t hear him so I just let guys at the bar say stupid mean shit to him on speaker phone. I’d rather do a gangbang at a family reunion than take him back. My ears start ringing. Make out with a hot chick and notice a cold sore. Music is too loud but fun. Take another dump. Not sure what’s going on. Type my mom another text but send neither. Hit some guys pen in the middle of a bar watching a UFC fight. Some Irish dudes leg snaps like a wet cigarette. Everyone laughs. Make out with some guy who looks like Blake Shelton. He’s not Blake Shelton. Give some married short guy a hickey. Convince two straight construction workers to kiss in exchange for my number. Block them both. Some cute Spanish guy dry humps me and we leave in an uber. He has no condoms and tries to use a Walmart bag. I tell him to just hurry. I wake up before sunrise and jet. Feeling like asshole. Clear out thirty-one missed calls. Uber back to my girl’s hotel and NPR talks about some drone strike that killed babies or something lame. I tell him to play some music but it’s more country. He tells me to check out some BBQ place called *Peg Leg Porker’s*. The girls are freaked over some stripper they hired yesterday. Not sure all what happened but, found out today it was Charlotte’s dad. So that’s our first night in town. We’re here the weekend. Before my wedding. Since Mercury is in Gatorade or something, they want to hit up that bath salt cave or whatever. I’d never work in a place like this but well be back. What’s your number? We should stay in touch.

Michael-I downed three shots of Jack I brought and feel new. Remade.

You shouldn't have to drink fermented fruit or vegetables or snort nutmeg powder, or shoot up poppies, or smoke battery-acid-cat litter-coated Sudafed out of light bulbs to feel this good. This normal. You have to screw off the thread and shake salt in the lightbulb to get that dangerous powder coating out before you can safely smoke meth.

Surely God frowns on this. Perplexed. No way God wants us getting drunk and porking strangers in a strange land, right? Or are jobs and parenthood worse? Stranger? I mainly feel uncomfortable in a human body. Since I was little.

This Amish guy I met had missing fingers. "They saw them off if you steal or break rules." he claimed. "but its real nice because when you move in the community builds you a house." That whole rumspringa thing sounds cool. What other cult lets you wander outside for a while? Apparently, most of em comes back. There aint no community like that up here. I'll take a fifteen-dollar couch dance but all I got's ten?

Cut me a deal an I'll tell ya bout why I micro dose that AA coffee.

James-The church basements damp. Not a well-lighted place. We sit on rusted fold out WWE style chairs. Reeks of mothballs and mildew. Coffees formidable. All them rooms the same and I been to enough to fill a shitty Garth Brooks concert.

It's a sorry looking bunch. Leather skinned old timers ignore us. Not worth an introduction since they doubt our success. Chicks are either shy and prudish or too trusting and giddy. Preying on 'ems called thirteen stepping. Way more popular in NA.

A cowpoke looking creep named Chuck is eyeing every woman. A plumber named Larry is present because he knocked out his wife in a blackout. His daughter broke the news when he

called from jail the next morning. Some construction workers giggle at that one. Roger, a man who looks like he runs a bowling alley, is here since he has been reduced to drinking five bottles of mouthwash and shoe polish every day. Sarah can't stop getting DUI's with her kids in her car.

“My name is Ken and I'm an alcoholic.” Says I. They don't need my Christian name, just my story. “Hi Ken!” Says they. I tell my boring journey. They call's em salad days. A couple folks laugh. Even more cry. I grab what has to be damn near my ninth white chip and they clap, cleansing me. Accepting me, not in spite of my faults, but because of em.

You get so sick of explaining yourself and apologizing. It's easier to admit you're a fuck up. God made you that way. You're not cute or talented or wise.

You're destined to steal from every girlfriend's purse. Over sleep and miss out on entire careers. Barf up Pina coladas at your aunt's funeral. Forget your kids in your backseat. Die of sepsis or jaundice or liver failure. I don't intend to stay sober. These just my only friends. It's a highly spiritual program. You have to accept some higher power.

“If I ain't part of something bigger an me” Larry crooned. “I'd sooner kill myself”.

I realized when I pray, I beg for everything to go perfect. Like some bubblegum candy wonderland life to befall me. That's not what I'm after. I guess I just want community. I want to live forever. To create something that will outlast me. We all going to die and be dead forever.

Even the permeance of heaven scares the piss out of me. Every day lined up in glory forever and ever. Freaks me out but it shouldn't because no one has that one figured out. Not Shakespeare, not Richard Petty, not Dwight Yoakam, and not Mike Tyson, who I swear I saw at a meeting in Savannah once.

This has to be the worst town to be sober in. Its food, commerce, entertainment, and tourism are all based on alcoholism.

“This town weren’t built on sobriety.” Says some soccer mom. “Bad luck runs these streets”.

I head out and grab a pack of tall boys at that quick stop. Its twelve o’clock somewhere. Plus, I knew yalls liquor license been suspended. I’ll take a couch dance here than waste more time on some hack therapist. I’m in this club because my fiancé cheated on me during her bachelorette party. I followed her down here.

Before the accident, I told my fiancé I have the disease of alcoholism. She said she was rooting for the disease to win.

Ralph- I hacked up some phlegm but, not wanting to touch anything in the drunk tank, decided to wipe it off in my pocket.

