

This Is The Last Time

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Abstract:

*This Is The Last Time* is an interconnected collection of flash fiction pieces, following a group of friends in Hawai‘i and chronicling their separate lives and how they converge. With each piece told in the first-person perspective, these characters construct reality according to their own insights and fragmented narratives from the past while negotiating addiction, heartbreak, and the anxiety of isolation. As they attempt to mediate their lives through social networks and technology, the characters in *This Is The Last Time* attempt to confess and testify to their most intimate and revealing moments as they strive for redemption through the vulnerability that story-telling offers them, no matter how brief the opportunity.

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*“We were so under the brine  
We were so vacant and kind”*

The National

## Introduction

When someone asks you about your day, there's a lot to skip over: the minute details, sporadic thoughts, or passing observations. In favor of plot and the listener's attention, a speaker has to narrativize, favor specific moments, and condense, all in the interest of time. The seriousness of the subject matter, or how far back it originates in memory, may warrant deeper thinking and careful execution of story – here telling can become testimony, insight, and characterization unfolding. But again, in the interest of time, and depending on the speaker or writer, will the audience commit? It's a question concerning patience, and the willingness on both sides to tell or listen. The way information and entertainment is delivered through media demands instantaneous delivery and brevity, what we have access to and what is accessible. This informs my choice to write a collection of flash fiction, defined as a short story that falls between 500 to 1200 words, as I sought to write the most contemporary book that I could in subject matter and form.

As a basic summary, *This Is The Last Time* follows Jonah and his circle of friends, chronicling his failed relationships, drug use, and approach to entering adulthood. With impending joblessness and lack of any security for the future, Jonah must negotiate his fears of intimacy, notions of masculinity defined by his peers, and his disconnection from society, which will further strengthen his urge to seek escape. In conceptualizing audience, I imagined a reader my own age as an important consideration of how I could respond to the current culture, or the one that I'm complicit in. Where there exists a need to share and narrativize in instant and condensed forms, as an ongoing documentary effort, what happens to storytelling? How do we tell stories that we are unwilling to share?

In order to keep the mainstay of strong characterization in a conventional short story collection, I decided to write flash fiction strictly in first-person. This allows a focused perception from a narrator's point-of-view, approximating the time it would take for a person to tell a story to another individual in a conversation. Therefore, *This Is The Last Time* follows a group of friends, each having their turn to speak for themselves, contradict each other, and gossip. Mikhail Bahktin's notion of polyphony, or multiple voices, serves as my point of departure as I explore this group's fragmented and fractured narratives. He describes how each voice in a narrative carries a distinct insight, validity, and perspective. Therefore, consciousness is not limited to a certain narrator, and polyphony becomes a way of seeing how reality appears and becomes constructed through each character. In writing about Dostoevsky, Bahktin notes, "What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (6). In their most revealing and vulnerable stories, I wondered if they would actually have the courage to tell their stories to one another. I wondered if they were all starting to sound the same, stamped by my style as a writer, which I tried to resist throughout each piece and knew was unavoidable but apparent through various drafts. Thus, it became my challenge to make my authorial consciousness less present and strive to bring a sense of plurality and difference among the characters.

HISTORY AND FORM OF FLASH: CONCEPTUALIZING *THIS IS THE LAST TIME*

According to Holly Howitt-Dring, in her essay “Making Micro Meanings: Reading and Writing Microfiction,” “flash fiction,” as it was coined in 1988, or “microfiction,” can be considered a blurred genre falling between poetry and prose, which was pioneered by writers like Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis-Borges. Also considered “smoke-long” stories, which parallels Yasunari Kawabata’s *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*, a story’s length should be dictated by the amount of time it would take to smoke a cigarette. It is an opportunity more than a constraint. Rather than defining it as a genre, flash fiction as a form focuses on rhythm, the image, visual implications, extended metaphors, turns or epiphanies, or punch-line ending, and “mostly always starts with an idea, story or situation presupposed. And then this focus is either skewed to magnify the situation or character presented, or zoomed out, as it were, to view the implications of this from another perspective” (Howitt-Dring 7).

This foray into flash fiction originated in my efforts to submit writing to online publications. Various magazines enforced word limits or only accepted shorter forms because of their condition as a digital medium for reading, begging the question of how much we are really able to tolerate when it comes to reading online or through different devices. With only a background in short story writing to guide me, I initially tackled the form through writing scenes, writing reflectively, or using a single metaphor as a foundation. Robert Shapard’s various anthologies on flash fiction allowed me to trace a trajectory of craft and provided many useful models. In *Flash Fiction Forward*, Shapard tackles his own questions about the future of the form, leaving the answers to the stories themselves: “How short can a story be and still truly be a story? Some would say ideally as short as a sentence, but we found in practice anything less than a third of a page is likely to be a mere summary, or perhaps a joke” (12). Shapard goes on to explain that conventionally a flash fiction story commands the reader’s attention because she can

process information quickly in the Information Age, confirming my previous assumption concerning tolerance and impatience (13). He notes how Grace Paley believed that a short story is more like a poem than a novel and therefore should be read like one – slowly, with nothing for people to skip. Shapard reacts to this and adds, “Thus we may allow an entire page in a novel to be forgettable, but we approach a flash fiction as if all of it may be memorable” (13). This proved a confounding and intimidating challenge. What’s the difference between flash fiction and prose poetry, with both forms occupying some sort of middle ground? My new perspective on the power of a single page changed my writing process and indeed made it slower. In making each piece memorable, this put quite a pressure on not only how I could structure the whole book in terms of plot – having chosen to write an interconnected collection that could read like a novel in succession – but on sentence building.

With limited space determining what I could achieve, I had to consider each piece as a snapshot that would have a cumulative effect, with each sentence keeping momentum. In his essay “In Breach of Story: Breaking the Shackles of Traditional Fiction,” Ethan Joella argues, “the short-short (or flash fiction) form is definitely in a rule-betraying, anti-story category of its own. The pieces are effectively condensed, and they revolutionize the stale, customary form” (8). Taking a contrary stance, G.W. Thomas doesn’t quite believe in the revolutionary power of shorter forms in his instructional essay for *Fiction Factor*: “Flash fiction is often twist-ending fiction because you don't have enough time to build up sympathetic characters and show how a long, devastating plot has affected them. Like a good joke, flash fiction is often streamlined to the punch-line at the end” (2). With Thomas in mind, I wanted to establish a unifying plot that would be the central event to the main narrator and his friends as they in turn face their own devastations. Knowing I could convey a multi-faceted portrayal of each character with

subsequent pieces, attempting to make them standalone proved more difficult. I also hope that this book can be read according to the reader's will, despite my own authorial effort to sequence each piece for effect. Overall, I considered each story as an impression contributing to a larger effect with Jonah as the main narrator serving as the reader's proxy – and absolutely, my own – with his own concern for how his story, along with his friends', will matter later on and what it all leads toward. This drew me to the theme in the collection addressing the anxiety of how there can be an organizational principle to multiple, often disjointed narratives – especially when technology becomes both mediator and isolator. In thinking about models for this book, R. Zamora Linmark's vignettes in *Rolling the R's* came to mind, as well as Kent Haruf's *Plainsong*, and multiple narrative films like *Pulp Fiction*. Mostly, I became interested in the idea of convergence, conflict, and dissonance. As much as my presence as author may reveal itself through the resonance of language, motif, or metaphor, I was more drawn to unfolding themes of alienation, lack of communication, and breakdown, having been influenced by modernism in defining the scope of this book.

#### FAULKNER, DIAZ, AND O'BRIEN: FROM DISCONNECT TO UNDERSTANDING

While the imperative of literature is to render and dramatize life, modernism explores how history and events, the very act of representing reality, is artificial and constructed through narratives. In a sense, reality is a set of realities, a collage of interiority, consciousness, and multiple perspectives. With that, *As I Lay Dying* has been seminal in my writing career in challenging how I write in the first-person, use language, and represent the mind. The character's voices in the novel strive to represent reality and assert themselves amongst a cacophony, and their language is both tinged and bent by trauma. In discussing the nature of representation in his

book titled *Realist Vision*, Peter Brooks notes, “Fictions have to lie in order to tell the truth: they must fore-shorten, summarize, perspectivize, give an illusion of completeness from fragments” (6). Although the act of representing can remedy the Bundren family’s trauma after Addie’s death, it also tampers with their psyche and further removes them from reality, especially in Darl. I’ve always been fascinated by the notion that it’s the eventual coming together of each fragment that makes sense of disarray. It’s more about the effort in making sense of reality for the reader rather than the actual task of seaming fragments together. In her essay on the poetics of fiction, Barbara Hardy argues that narrative eventually becomes “revealed as a coherence and a solicitation of curiosity, a movement toward completion. This very incoherence, the tantalizing, and the incompleteness unbare characteristics of narrative and also mine the complexity of the process in the primary act of consciousness” (7). Whether it’s the reader or the characters themselves, there is a thrust toward understanding fulfilled through curiosity as a guiding principle. I’m always drawn to literature that invites active participation in creating meaning, by way of finding associations, remembering anecdotes or bits of information, and tying narrative ends.

The reader’s role often becomes investigative and parallels the author’s own interest in discovery. My choice to write an interconnected narrative was an easy one because my favorite short story collections do this kind of work. In an essay from his book, *Alone With All That Could Happen: Rethinking Conventional Wisdom about the Craft of Fiction*, David Jauss argues that “a story collection, when it’s really good, is a unified whole, one whose parts cannot be rearranged without doing damage to its unity” (150). But the strength of interconnected collections is that there is no absolute need for linearity or a sense of progress through reading. The reader can piece the book together as she wishes. My favorite contemporary writer, Junot

Diaz, is masterful in exploring a character throughout a lifetime in all of his books to date. The character, Yuniór, becomes the focal point throughout as he negotiates the legacy of his family moving from the Dominican Republic to America, his upbringing at various points, Oscar de Leon's story – along with Oscar's sister, mother, grandmother, the dictator Trujillo – his brother's death, multiple affairs, and failed relationships. The list goes on. In an interview with *The Rumpus*, Diaz himself has stated that his collections attempt to capture the “brevity of our moments” while also bringing forth the pleasure of reading a novel, which I will quote at length:

We know story collections end when they end, as well—the pages serving as a countdown—but nevertheless the standard story anthology hews closer to what makes being human so hard: it reminds you with each story how quickly everything we are, everything we call our lives can change, can be upended, can disappear. Never to return.

(2)

For Diaz's characters, telling a story is a struggle. However, it's a necessary step to acknowledge what's lost, remember, and witness. Yuniór does this at length in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as an anesthetic to the curses endured by Oscar's family and also to self-heal. *This Is How You Lose Her* brings more self-scrutiny, and each story becomes an attempt to understand why things went wrong for him, why Yuniór has become a version of his father and the typical Dominican male, and how he can redeem himself. For characters narrating first-person stories, or even acting as third-person voices, the act of telling becomes a means of reflection, exploration, and exercise in the imaginary.

In this way, I approached *This Is The Last Time* as a striving for truth in the act of each character allowing themselves to be vulnerable – to reveal in what limited and brief ways they can. Henry James argues that experience is a “huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads

suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue... it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (51). James is talking about realism in its strictest regard, where writing becomes an act of recording, the narrator becoming a camera. My concern, and this aligns with why modernism departed from realism, is how there’s just too much to catch, and not everything will amount to a revelation. Likewise, in terms of trauma and remembering, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* is concerned with what kinds of stories we tell and for what purpose. Most of the time, it’s more about the act of telling. What’s the point or is there even one? Does it matter if it’s true? In the piece I keep returning to in the collection, “How to Tell a True War Story,” the narrator juggles with these questions, ultimately arriving at his own version of the answer:

...a true war story is never about war. It’s about sunlight. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. (85)

O’Brien isn’t concerned with truth because it is an ideal that is strived for rather than achieved. It is comprised of details encompassing abstractions, feelings like sorrow and love, without having to outright admit those feelings. Truth can be the integrity of a story, but it can only be approximated. What strikes me most about the collection is how the narrator, Tim O’Brien, goes through a process of empathy, trying to come to terms with the death of Kiowa, writing about friends like Norman Bowker, who asks him to write a story that follows later. In “Good Form,” the narrator admits, “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (180). To empathize means to relive and to keep what’s both past and dead

alive. Flash fiction thus becomes a quick effort to do this, with urgency being a cause for telling and revealing.