Some old codger wearing nothing but grippy socks, is whining about not being able to eat without his teeth, so his cellmate passes him his dentures, to chew his waffles.

We forgot to take this businessman’s tie after that salt bullshit, so we found him hanging from a top bunk. Which really sucked because we was watching my Titans give a shellacking to the Chiefs, on our tv bolted to the plywood in the ceilings corner.

In for a simple DUI but bitchin about public shaming, southerners, and his reputation, across from some screaming frat boy. Oh well, guess he was torn between suicide and breakfast, but he had the personality of a wasp anyway.

We give the worst ones Jim Beam, so as to stop em shaking, but it's just like a band aid. This place, like gas stations and buses, are very democratic, since they are all equally shit.

At least we get hot chicks here, although since I'm still legally married, I can't touch any of em. My wife, her names Jade, has been cooped up with some dickhead attorney. She done called each divorce lawyer in town, and they can't represent me now, I've gotta grin and bear it.

She stepped out after our baby died, but it was her cat's fault. Purty liked to snuggle on the kid but one night, since he laid sprawled out over the kids nose and mouth for hours, the boy was blue by morning. I woke up to her screaming, she didn't want to talk, so she left and didn't look back. Not too surprised, she's been building up her venom for me a while anyway.

Truth is, I was drunk and asleep and forgot to check up on him before bedtime, that door should have been closed. Suppose now it is, and Earth will turn on despite our love. I aint never gonna see my wife naked again and every morning I gotta tell myself its temporary. If I'd have killed her when we met id be out of jail by now and none of this would a been. Nothing matters again I reckon.

Watching them hopeless drunks reminds me of something I read before flunking out tech school. "We change them and are changed". And something else about staring into an abscess until it stares back. This towns like at. But my biggest question from punching clocks there is more important. After that yankee hung hisself I wondered why does human shit smell so bad outside of water?

I'll tip you double for them V.I.P. rooms, what do you say darling? I'm still married. No touching.

Afterwards- While underpaid bands crank out honky tonk classics everyone sings as one drunken chorus. Members of the same pack. Slurred lyrics in harmony. So loud they drown out the band. Until the band stops between songs. What united them briefly ceases. Yet the tipsy charade continues. No one wanting to be the first to break the spell by leaving the bar. Defecting. For the leaving confirms the existence of life going on outside. Beyond the party. Sustaining the party. The brief silence assures them that this can't last. Reminds them of that eternal loneliness outside. Promising to stay in touch after. If only they ever did. Life may be more bearable.

BARTENDER'S BLUES

Key West, Florida is swamp ass hot. No designated drivers in the area code. At night, dead stars pollute a mindlessly blank sky. Making God look senile. Obscene emerald flashes from a drowning sun spray the tides like sewage. A buoyed planet refusing to stay drowned. Water thick as spit. Light ricochets off harsh ripples like water moccasins. Snakes walk on land here. Gypsy chickens crow and parade the streets as rickshaw riders harangue hungover tourists. The sun is unrelenting. Shade is a mirage. Briny air kaleidoscopes your eyeballs. How could you not disappear out there with the Sirens still in heat?

Bartender- When the worlds got you worn out you need a bar. People are dicks to uber drivers and waiters but everyone wants the bartender to think they're cool.

We encourage spilled secrets and stoically imply anonymity. Carte blanche. Every night, shadowed by a thrashing heat, goons, trollops, and charlatans climb onto barstool mountain. Losers from both sides of the track converge in ecstasy and self-pity. It's all here. Grecian.

I pine for these daily inconsequential calamities, throes of drunkards, quotidian falsehoods, and adult melodramas. I'm in love with the owner and her husband because life is futile sometimes. Don't worry. Only the lowest type of love. Lucky I'm Catholic because the gauntlet of trials aren't for nada. They enrich life with purposeful lessons if we choose to recognize them.

A noble gig making me pertinent and sore. I drink a Cuba Libre before my shift and feel like every minute before was worthless. A fizzy club soda brain resets me. Bars are like that. A temple that tithes body and soul. Yet heals nothing. At best these people share a neighborly obligation to play nice. Pretend to care for one another's miserable foibles. Promising some

eternal bond before hitting them with the old Irish goodbye. Before slinking out full as a tick. Refuting the onslaught of lessons from the universe. Cyclical traumas.

I dream of drowning both owners. Worse oddities occurred under this heavy moon Hitler and Jesus cried under. Life is cheap. My father was killed by a tree in a crash after basic. He discovered my mother had been two timing him with his brother. Who later died skydiving. Claw marks all over his leather jacket before the fall cracked his spine like a glow stick.

The worst part with dead parents is how no one can ever love you more than them. No one here pays me any mind. I'm a bar with ears.

Corra-I died twice during basic training. The first was a molly overdose after I blacked out and left some tourist handcuffed to his Airbnb bedpost. Being a medic rules since I have enough Narcan to necromance this islands census.

Blurry nights are punctuated by sheparding drunken girls' home from horny vultures. Only came here after my husband and mother intervned me. Dove out a window and cracked my orbital. Quit drinking long enough to get meat hooked on the opioids in the hospital. Drugs so good you'll let your teeth shed out and your cheeks sink like lipped crankbait.

It's a fearful, tough town to tool around in. Folks flock south regardless. Being here's like rolling a stone up a hill. Gotta make your own meaning since there aint none. Pushing drugs alongside Narcan feels karmically attune. Spend most days pulling girls out their puke, shoing guys away, or babysitting girls in uber's. I'm not paranoid if they're really trying to get me.