#### THEMES, PROCESS, AND CONCERNS

In thinking about what it meant to write “contemporary” fiction, I wanted to write about contemporary life as I saw it. The foundation of my subject matter comes from an old creative writing adage: I decided to write what I know, and with this regard I looked toward the people around me. This is how I wound up writing about a group of friends, many of the characters’ profiles and experiences mined from real people, including my own. Despite this, each flash fiction piece became more about the process of telling a type of story, evoking a single emotion or tone. I became very concerned with doing justice to each character, making sure that each one fairly had their chance to speak; however, I also had to respect the stories that I knew they would not be willing to tell and exercise restraint in that way. Jonah becomes the most consistent and prevalent narrator throughout the book, standing in for me in terms of character and agent the same way Yunion works for Diaz. Oftentimes, in his most philosophical moments, he becomes my speakerphone. While I try to make sense of my own reality in fictional terms, Jonah goes through the same process, which Hardy considers an impulse of narration:

Like most works of fiction, personal history is made up of fantasy and realism, production and idling. We often tend to see the novel as competing with world of happenings. I should prefer to see it as a continuation, in disguising and isolating art, of the remembering, dreaming, and planning that is in life imposed on the uncertain, attenuated, interrupted, and unpredictable or meaningless flow of happenings. (Hardy 6-7)

All the pieces in *This Is The Last Time* don't cumulate as a comprehensive portrayal of the characters' lives, but they each make an attempt, while individual narrators go from idling to unfolding to discovery, perhaps even change. Flash fiction gave me the opportunity to represent both erratic thinking on the page with line breaks, or careful rumination, calling for more reflective pieces. Telling becomes an investigative act, and each character interrogates their past in relation to their understanding of one another. With this, there is overlap and collision. When a character unveils a story or something has been said, I wanted every word to carry the weight of irrevocability.

The title of the book comes from a song in The National's album titled *Trouble Will Find Me*. I was very inspired by songs and lyrics as short pieces in themselves – albums as collections. When I think of how scenes in films or television invoke songs, and how those songs in turn, when listened to, can invoke scenes, I'm interested in how mood and emotion erupts from music, or even mirrors what it accompanies. This is what I hope the title evokes in binding the book and its pieces together as its vertebrae. When the lead singer Matt Beringer's lyrics become confessions of regret and longing, his tone reveals a yearning to narrate stories, and oftentimes it's ridden with ache and pathos. But by the time a song is finished, its completion becomes liberating for the speaker, as he's done pleading and offered all that he could. The song "This Is The Last Time" is about celebrating the failure of a past relationship, but also signals guilt over its end and how difficult it is to recover. In the epigraph that I quote, the speaker defines a lack, and later in the song he repeats over and over, "I won't be vacant anymore, I won't be waitin' anymore," as a wish to redeem. In this way, each character in the book attempts to create something out of feelings of vacancy, trying to take more control of their lives, even if it's momentary.

Though set in O‘ahu, notions of place and setting are not overt throughout each story but do figure prominently in different sections with mentions of Waikīkī, the North Shore, and hostess bars or strip clubs on Kapi‘olani Boulevard. Each location becomes a site of escapism, and the characters end up exploring these spaces as extensions of their own desires. I found that it would be too difficult to do setting much justice within a flash fiction piece, unless it were all about that. Therefore, interiority and the mindscape figures more into the book, and these characters are defined by their uncertainty and listlessness. Everything they narrate addresses concerns of loneliness or love, which I find to be the most pressing and prevalent anxieties.

Each piece represents a process of evaluation, empathy, and preservation. To bring order, story, or meaning to what seems arbitrary through narrative today often means to do it quickly, but it also means to continue the process, move on, and prepare to do it again. While the characters in *This Is The Last Time* can very well keep telling stories, what follows in this book indicates what can emerge from inhibitions in what they’re willing to admit and restraint in how much. Here, they are caught mid-process, always unsure and afraid of what their stories will reveal about themselves and the people around them.

Part I.

## Driving Neutral

At the stoplight a man wearing a tattered red cap and a piano key grin started spraying blue stuff at the windshield. He gave me a thumbs-up with a squeegee in his hand. The hood kept popping under his palms. My little sister watched as splotches of bird crap fizzed with his sprays. She pointed, made a fist, mimed rolling up the window.

I had the AC turned off. The car was low on gas and I was afraid we wouldn't make it to the station, and ballet practice afterwards, so I rolled them up halfway.

"Let's compromise," I said. "It's smoking in here."

She took the vow of silence after the accident. The announcement was still taped to her door, letters cut out ransom note style.

The man outside dragged the rubber blade against the glass in one sweep, and I wanted to scream—louder than the car horn that signaled my mother was dead, her head pressed against the steering wheel; louder than the wail of the wipers scraping half-moons, louder than the thunderous quiet after they stopped and I sat her upright.

The man finished, I paid him and drove off. My sister took out her notebook and drew a picture of our dog eating rocks. The caption beneath read, "I'm scared."

"You or her?"

The rocks were cutting up her insides, and our dog needed surgery. In angrier times, I used to ask my sister loaded questions. Now they're more definitive, begging certainties, things we can be sure of. I couldn't tell her that we wouldn't be paying for the procedure. That kind of stuff leads to depression.

"Was that man earlier scary looking?"

She nodded yes, pointed at me and tilted her head to the left, her way of asking the same question—I just shrugged.

The car gave up and I had to merge to the side. She looked worried about being late. I hit the wheel and hate myself.

“What do we do?”

She shrugged.

“You wanna drive?” She nodded at speed. I got out and she climbed over, looked too small in the seat. I adjusted it so she could be closer to the wheel and let her sit on my backpack for a boost to see through the cleaner windshield.

She pressed her ballet shoe against the brake pedal. “Cool,” she said, and then touched her mouth, surprised at her slip. Most of the lettering in her note was from the memorial pamphlet.

“Yes, very.”

I put the car in neutral and told her to be steady. I stood behind the bumper and started leaning into the edge of the trunk. The car felt lighter as it moved forward, as I released each step on pointe, bending and snapping my legs straight. I took my hands off for a moment before planting them back on again, just like how I used to with shopping carts when she could still sit in the baby seat. I could see her concentrating in the rearview mirror. Now I’m the one facing her, trusting that she’d know where to turn while I ignored everything behind us.

## The Phone pt. I

*Tommy*

I'd do anything to have known Karen before she moved here. Right before she got into her phase of dating weirdos, and when I heard about that old guy that really put a damper, or should I say diaper because I'd joke that they split because she'd have to change it all the time. And she'd get pissed if I said maybe that's what all of her exes were, diapers that eventually gave up because they couldn't deal with all her shit.

"Well, what are you then?" she said.

"I'm the guy holding your hand while you potty train."

God, the way she would look at me like I was the first person to be heard on the radio or speak on the first telephone.

Once when we were waiting to be seated at a restaurant and I pointed out this oafish guy being dragged around by a girl too pretty for him. I told Karen, "Guys like that, they're like very smart dogs."

She said, "Maybe I'm just taking you for a walk."

Never forget that. Karen could keep up with me. But at times, she got too far ahead, and she'd look at me, like she was waiting for me to say something amazing. Like the way she describes her favorite things, or whatever she's enthusiastic about, she'll say "it's delicious," and I always had to cook something up because I always wanted to be like the first guy on a talkie saying you ain't heard nothing yet. If I could be like every great character in movies that we've seen in class or on our own, then we could play something out with our lives that didn't have to end.

One night Karen called me and said she was listening to spaghetti western music to get motivated to write her senior thesis on the antihero in film, and it's shit like that makes you pay attention to a lady as being special.

But stuff like finding out a girl doesn't like a lot of people just like you do or has a problem with being bored all the time, that makes a guy fall hard and make him think, I can change that.

"We got the ball rolling," I'd tell her. "And now we just have to control the direction of its travel." And then I'd go on and say that the saying about people not being special snowflakes, we were the exception because we'd come together and roll down avalanche-style. I didn't mind sounding crazy as long as it sounded cool. Like whenever she'd suggest something drab or complain about something I would ask, "Where's the music in that?"

But dogs bark when they get excited or stirred up, and people run out of things to say. Sometimes I'd just go blank and didn't want to think about anything. Quote as many movies as you like, but then this becomes stale. White noise. Static. Ringing in the ears that only go away if the radio is on during the drives. I wanted Karen to fill that space and to see if silence could be enough for us.

Whenever she was pissy, I'd tell her, "That's not very Karen of you" in a southern drawl. I learned in class that there's a Japanese aesthetic where using glue with gold in it to put an object back together, like a vase, was supposed to trace the act of reassembling as part of a new beauty. But how could you look at the rebuilt thing without thinking about how easy it came apart in the first place? Karen could cross her arms and look out the window to just be doing something. Or she could look at her phone and know what everyone else was up to. And I'd look

through my phone too when I was with her because sometimes it's easier looking at a lot of people from a distance than just one person close up.

Sometimes I'd wonder what stories other people made up about us when we'd go places. Sometimes I'd search through radio stations hoping that there would be a song I knew the lyrics to so I could sing to Karen but only find commercials.

Sometimes I'd wonder if the stories that other people made up about us were better than the stories we were telling ourselves.

## Fever

Martin told me that he understood death because it just means you get really tired, and that's why they call it an eternal slumber. Sometimes I care about people when they say weird things. I listen because I also have strange thoughts, so there's a spot for the strangeys and the weirdos somewhere in my feelings. But sometimes that spot gets irritated and itchy, especially then since I got so thirsty. He sat on his skateboard in lotus position, trying to remain still, but he kept shifting left and right and it made me nauseated. I gave up chewing this burrito, it plopped onto the floor, and I waited for a beetle to carry it away.

"I'm profound," he said.

"Cute," I said. "Then that means smoking pot is closest to death." My face felt droopy and I wanted sleep bad. "On the brink of death, we feel most alive." The last word came out as a cough.

Martin smoked from the roach, and the fire was small like the way the sun would look between God's fingers. He burned himself and looked scared, slipping on the board which pop shove-it-ed under the bed on his side of the dorm.

"Bullshit," he said, standing now with arms raised to the ceiling light. "Pot is about elevating the consciousness, transcending the body, and floating in ephemeral nirvana."

"Get a grip."

He tossed me the bottle of brandy and I took a sip. After the burn, I tasted a hint of apple in the back of my throat. I imagined swallowing an apple. My chest cavity held the sun, large and full. I explained to Martin that the reason we get drunk is so we can go back to that feeling of comfortable warmth bathing in the amniotic fluid of the womb. I told him that drinking in a hot tub is ideal, but nothing will ever nourish our bodies and health the way mother's milk does.

My skin was feverish and I imagined myself cracking up like desert ground or my body shriveled like dried jerky for vultures.

“Whack,” he said. “Your talk is cheap.”

“Cheap? Cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap.” I kept repeating the word, and Martin told me I sound like a baby chicken or a small bird waiting to be mouth-fed. But to me it sounded like a sprinkler, one that I would walk in front in every consistent direction, fresh and strong back to the beginning again and again in a cycling baptism.

## Like Flying

Tommy's talking to his ex again, lives on his own now after college and says she's a ghost in his apartment. He believes he's being haunted, not that she's dead but he feels her around. Swears by these hallucinations but I just call them whiskey dreams.

I never knew Tommy had an ex. Look her up on his laptop to see what she looks like and yes she's real, but not from around here. Get to thinking she's a he and just dicking around with a fake identity until I see pics of them together.

A few months ago we had a usual drunk talk and I asked Tommy if he was real, what if I was really just talking to myself and I made you up. Tommy said bullshit, I'm the real one; I make up people all the time.

Tommy emailed me one night and tells me all about how his relationship burned. She's a ghost because she's made of smoke, the signs of fire. What they had was hot as hell, but not in the negative religious way, more like a furnace that powered a ship or locomotive. So I email him back that trains don't run on fire anymore.

Ask him how long they've been broken up and he says a week. Tommy tells me she thought he was dead. Really she was being dramatic and meant he was distant. I tell Tommy that he can't be the real one if he's dead but he doesn't remember what I'm referring to and I wonder if we even had that conversation.