Love and comradery for my husband is dead. Jealousy limps us forward. Like a dog crawling under his favorite log to croak. He gets things done financially but he stands tall in his

possession. I want him to die. Leaving me with a mess of money and sympathy. I'm just aiming to get high and keep you from dying as you're passing through. Can't get every lost dog home though. This islands' capsizing and Gods away on vacation.

Harold- I don't root for my friends. I sabotage them and hope for the worst.

I used to be married and had a job since people said I should. My wife wilted from cancer but life insurance sponged up those tears alright. We had a newborn. Only problem was I'd had my secret vasectomy a year prior. Planned on killing myself. But lacked the moral courage. I moved here because no one I know is from here and will never visit such a sour smelling rock. This briny air could gag a maggot.

Many third world countries inhabitants find the idea of vacations absurd. Why would you want to leave your home, family and friends they might reckon? I was set to be a stay at home dad and write stories all day between wiping shit and cooking. When I left vocational rehab, I drove an El Camino with the radiator hissing straight to Hemingway's old bar. *Captain Tony's*, not those hacks at *Sloppy Joes*. Had to plop her baby at the last mainland fire station. I'm no saint. I can't run zone defense on someone else's child. Pounding enough rum and cokes to leave my liver reeling like a backed up septic tank. I was three different guys in the car ride crossing the bridge down here. Who among us can handle the bipolar? We drank and laughed and met soldiers and prostitutes and thought we were in a novel. I smoke tart cigars and hack up meconium hued phlegm.

I sleep with a .25 that was my father in laws. Using what looks I have left to seduce mainlanders. Stress about writing opposed to writing. I'm content to be a beach bum. Bidding my time as if it's not sifting through pruned fingers.

Victor-Its ball stickingly hot in middle of winter here. Sipping PBR coffees with breakfast. Walking Jimmy Buffett song. Florida man. Best part of holing up in Florida? Shooting shit. Lawnmower craps out? *Bang*. Printer stops working? *Pow*. Hell, with these stand your castle laws you can smoke a human. In my yard? *Blammo*.

You can get in most houses here by yanking out the AC unit, FYI. Had some decent scores until an amber alert went off on my phone waking some owner. Son of a bitch sat up like Lazarus and pierced my boy T flush in the eyeball, the bullet rolled around like a shoe in a dryer. Surprised that pocket rocket went off. Paper says he bled out for about thirty minutes. Not a bad response time here. T died whining into the dude's toilet. Piss puddle like a mirror. More of a cut for me, way I see it. He wanted to be famous and now he's in the paper, just on the backside, survived by some mother Martha. Never fathomed the possibility of him having a mom. Just imagined he was the spawn of his father's grunting into a bologna sandwich.

Key West's an archipelago. Just as isolated as its people. Black cats on every corner. High tides drown the fainthearted part time boozers. Often, I'll just mug a Dollar General if I'm strapped for a cash injection. Those places might as be ATM's they're so secluded and defenseless. Just like the girls with a suspiciously salty drink at the bar. No one obligated to defend them.

Been rehabbed once already. Didn't take. Asking another dude to be my "sponsor" was like asking him to be my valentine. Been married too. Didn't take either. I relapsed when my kid got the diagnosis. Broke many a heart at the AA room I polluted. My ex-wife is less petty towards the doctors. I want their office to catch fire and them to get stampeded by all their coworkers. She robbed me of solitude but provided no companionship.

It don't matter. You see, all this here debauchery will go on without me. Some deep breathing apocalyptic machine hellbent on oblivion.

Martha-There's a labyrinth under this isle. You can enter it under that nude bar. *The Bull*. Men chase you with muskets and knives and do what men do there. If you can't pay a dealer or you're a tourist no one will fuss over, in you go. Rumor has it, there's a panther and anacondas down there. A lot of the rooms have cameras and two-way mirrors so elites can place bets on how long you'll survive. They inject you with heroin, smallpox, motor oil, piss, anything to slow you down. That houseboat caravan ships out the bodies. Where gators crush their skulls and shit them out into a sirenless salt grave.

Those purple streetlights in town signify cartel drug houses. The rest of the towns a real pissier though. Swingers clubs, karaoke, Hemingway's place, and the most gorgeous southernmost beaches in the U.S. The southernmost point in my life was when I moved here. Dad weeping, visiting the loony bin. Was a thousandaire but lost it toward legal fees. Arson, endangerment, D.U.I, or gun stuff. I blame the colony of Ernest's cats that gave me toxoplasmosis.

Mood swings as consistent as low tide. Losing my peepers too. Left me jonesing for men of lesser stock or trucker crank. Mel was a trucker when we met. Hope he jackknives into the everglades. Use'ta couldn't stand his motor oil smell. Probably spilled it on hisself to cover them other girls wafting aroma. He threw a Budweiser at my late husband's urn. Had to replace them with his favorite kittens' litter.

I have an intimate relationship with Christ. Who handles my earthy vendettas. Confusion to the usurper Mel and his legion of sluts. Says he bailed since I gained weight but type one diabetes runs in my family.

He's always been jealous of the cats and too vanilla to really sell my fury roleplay. He went apeshit at the human sized litter box. We could stand to be more like them cats. Nine lifers. Livers. If it aint the 5G it's the spirits we swallow that slows us down. Oh, how we fail to mourn our dead. In a town that feels like a purgatory on sand before some inevitable storm.