I explain to Tommy that we like whiskey the same reason why rats love their garbage.

My dad used to always tell me these animal metaphors. People are like ostriches. They can stick their head in the ground and only grab the worms around them, thinking they can hear what's coming in the distance as some premonition. But then there are the brave ones that run and leap so they can see what they want and that would be like flying for a few seconds. The

romantics. The dreamers. Sounded like a fancy way of saying chase your dreams to me, and I usually flopped more than flapped.

I tell Tommy that relationships go two ways: you're either a stick in the mud or a side to a jetpack, a rocket. Two sticks make a kite that can only go as far as the spool lets it. Two rockets can power more movement to flying. Better than being a bird.

Maybe they stuck their heads in the ground to listen for trains or feel the warmth. I ask Tommy if he's ever seen an ostrich on fire. If we were rats and saw a bat, we would say angel. Angel in a jetpack fueled by hellfire going after what's real.

Ex-girlfriend shows up and Tommy answers the door and they just stand there. Looks like they made up in a second, a moment of mud. I start to sweat and want to takeoff.

## Little Moments

*Cathy*

My boyfriend Derek needed to finish his screenplay and I tried to help by asking him questions about it to seem interested, but he just thought it was annoying, I could tell, just by the way he looked up at me over his laptop.

“How’s the plot going?”

“Cathy, I told you this already, that’s the problem,” he said. “I don’t know what the protagonist has to do next.”

I was just waiting for him to change. Derek will become Amanda any second and just take a break and we can have fun.

“So I saw this photo that had like a hundred likes and it was of a water bottle.”

Derek squeezed the bridge of his nose between his eyes. Here she comes.

When we first started dating and he told me that he changed personalities, into a woman, I laughed and told him that kind of stuff only happens in movies, and he told me, actually, he writes movies too, which made me laugh even more.

“Maybe out of this, you can write about us?”

He never knows when it happens, for how long. Sometimes not for a while, but it’s usually stress that brings Amanda out. He acts like a woman too, and suddenly it’s like he’s my gay best friend. Even though I miss him as Amanda, she’ll never hold my hand, and we’ll never kiss, but she knows I want these things because I love Derek. It’s great because sometimes we can talk shit about him too, which worries me usually because what if he’s just pretending and

wants to hear what I really think. But all of us have our separate moments together that I enjoy, but I always wind up thinking it's unfair to me.

I was so nervous about the first time Derek changed, that it felt like I was taking my drivers test again and sat in the backseat instead of getting behind the wheel.

I've missed Amanda, especially after this whole screenplay thing and after my best friend Karen got all bummed out about her break up. Now Karen just spends her time re-blogging quotes from books she's never read, which irritates me so much. It's like she's cheating and gets by on pieces, little moments, without fitting it to something bigger.

I honestly don't know how much longer I can deal with this. There was this one moment where I told Karen that I wasn't sure who was the original person, it's like I'm in a relationship with two people – Dr. Amanda who turns into Mr. Asshole. But I know for sure that I met Derek, I fell for Derek, and that maybe I can be right about us. I never figured out why Amanda changes back and I don't think I ever will.

I don't know what I have to do next, but I always tell myself, you gotta find ways to miss people.

### The Ultimate Tourist

It's like every time it's someone's birthday we do this: head to Waikīkī, pop a cocktail of Savion's pills in the hotel, shoot some whiskey, and hit the streets walking around like royalty returning. Each time tops the last time, and I worry about that. Tommy hopes that Godzilla is still shooting and that we'll get in on a catastrophe scene.

"Why would they shoot a Godzilla scene at night?" I ask.

"In this adaptation, he's a sneaky bastard," Tommy says.

It's like it's safer when it's just us. Last time we went to a house party, Savion got so crazy that he thought some dude had demon eyes, and later he said he was a jet plane and started breaking things.

Rules at the hotel room: don't break things, always keep the ice bucket full, don't get caught smoking on the balcony, only the drunkest person can drink from the ice bucket, and no one can fly no matter how high you get. Ice bucket water is nice.

Savion asks us whether we heard the news about this dismembered body being found in a bag someplace. Not sure if he's excited about this news or that he's divvying up the pills into groups of three, most of them the size of baby teeth. This time he has a large pillbox. These nights are prescriptive. Everyone must swallow. I get scared every time.

I don't know what's going on in my head. It's like I'm watching a video with the sound off. Things suddenly turn up and then get muted. My mouth fills with saliva and I hold it back with the bar napkin folded and folded. Savion yelling into a phone because we lost Tommy. I see bodies at a bar, people intact. We like being around people we will never see again.

We find Tommy holding onto a lampost whispering his ex's name.

“Don't go there,” I say. I taste sour mess like birthday alfredo sauce. Somewhere on the way I found my head in the bushes. “You don't belong there.”

“What are we doing here?” Tommy asks.

Savion is going off about how the hell can you run off, and I'm like, you mean at this moment at the lampost or you wanna get all philosophical and be like no one really belongs in Waikīkī, how can people live here, this place isn't really a part of the island, it's an international watering hole with ten dollar cover charges and where sand is fake and sunburn means hey, this is what hurt feels like in your deviled skin and vacationing is prescriptive like Vitamin D which is good for you before you die and everyone wants to relax like antidepressants after working so hard, and if you think about it Godzilla is the ultimate tourist. I open my mouth trying to say some of these things, but I'm just letting air come in and I don't want to think about breathing because if I do then I have to force myself to do it and I'm scared maybe I'll just stop and all I could ever really want is sleep now.

The dance floor is packed, men looking for wildest catches, a large net of fish. A cramped hell lit in blue, tanning neon so occupied there's no room for torture. Groups dancing in sections, two at a time, one person squeezing in, sections of a pillbox. Joints moving, heads bouncing like buoys on the surface, and even from my neck down feels underwater but my body is hot. I wonder: all of us put together, could we make up Godzilla in pieces?

Somebody screams, action – the movie must be shooting. Savion yells for me to come over and there's a crowd surrounding Tommy who's on the floor, gray puke on his clothes,

people trying to turn him to his side. Time slows as I reach for the holster, my pocket for my phone, like I'm in the Wild West at the bottom of the Pacific, but instead of gunning down an outlaw I'm crying for help for a dead friend with whale sounds.