Dan- I got caught selling feet pics to other toy soldiers. I'm pretty feminine. Girl I lost my v-card to said "I like you since your bodies so girly".

My life was squandered and loathed until I met Kristen.

Every day before was some lame practice. A boring basic training before the ass clenching rifles get to popping off. Being with her was both self-actualization and ego death. Solitude is foul on me. She was extensive and elevated with small eyes full of misfortunes. Dressed in layers like a pile of laundry come alive.

She's a poet. Penning odes to dying whales, old lovers locking her in closets with mason jars for days, smoking weed with her dog, and future lovers who'll destroy her. She ate whole carrots during meetings. Flamboyant and unapologetic. She didn't fold her legs or cover her mouth.

She had hairy arms and legs and a thin moustache, like a 70's drill sergeant, that shined. She had all these moles and I'd lay up at night with a pen playing connect the dots on her Kevlar tight back. When we made love, we kept the windows open and the tv on. Usually war movies.

Never locking eyes. She was intoxicating. A poet. I was her fool on borrowed time. Fraudulent lover.

I cheated on her with a traveling salesman woman. She called it the “end of an *error*”. I got stationed here because she moved here. You probably think that’s creepy. But I anticipate this and suspect I’m capable of much worse.

I went on to date her neighbor. Under the ruse of wanting to meet in secrecy. Lied and said I was married and finalizing the divorce so no one can know or that greedy lawyer will finish me. Finish us. She bought it and fed me all the weeks gossip freely. I even had fake conversations with my made-up wife to keep character. Making dinner for two. All her lovely neighbors’ secrets and desires fell on my ears like mortar rounds. If you wouldn’t do the same you must never been in love. I fake orgasms and pretend I’d die without her. This stand in lover. A placeholder, a transition into my real love’s arms. Find that odd? You must lead a sheltered life.

I even visit her therapist and try to prod her with specificity. Who wouldn’t? Once discovered as a liar lusting for her friend, it wouldn’t matter. I’ve gotten plastic surgery after the IED. To look like anyone else. I can be no one for her. No one’s native to Florida anyway. Unicorns if they are. And not usually the fun unicorns at the swinging bars like *The Bull*. Anyway, I caught her stripping. How’d she sink so low I wondered. Turned out to be her sister. One of them classic stalking the wrong twin scenarios. Wouldn’t mind sharing a fox hole with both of them. I’m into cheap thrills so I left once the chase was run out. Two bushes in your hand or whatever.

Titus- I'm Vic's bait. He hoodwinked my fucking ass. The same guy who steals angel tree kids' names just so they don't get gifts. He's an unfuckable slob and needed an Adonis to pull chicks.

Jessie's a journalist and a good guy. She's a super fox though so I warned her about the creeps. She's also an ex-addict so a bottle in her hand may as well be a twelve gauge with your big toe on the trigger. Might head back to South Carolina and see my grandparents before they die. I'm gonna crush someone's larynx like a red solo cup if they step to me. I'm a Gracie black belt in case you're wondering about the cauliflower ears.

Victor's daughter's bum liver keeps him home invading. He's living pretty hand to mouth for a sex trafficker. An enslaved slaver. Saying "I need you on my wall" or "I want to wear your face" to these mainlanders. He's the number you don't want to call on the bathroom stall. Town's like a drugged purgatory. Oasis of salt water. I aint Garth Brooks mother fucker, I got friends in high places.

Jessie-The most gorgeous woman I ever saw was beneath the paper-thin Augusta, Georgia sun. They called it "Disgusta" the whole time we was up there.

She was tall and long and brown. Not from there. She was Aphrodite. She was a waitress. I was so eclipsed I accidently ordered my steak well done. "Ok we'll kill it twice" she joked. I felt like a schlep. Transported back into the rube I was in high school. Showering with other sweaty confused kids was an unending source of dread. I didn't have a girlfriend until my second senior year. She was my best friends' girl. It was a mess. A real low point then that's molded into a plateau.

The most beautiful man I ever saw was in Greenville, South Carolina. He was shirtless in the street. Directing traffic after a head on collision. He was Apollo. He was Adonis. He stared at me and I let him. He had those little riblet muscles under his armpits. Most guys kick rocks when they see I'm packing the same thing as them. But Titus is too concerned with himself to care.

"Same plumbing's cool with me babe" might not be Shakespearian, but there's a lower bar for us marginalized. He loves who likes him. I can always pass here on account of there's no natives. Geographic pride is harmful. "Why love an acre just because your parents porked in the back of a pinto parked there?" as T has said ad nauseum.

Just a renewal of drugged pilgrims here. No local mob to oppose my sexual duality. Most of these tourists farting around didn't wake up thinking they'd bed a mannish girl. But there is no trickery. I'm no great deceiver. I tell them upfront in laymen's terms. Issues only arise with the unrelenting sprawling sun and its false clarity. Echoes of their friends' opinions bouncing around my duplex. As if their business will slip cause they touched a peter.

T's invited me to his party. Bunch of Bubbas greasing palms and asses. Just black cats all night. T isn't normally my type. He smells like an everything bagel but I enjoy him musk and all. My love for Titus is defiling me. He's discouragingly good at sex and too dumb to know better. Total manwhore. I'm not through hurting enough to leave though. I feign to put up a fight but I'd go anywhere he said. Echoing his bad jokes in vain. Anchored by the junk he slips in these veins.

Marcus-With winds just right you can hear the surf echo down the Conch Republic.

The mutts are sore after another successful hunt, except Don had too much rum and a boar took his gonads. Poor boy hollered in a terribly flat soprano. A castrato now, very funny.

I penetrated the pig's cranium with a .45, the Colt by the way, in a span of seconds I'll describe as slower than I could have. He shook his legs like a truck with a broken timing chain.

He called us "yellow bellied" and "feeble fucks". Spewing mean spirited truths in agony. I quietly suspect he was piping Donna but I'll never ask her now. He's gone, and so must her unexpected hotness toward him. You can pine for a dead man but your last name is mine honey.

T's boss wants to acquire my hounds to guard their underground brothel. I don't need to cover the rent by breeding dogs but these three are utterly nonnegotiable. Sentimentality, the unearned emotion if ever there was such a thing. Donna claims some petite army man is stalking her. "Maybe it's just someone trying to snap your sisters' neck like a cheap banjo string" I joked to a silent audience. Her twin is somehow ugly to me since being draped in baggy rags and weak poetry can sink a face as you know. I have an original Colt, not sure if I mentioned. And a gold top Les Paul. Donna is the one just not the last one.

She's never yours, it's only ever your turn bud.

Donna-In this area code, the bartenders are hot but so's the beer. I'm down the street at *Teasers*. Fine gig other than that sunscreen fart smell on crusty pleather seats. My sister was taking my place that night we got some merchant agreement violation. Same face, no rhythm.

Daddy put his face in a lawnmower on Christmas day before he could pit us against each other. But I still hate men older than him, feeling robbed by them. Mommas in the Monroe county jail. She's done two years, which is nice cause she had one-word syndrome. Say one wrong word to her and she'd ignore us kids for months at a time.

There are no family photos on our walls, just a constant exchanging of frames depicting failed relationships. Marcus and I got a bad thing going but it'll do. He's so courteous he snaps the needle off his syringe before tossing it out the car window.

Gotta find a man opposite your ex. Don passed over yonder wallowing and cursing his friends. Some people lack grace even in the most prudent trials. Fuck having grace in a grocery checkout line, sex and deaths what requires grace. Florida demands grace. Nobody's from here and there aint no accent or communal sense in sight. Palm trees like prison bars. Bars like cells. Sounds like a bad line from a Kristen poem.

Kristen- My heart is wet ashes and my brainbox is a frying pan. At home, I just pace from room to room pouring whisky in la Croix's. I don't work and can't.

There is no joy in waiting. I need to be paralyzed by the numbing quality of labor. That dull ache. I used to love writing but all this alone time made it feel like a nine to five shit fest. I need something to struggle against and hate and cry over. I'm not fit to be a kept woman or full ride student. I need cancer, drownings, forlorn relatives, and blunt force traumas. I need drunken pool games and hot wings. Can't thrive in meal prepped lunches or morning forehead kisses. Drawing more from abortions and relapses than movie nights and play dates.

I used to be happy and regularly sexed. Now I'm an emotional disaster. Lying for emphasis, crying for effect. To avoid punching my ex I had to pinch myself hard.

When I was a kid my sister used to speak my name to the writing spiders. I'd beg her to stop but shed whisper to them even more, swearing I'd die if they spun my name. Every morning I woke up early to burn the spider families with daddy's zippo. I'd thumb their guts out like grapes or feed them to pet snakes.

My sister shits on our past saying “No one in our hometown knows how to fuck” or “Only fools die where they’re born”. I just can’t feel at home in such an unrooted half sunken rock.

There are no roots to be drained by or grasp onto. Tourism isn’t culture. If the momentum of our family’s failures hadn’t sequestered against such merciless shores perhaps, we’d be alive or engaged in humanity rather than depravity. Maybe wickedness finds you despite phony borders and accents or cuisines.

It found us and if joy hunts you down it’s a bad cold case detective. Happiness, a state trooper clenching his hat at your door. Donna made an Only Fans and I promised she could stay with me until she got on her feet, or knees rather. My stalker ex fell in love with her. The wrong one, not even the girl he planned on stalking initially. It’s a small world but I wouldn’t want to carpet it. Yet another grueling character arc. What if everyone who loves you *is* wrong?

These barstools will be warmed by countless luses. Crammed in like chicken parts in a bag. Positioned like items in a lunatic gods flea market. Replaying mythic barroom tragedies and haunted by the same spirits. Spilled beer and tears engrained in sticky bar tops. The ones drinking and the ones pouring might as well be the same. They could switch places and it wouldn’t matter. Same as tomorrow.

HELL STAYS OPEN ALL NIGHT LONG

The farm was sandy yet held no breeze. Isolated off a busy enough road to claim several generations of dogs. Neighbors were miles apart yet current on intergenerational gossips. Half-truths, falsehoods, or facts too substantial for this side of the river Styx. Rumors that haunted you in life are confirmed in death. Revealed as sexual betrayals, surprise familial violence, life disaffirming secrets, or merely what could have been. Within some celestial courtroom you're revealed a fool before the mocking dead.