Tommy's not having a seizure, someone just falsed him, someone just falsed my friend Savion says. As I put his arm around my neck, I'm worried I'll pull it off, that he'll just fall apart or if I hold onto him too tight he'll burst into atoms. We can't find that sneaky bastard.

When he wakes up and feels his swollen jaw and asks what happened, I'll say something like, we got into the movie. Sitting next to Tommy, I make sure he's breathing just in case he forgets, while Savion's passed out on the other bed. Tonight I am older, and as I begin to nod off I think about how Savion's birthday is next month, and I can't wait.

## The Phone pt. II

*Karen*

Tommy impacted me the same way really great movies have. When we first started dating, every moment felt scene worthy and moved the plot to some happy ending, but now I don't know. Tommy talked like he was always in a movie and I could just close my eyes and listen. He just had this way about him that was different from my ex: Jason got really depressed when we moved out to Hawai'i from Minnesota, and it only got worse when we broke up. Makes me feel guilty, but I don't think he's trying to – I think it's mostly me.

That's why Tommy was such a relief because even though Jason and I were broken up and still lived together, I was like his mom. I made his dinner and did his laundry. One time when Tommy brought me back to my place after we got wasted, Jason started shouting and asked if I was whoring myself to every guy in Honolulu. I still cared about Jason, but Tommy was something else. His lines stuck with me, and I could just montage our moments together and it'd be better than any rom-com because the moments were only supposed to keep stitching together with more things.

After my parents divorced in high school, I became a relationship-monster and dated any guy I could. There was this guy that was really into coffee, and there was this old guy that was sweet but talking to him was like a history lesson. I was just so sick of Minnesota. One time when I traveled to Germany, this German guy named Alex asked me to get pancakes since I was American, and when I told him I was from Minnesota, he told me sorry. My favorite spot in Minnesota though is this bench in the Mall of America where I can just sit and watch people and invent stories about them. I could sit there forever hoping that I would see a robbery in action or meet a guy that I didn't have to make up a backstory for.

I didn't get bored with Tommy. It was different because I wanted him to date me, not the other way around. Living by my coffee shop paychecks didn't feel like a trash bag put over my head with a pinprick hole in it with me trying to breathe. I didn't feel like a black blob monster and Tommy was the one who helped me break my head and arms out of it like I was preparing to go out in the rain.

When Tommy took me out to dinner and we had to wait on a bench for the buzzer to go off to tell us a table was ready, he was so hungry that he'd say, "I feel like all these people are dying anyway, and the only way I'll stay alive is if I eat them." That's when I thought, no I'm not full yet, and I'm not ready to die. We're going to sit here and think about eating everyone and nothing could be healthier.

But then it was like Tommy ran out of gas, his movie magic. Tommy would talk less, like he was constantly distracted or thinking about something else, or maybe he was just tired whenever he took me home from his apartment – maybe the Tommy reel ran out. We were living in black and white, in some drawn out French existential crisis movie about identity when I just wanted my Bogart back.

Tommy didn't seem to care when I broke up with him. When all he said was "fine," I had trouble breathing again. But I missed him from time to time like a favorite movie, and we kept texting each other, and I'd joy at seeing those ellipses showing that he was there texting back, or the 'sent' message changed to 'seen' because he kept that feature on his iPhone. Even though we weren't physically together while texting, it felt like we were writing a screenplay and I just hoped that my phone kept buzzing, that I was being seen as we wrote a sequel alive with color, without feeling sorry or hungry anymore.

## How to get a date

The planets have aligned for your boys and almost all of them have girlfriends. So when they ask you at dinner how your game is going, you mention a girl that's had your attention for a while because you don't wanna get lectured again about how to get a date. You start chewing on ice from your empty water glass. Cubes hit your teeth all at once. They demand pics, but you're not friends with her on Facebook just yet. Your boys pull out their phones and Congress is in session.

She ain't the kinda girl that has things to hide, so all her tagged photos are available, no gray boxes for censored assessment. Each of your boys scroll through for the best pics. They show you their phones over the pastas the way detectives flash badges, faster than the rate they're eating the free garlic bread rolls, and you pretend that these photos are new to you, yeah she's kinda hot. All members come to an agreement: the boys have decided for you – you gotta hit that, bro. You add her on the spot. They hand you a verbal mallet, and now you have to hit the bell at the carnival. It hovers there like a dull, silent sun.

Later, you've gotten her number and now texting is part of the game. Sometimes you take your time with what you want to say like you were planning to write a novel. When you feel like you shouldn't delay, you respond to her questions with game show buzzer fingers. Don't tell them about how you wait for your phone to ring when you get a message. How you watch blinking dots like they're traffic lights telling you to go. At another ask-the-audience meeting of the boys, at the bar this time, they tell you that it's all about getting those haha's. The longer the laughs get, the better – ALL CAPS, even better. Pavlov got it right with the bells and dogs, so leave her expecting your replies, and never initiate if you don't have to.

Congress becomes judiciary, and now your boys turn into prosecutors. Tell us about the signals she's been giving. She smile at you lots? With teeth or just lips? Don't tell me she caught you checking her out, cause then she gonna think that's all you want, even though that's the end game, right? – obligatory fist bump. Don't tell them how long it's been since you even kissed a girl, let alone hold her hand. You rub at your glass with your thumb and try to focus on that sound instead. They tell you it's time to get things going or else you'll be jerkin' – to what could've been – in the friend zone. The boys are clearly buzzin' and feeling wiser the more they talk.

They crowd around, arms flailing, hands patting each other and resting on your shoulder. They look at your phone like it's a banana and tell you to text her that you're really interested in her, that you think she's *dope*, no don't use that word, just say *great*. It's simple and flattering and she'll get that you dig her. You do it because you have no choice, begin to think this could work. Your mouth is dry from all the beer. You start peeling at the coaster, folding it in halves.

In the meantime, as the results are coming in, your boys talk about how they ache for other girls, making circular, groping motions with their hands.

She texts back ten minutes later, "I'm sorry Jonah, but I don't think of you in that kind of way."

The whole night the boys keep asking if she responded yet, and you say "nope, not yet." You're still trying to lift this gorilla of news off of you.