The farms panoramic trees praising the dying sun like petrified pagans. Unconvinced the plummeting sun will succeed in rising. While the moon mirrors lives the sun cannot fathom. Ashamed with each dawn at what terrors the truth of the night fetches.

Ambulance and fire engine caravans skidded into a burnt plastic halt. Patrol cars beeped and whirled outside the charred trailer. A fireman carried a limp mutt under a moon sparked by flames. Winds lifted embered papers like suicidal birds up in the air towards a full moon. Singeing out before they could hit the damp earth. Why they arsoned that trailer? One man reckoned boringly as a police scanner buzzed news of a poolhall war.

Billy-Could hardly whip a fishing line in this dank tuxedo. Same mothballed rag I wore to daddy's closed casket. Least Milton's was open, put down and waxy.

Creek was like chocolate milk then too. Grandboys used to see who'd skip pebbles furthest. Caught more turtles than fish. "Useless as tits on a boar hog" the fellas reckoned "Can't be no kin of yours Billy". Tackleboxes plumb full of pills and mini bottles.

This creek opens up to where they found mama ass over teakettle. Figure T. Hysteria now called postpartum. Retiring from the water plant left me with nothing but time to nip rye whiskey, fish, and ponder where concrete encroaches my grass.

Lingering out that stuffy house where me and Emily been farting on the same cushions since Eisenhower's day. Warned them boys both to only marry women keen on agreeing temperatures. Doubt ill make another inauguration, but might outlive the youngest grandboy since he treats rehab like vacation.

I want to wake in glory knowing them boys got houses and a piece of money. Some fool fish biting snaps me back. A pale sun darkening my water. The clan of kin yours born into is so totally separate from the bunch you die around. The line throbs and whines out my hands and skids off a dock I finally realize I never owned.

Emily-Hunched in a pope posture, I see Billy booting a Marlboro into that roly poly barn floor.

Well water cascading off dishes, I can always see him from the kitchen but he aint never seen me once. Just heard and ignored in gossip.

Allen limping home from rehab and got pawnshops on the brain. So, Billy's rearranging hoarded relics senselessly.

I been thinking on a church pamphlet devotional saying "Once you enter the Lords Kingdom, who will you greet first?" I'd push past my dead daddy, both sisters and the baby I give up to see Lloyd. That man had style. Aborted babies might not be permitted on them golden streets anyhow.

Sweaty nights Lloyd contorting me and gasping. Crackling chicken pans rooster tail on the wood paneling stirring me from wicked daydreams. Fixing a coconut pie, fried chicken, collards, cornbread, and a mess of muscadines for the new sheriff. One of them Colemans. Sorry bunch. He's looking into Raymond breaking into Milton's house.

We got ourselves a rigid system here and the circle can't go unbroken by him. This imposter good thief won't be mourned. Milton's money is Billy's birthright near enough.

Ushering peace in the valley for these grandboys. Ashamed of my sexual frailty. Hemorrhoids wide as grapes. The Lord carries these trespasses since spoken aloud would be sacrilege. But after my dreams of Lloyds grunts, the Lord breaks his covenant with man, flooding the planet again.

Allen-Papa and the farm both seem shrunken after each spell in rehab. Baring watermelon, corn, cantaloupes, muscadines, figs, pears, and sunflowers tall as me.

"Looking virile Papa," I perjured.

"You ain't missed a meal boy."

I always looked down on the old timer for regarding corn over Faulkner. His eyes were glazed as the peepers I veered at the center. He was slurring but the rolodex of skanks I've flipped through here never understood a lick of his mumbles.

He's probably never drank and only copulated one broad twice. Yet, he was clear and brimstone when he hollered at me for losing golf cart keys as a kid.

"How damn stupid can you be?"

Like a motto ushering me into each county rec room or rehab. I recall Jeremy scrubbing the commode with Papas tooth brush in some petty revenge. He's narcoleptic and always seems to be in hibernation.

After sniffing out a bonded rye whiskey from a high shelf, probably granny's, memories of her as a real goer surfaced. You gotta buy them bottles with screw tops. Corks too loud when you're trying to sneak a sip.

The rye buoyed me. Mindfulness may be key but drinking fields the intrusive thoughts. Dulls one into a more singular state of observance. I'm not me unless I'm staring down an empty glass. A shot glass is never half empty. It never fails to stir you.

No way I'll expire on this shit farm. You can't die just wherever your mom pushed you out. Papa is Sisyphus with a tractor. Daddy's flamboyant in exaggerations but this inheritance inflowing sounds promising.

Duke Power stock or some shit. I palmed some pearl handled .357 the old man won't miss. Either an heirloom that shoot clean or some fouled relic to blow my hand off. Craving the confidence of a gun in truck. Been dreaming of warped pool tables, sticky bar tops, and jukebox angels while away.

Two strangers from rehab where missing digits. Some meth peddler from Pelzer, felt it appropriate to slice the extremities off slighting junkies. Deeply ashamed of this permanent alteration to their hands. "I used to draw all the time. It was my passion" one of them whispered. While his thumbless twin fretted about "How am I supposed to throw a baseball with my boy or keep his respect now". William Burroughs claimed you could lucid dream if you look at your

hands in a dream. But what if you don't have thumbs? I worry pondered towards a dreamless sleep muted by a choir of cicadas.

Ashton-Bicing a Camel, I load up the 5.56 for opening day. Slapping on coconut tasting sunscreen since the suns closer down here. Prefer to headshot the fuckers since one killt daddy in his truck.

Son of a bitch got wedged in the cobwebbed windshield and hooved him to death. Americas most deadly animal annually. I'd punch them with brass knuckles if I could.

Clarence knocked up some stripper and I reckoned he ought to think hard and long on whether he wants to stay or go. Off he went like a shot while I was at Dollar General.

Got a thing for men of lesser stock. Them fixer uppers. Under their lack of guidance and simple irritability, they're controllable. My true love got hitched. Can you have two wives in Christian heaven? Celestial mistress? How can the broadband of heaven support both my reconnection with a long dead beloved grandmother and a sweaty reunion with the one who got away? Day after day. Hi granny I'd shake your hand but its busy. My joy just can't be.

What type of celestial brainwash would need to occur to justify the rape babies, sordid affairs, secret murders, and blocked out incest? We wouldn't be us in the afterlife. Just some knockoff after school special version. Or is my thinking all off? If we lived as we should would we be our heavenly selves here on this toilet planet? Is your God some unflappable caretaker or a smiting gestapo?

Nancy tried to set me up with Raymond, a thinly veiled plot to set Allen off me. He's more fun with this threat of inheritance but Raymond's hotter. If you told me they'd both died in agony or asked to bum a cigarette, I'd have the same reaction.

Jeremy-Shaded firmly beneath my baby brothers' convictions, I realize he needs to attend some jezebel rehab. Heroin and heroines. Wish he'd coalesce into the town's demands. Family feels paramount, irreplaceable, but fleeting now under the scrutiny of a lump inheritance.

I was comfortably inoculated to my wife's infidelity until everyone at church started sniffing around. Had to start carrying a knife and pepper spray. Some poolhall goons kicked a fella's eye out and branded "lucky boy" into his haunches. Some signpost to alert other inmates of a pedophile. I know now there is no benevolent god. An omniscient shareholder at best.

As a misspent youth we were menaces. Slapping men on the side of the road with our belt buckles. Degenerates clubbing mailboxes, smushing turds into library book slots, and placing ratttraps into the final hole on golf courses. Some of our kids are in hell and our parents fucked way more people than we can imagine. I just lack god conviction either way. Unless it's three am and the cat at the door sounds like a witch.

David-Peeping out the motel blinds with a crusty .38 I seen pigs patrolling. "Come back to bed baby" my rented man begs across a cigarette cratered carpet. Passing the one hitter, lit up by the fuzzy tv. UFC fighters throwing elbows and head kicks excite me.

"I worked my balls off at that plant in Greer without thank you number one from them boys or their so-called mother who always came home with matted hair and slurred."

"It's ok baby."

Burning plastic odor lanced our eyeballs. Titling sunlight framed the duffel bag through crusty blinds. I had to snatch something before some DNA fucks this whole deal. Fat chance this bags here come morning. Almost comforting, like a gambler risking it on a bad hand just to hit the hotel bar sooner.

Nancy-So many goddamn buzzing phones I gotta slurp my shrimp sauce like a shot.

“Momma done fell out” some kid screams aggravating my tinnitus.

“Please oh god don’t die momma.”

Merle is pretending to fellate a chili dog across my desk. Laughing with my face and not my voice I field the call. Keying in all the horseshit details. Yawning while another call wraps up.

Some guy wanted to let us know where his body would be after he offed hisself. Heard a dog in the back round and told him the hound would get throwed in the pound and likely killed. Seems to have worked.

We feel no moral obligation to help our foolish neighbors. Boredom like one of them pendulums measures our reactions. DOA or survivors. Neither give closure. Ever since that sissy David run off. What a joke from the jump. Colorblind working in a paint factory, can’t make this shit up.

When the call from Ashton’s trailer dinged in, I was ecstatic. Wasn’t here when they got the call for my boy. Heroin. Sheriff had no choice. Galivanting husband and dead son can’t fit into my heart both at once. Delivering babies and arguing with junkies over the phone helps. Other people’s misery like a shot of Narcan.

Coleman-Them Wrights a sorry ass bunch. Whore grannies, junky sons, history of drownings, half of em light in the loafers. Somewhere a ditch aint being dug with these mutts toiling around.

Slinked into the gingers trailer. She didn't bother putting out her skunky joint. Plucking it before swallowing it, I asked if she seen Raymond or Allen's pudgy asses. She stuttered and lied meekly. Be damned if she inherits this earth.

Reminded her she ain't dance with me at prom or cotillion. Had sense enough to conveniently forget. Couldn't tell if she was dumb or indifferent about the Duke Power shit.

She went down easy. Her pleas sounded like some feeble language I couldn't follow. Like talking to your dog. Took a heap of dryer lint and Crisco to kindle the pile of bills in her ratty doublewide. Her, stiff as a hickory but conscientious. Peeled off her apple cider vinegar smelling socks for keepsake. Ground level to assure my mug was the last flash she seen before passing over to wherever it is whores reside.

Neighbors closed their blinds and cut off lights to pretend I weren't there. Imagine them praying for some bizarre world where robbers can be called to come shoot cops in the back. I flipped the sirens on and slung gravel just to set the mood. Aint hiding from nobody but they best look out for me.