Finally you tell the boys and they just say, nah man, it wasn't worth it, she's younger than you anyway. Their pats on your back make you feel like a losing horse because you began to actually believe that this win was what you wanted in the beginning. They will place their bets on the next go around.

## Soap

*Tommy*

I'll start when I still had the blue car. Karen, these are all the things I wish I told you before you broke up with me because maybe it would've changed something at least.

The parties I went to. At first it was just to be away from all those people I went to high school with. Even now when I run into them, these ghosts in new clothes, it's a game of seeing how long you can ignore or avoid that person until courtesy gives. I'd hang on the walls leaning like a crooked painting, going whole nights not saying anything, just sipping on my beer with my mouth and words getting dry. Me not actually talking to other people, especially girls.

You know about how I totaled the car my parents bought me for my eighteenth birthday. We met sometime after that.

All about numbers. For every girl that turns you down, there's her friend. There's the girl that believes the fiction you make up about yourself and buys into the new name that you wear in your smile. I couldn't be myself when I tried to hook up with girls. That guy got rejected, got scowled at, had to listen to giggles over turned shoulders. Sobs on drives home. One time a vodka-Red Bull splashed on his shirt. Being someone else, it was like cursive and I was perfecting the signature that I'd use for every transaction the rest of my life. You just keep signing.

But Karen, I thought you should know why you were important. It's been a while since I've seen you in person.

Got better at expressing myself in that kind of way, unlocked a new me. When I went out with groups, I ordered whiskey straight instead of getting beers like everyone else. I wasn't on the wall anymore. I drank because I was drinking keys.

When I went out with a girl, I'd leave my phone in the car somewhere for her to notice, for her to ask "Aren't you going to take this?" Then I'd tell her I didn't want any interruptions.

At this one party, me and a few guys were getting pokeballs from this one dealer, and for some reason I wasn't feeling anything. I bought more and had another but nothing. The other guys were tripping, and it didn't hit me until I left and drove home. The leather steering wheel started squeaking really good. I left my car at some parking lot and went to Savion's place, threw grass at his windows to get his attention without making a sound.

Bad things always happen on rainy days. People drive worse, and traffic becomes slow. I wasn't really drunk but I was driving back and the highway felt like ice.

I got out and sat on the soft, wet gravel thinking no one sat here before. The rain seeped through my clothes and skirted on the dried sweat that came from being in a crowded room. I pressed my palms down on the road and scratched at tiny rocks with my fingertips, feeling dirty. My car looked clumped the way the last phase of a bar of soap looks.

But you should know that breaking up with me was the best thing that has ever happened to you. Now I only know the tiny version of you that I see on my phone through your occasional posts. This might sound weird, but it seems like you don't feel so fucked up anymore.

Drafting this to Facebook message to you is ridiculous and I won't send it either. I'll just leave it here. I just wanted to let you know that I felt washed for a while.

I remember when you told me how two fucked-up people couldn't be together. It felt like you were throwing leaves at me, a batch collected from a tree that wasn't going to grow, and I watched your doubt sway and collect before my feet, expecting the season to change.

## Contest

Martin wanted to get big after his break up. When he came back to visit for a few weeks, he had increased himself – twice his own size, taking up space. The first thing he did after landing from a six-hour flight and getting a rental car was head to the gym for a session. His presence declared himself as mass, as if every striation on his body was a sentence declaring: I exist.

Martin's weights defined him – what he lifted, things he carried. He built himself through supplement powders turned clay in his body – that coated what existed and turned into muscle fibers – self-chiseling his way out of a pillar of marble to become Michelangelo's angel so that he could go on to win a body building contest.

Eating became his job. He stocked my fridge with chicken fillets, ground tuna, cartons of egg whites. Had gallons of water in his room. He ate bread plain and ate gummy fiber and vitamin chews, microwaveable brown rice, ate his fiber cereal with coconut milk, which turned out to crunchy sludge. Told me beer has estrogen in it, you're gonna get man tits bro, and that shots of whiskey usually have sixty calories, that he hasn't had ice cream in forever. I looked at him with a what-kind-of-life-are-you-living face and felt my pec.

Before he got big, Martin lived with his then girlfriend and her folks the whole time they dated, which made the split tectonic, made Martin feel small. He walked around the neighborhood with large headphones on, red-faced, moving slow as if he were a prawn navigating ruins underwater.

Martin taught me things about lifting when I went to the gym with him, things that I took as metaphors for his life.

On not lifting with a mindset that you're going to fail a rep: You just have to hit the pain

threshold; you have to be crazy. On the amount of supplement powders he consumed every day: Once you hit a certain point in bodybuilding, it isn't about genetics – it's chemical warfare. He critiqued other guys in the gym for looking sloppy when they lifted. On not sacrificing form for weight: It's about time under tension. Martin pointed out one guy with head-sized arms, told me how he had no striations when he lifted. That's because that man injects himself with synthol, oil that expands muscles in size. On not cheating: Our bodies are a reflection of our thoughts and actions.

And I'd see Martin's routine every day, him listening to the same playlists, watching the same shows after drinking Zzzquil to put him out. The whole time he stayed with me, I wanted to ask why he really wanted to win the contest, why he moved to another state. But I just held the questions.

One day Martin came to the apartment and told me he strained something in his back. He brought out a tennis ball and put it on the ground, sat in front of it, leaned back, and started rolling against it. With his arms stretched behind him, I wanted to tell him that winning the contest wasn't going to alleviate what might be a serious injury, that bodybuilders are masochists, that our bodies are no longer meant to kill or hunt like he said. I wanted to tell him that he was Atlas and the planet that he had to carry wasn't so great, that he didn't have to punish himself by lifting so much to make up for that. Wars fought and lost for women, chemical or not, end in tragedy. The tension of heartache doesn't make you stronger over time, just makes you familiar with it – water pressure the deeper you go, but swimming is quicker on the surface.

Instead, I just watched red-faced Martin roll like a lobster trying to balance on a marble and gave him some advice. On not getting yourself hurt: I think you should change your routine.