When I peeled into my driveway somethings afoot. Porch light blank and deadbolt locked. Clicked the cylinder. Woodenly walking down linoleum hallway. Wife lifting her head from phone, mascara leaking like a jailhouse wino. Did she find lipstick on my uniform? No way I leaved the boys in the car seats again? Had a condom floated up in the septic tank I been

digging? Divorce will chop this Wright money in half. Probably just them pregnancy hormones. Daddy used to call them *Whoremoans*. Told me through a leaky face that cancerd got momma.

Thank God, thank Jesus in heaven. What an earthly blessing. I tried to mimic human emotion with the oh no honeys oh gods and shit. Thank Christ for a dead mother and no cocky deputy or mouthy stripper. Sometime life works out. Can't wait to restore order on the land cutting grass and fixing my shitter.

Raymond- Figured that meth head burned my trailer. Sliding Milton's .45 in my waistline I peeled towards the non-prodigal Wright sons house. You fuck my shit I'll take yours. Seen two squad cars outside and bailed, downtown bound.

Scanner buzzing in with bullshit claims. No way in hell that nerd pulled on the pig. Conspiracy just like them false flag psyops in China. A bald homeless man hollered at some cotillion girls in a summer parade. He hooped and yelped and threw candy back at them.

"Fuck you and your joyful life".

Labeling them whores and deceivers. But when the boy scouts emerged, he was mystified. Eyes leaking, he saluted them and mumbled some wayward rendition of the national anthem.

After kicking Milton's door, I seen baby pics of him with little me. Mailed his schizophrenic journal to the paper. Writings debunking gospel familial truths and spitting venomous otherworldly claims. If that don't get read, I'm the only breathing man knowing Emily's kids aint Billy's. No telling who that brood leaked from.

Some relatives in hell mouth secrets to me in fever dreams. You could smell char at Ashtons funeral.

Waking up at three wondering what color her nails are as they still grow in that smoky pine box.

That's what I remember before the truck skidded, flipped, no wheel rubbing earth. Cracked sternum steering wheel. Motor ticking. Final visions before a glass eye smooshed into the one kicked out. Don't remember the beating but the heated wire hanger to the ass perked me up. They put some dead girl in my truck and up the road I went forever.

My good eye closed, dulled by jailhouse meds. Daydreaming on which interior decorations Ashton would line the cell with. Cousin told me the sheriff even slapped Jeremy at his funeral. Killing him twice with no merit or reward. Some mad fisherman suffocating us on air. Other orange jumpsuits treat me like a urban myth. Old Scratch. "Give me your biscuit chomo" scores my social life. Reckoning the paper burned Milton's journal, and I played a bad hand, hording psych pills for a bitter tasting early reprieve.

I loved her so much that I started believing in an afterlife. To try and *will* some more time together.

Coleman slammed his tailgate down to ready the lawnmower. Restore some order on his wild land. Dominion meditative. Septic tank exposed and gurgling hot air behind him. Tampons, toilet paper, condoms, years of refuse, and neglectedly flushed pharmaceuticals fermented. He dunked root killer in the tank and took up his spade, prepared for battle with the natural world.

His truck radio ceased. Uncrouching, he spun around. Plastic wheels rolling on metal sank his heart as the push mower met his teeth. Clicking like two wood blocks. Overwhelmed by the impact, he flailed at air as the ground wasn't there yet. Familial sewage thickened his lungs and clamped his eyelids shut. Never reaching his total wingspan, the machine sank him.

Fingernails clasp at dirt walls, putrid gasps and thick blinks stifling. The Wright boy rested on the truck's bed. Coleman clawing at dirt, then air, then metal. Never garnering foundation. He imagined the sheriff begging. No words imagined or pleaded pleasing him. A foul claustrophobic well submerged him. Allen, ashamed he lacked the moral courage to kill the rest of the Colemans. Sauntered home and plunged twenty milliliters of black china in his freckled arm. Momentum of his grandfather's past and wealth concentrated down into one needle and one vein ending a bloodline he didn't know wasn't his.

The family's foibles were largely ignored by a jaded town. Eclipsed by the sheriff's accidental drowning. Jokes mimicking "Shitty way to go." or "He was always full of shit." got a smattering of empty applause at the old men's Hardees breakfast or in sweltering bars.

Billy lost his fishing spot to morbid voyeurs. Violating murky waters with shoddy lures at the wrong time of year. At breakfast the townsmen cursed this new weather or snorted at inheritances they didn't fathom. Come dusk they mocked unfaithful wives while nervous of their own.

Inside a barroom that'd been shell cased twice before, minor fools rested on their laurels, waiting, hydrating, as greater fools clacked balls together for profit. Every bar in this Union, the same overshirt on the chair temperature. An incident clock waiting to reset over your D.U.I. death. A list of banned patrons hangs on a horseshoe blocking the sanitary rating. *Ratchet chick*

with greasy hair, spitting couple, full nelson, and simply that bitch Laverne. Someone so tragic they defy description.

Men who've been drunk for twenty years and women which, today, relapsed. People who will fumigate their lungs with Camels, flood their livers with rot gut whiskey, kill themselves and others in car wrecks, or take a voluntary spill off a barn roof when the world is too much with them. This is where the dads who left for milk five years ago ended up. Creepy uncles and jilted mistresses carving their names in sticky wooden bar tops. Forgotten.

Lifelong lushes about to take their last drink before going septic cheering on year one patient zero drunkards. Mighty stiff seats to be so expensive. Neon soaked angels cavort alongside sweat liars.