## Prescription

*Savion*

For every refill of Dad's meds that I get from the pharmacy, I take two pills. He doesn't notice because I put his antibiotics and such into a weekly container, besides doing other things as house nurse. I save the pills for the boys to pop. My stash is low since the last time we went out. In my silence, I blame dad for having me late in his life, and I envy people with younger fathers who are usually distant rather than dying.

When I stay at home and watch him, I get into the habit of shopping for things online. It started with my MCAT study books. Then it led to a pull up bar you can hang on your door frame, a variety pack of hot sauce, a tactical knife, molds that freeze water into perfect spheres of ice. Began to think, depending on what I purchase, I could gather the right technology and tools to operate on dad and make him bionic. The mind wanders on a frozen lake of codeine.

We both lived on our own, before the sickness, before I moved in with him. Dorming might not cut it as living on my own, but that meant I was away from dad, and it was easy to do that since mom provided everything financially, up until that point. This was after the split, after he went away for possession. Around the time my grandparents passed, my uncle made dad move in to their place when he got out – someday I think I'll have to die there too.

Dad ended up helping uncle by joining his painting crew, but in the meantime he passed out papers in the street. There are still stacks of the same issues lying around in piles, whatever didn't sell. He was supposed to recycle them. Now we have monuments to days.

Wasn't long before I ended up hearing news from uncle that on one occasion, dad just put a stack of Sunday down on the road and laid there, arms stretched, while cars honked at him. Took a while for the angry folks to realize the man was seizing. Like a fish being cooked alive

on a skillet. Since then he was sick, and since then I was asked to watch him. Man passing out news makes the news later that week.

Whenever I take some pills from his stash, it's like I'm denying him the high he's had his whole life as a chronic. The high he needs to dull things. Back then mom said he did that stuff cause of the pain in his bones – from Nam. Bullshit. He did it to ignore.

I've always wondering if he ever breathed in the paint. Maybe that's what caused him to get a seizure, or at least began triggering it. And how long can you spend watching cars and people going places while you troll under a freeway before you end up wanting to jump in front of traffic rather than walk alongside it. Maybe his brain wasn't used to not being so dulled up anymore and taking everything back in – the noise of cars driving by, different radio stations playing from rolled down windows – that made just thinking an act of war.

Every time I take a hit with the boys, feels like an organ transplant and I have dad's lungs. I picture them blowing up like old gum that's rubbery, tough to fill with air and ready to pop loud. Pulmonary veins becoming a rot that's spreading fast the way a window cracks in a sinking submarine. But all's good after the bowl is gone.

The one thing I didn't find out until later was that dad would try to read the whole paper in the time he had before he went under the freeway. He wanted to know what he was selling. He would at least read all of the headlines to get a hint at what the whole story was about, and that's all he needed.

I bought a hookah online, some mint flavored hashish so it's like I'm smoking extra whitening toothpaste. I bought strike-anywhere matches. I bought a military survival paracord bracelet. When I went to check on dad, I realized that one of his pillows was shaped like a pill. It's strange just to think about the times I've seen people get suffocated by pillows in movies,

like it's the inverse act of sleeping and breathing normally. I thought that I could prescribe him death.

My prescriptions come in cardboard boxes through postal service. Sometimes when I take the pills for my own stash, it feels like I'm the one that's sick. Instead of passing out papers, I'm the one getting a subscription, and the headline on all the pages are the same. Sometimes it reads: Son caught stealing meds from ailing father; Pre-med student arrested for pharmaceutical drug abuse; Bedridden veteran neglected by his caretaker son. The obits always belong to one guy.

I know what the story is about from these headlines. I know them in stacks, in yellowed aging, in paper turning into crisp leaves. And it's because I know this that sometimes, before swallowing, I let the pills rest on my tongue and dissolve between my teeth, between gum and cheek, so I can taste what they're doing to me. So I can think, this is how I want to feel when he's gone. This is how I've felt. It tastes awful like whiteout.

## Anatomy of a Car Crash

*Tommy*

It happens during a sneeze, my eyelids blinking hard enough to cut a thread. The bounce of every speed bump, tire falling off or into a curbside, rubber reversed into a parking lot bumper, the sound of an already dead cat being rolled over. I was surprised by how much my car bounced that time. That kind of impact echoes from under the front bumper, travelling between empty areas around the engine until it comes through the air conditioning ducts, which is different from the silence after I crashed on the freeway last year, a silence that cancelled the sudden noise of twisted metal and airbag. All of those moments compile in the evening just a few feet beyond the stop sign marker that I pass, right through the thin threshold that hangs between comfort and panic. The impact of the body on my car becomes a hollow vibration through the steering wheel, up my elbows, into an ice pick pierce through each lung from under my armpits. Seconds are surgical after I've fully stopped, marking and removing this person's timeframe into something worse. Something like blame, or breaking news on multiple channels. He is on the pavement before me, roses melting underneath him into a larger petal. I know this silence and the ringing in my ears that comes with it. It hardens this moment like amber, but my breath tries to crack through while my pulse feeds its solidness.

Part two

## The Mistakes

Thinking that you'd eventually marry Jenny was the first mistake. As if the world were a reverse Eden and she was the only one left alive. The large group of friends you used to hang with – all feathers on the same bird. Third-person shooter, gamer types, fantasy football draft party types. But this girl, she didn't belong to any group. She'd fly by and you'd wonder where she came from.

Which meant you had to know what being a gentleman was like because that's what she wanted. Jenny grew up wanting knights and boys from rom-coms. That meant holding doors, cooking ramen whenever she was hungry, cracking an egg inside. It meant turning pages in books because she liked the sound of paper ruffling. It meant combing through her hair from the top of her scalp and tugging down strands like sounding bells. Anything beyond that was quarantine from the intimacy zone. She practically picked out your armor for you.

Whenever you talked to Tommy about his girl problems in high school, you'd tell him, "You need to become their friend first." Thinking you knew anything at all was another mistake. He let you drive his car and told you things like, "I just want to take care of someone that's not me."

When you told Jenny what you needed to, it felt like you were trying to talk through straws. She told you she wasn't ready for a boyfriend and always thought of you as a best friend. You heard a drawbridge cranking up. It felt like you were swallowing the kind of paint that's used for making storms in backdrops. You basically agreed and told her the same thing Tommy said.

The third mistake was sticking through her relationship with another guy and still being her friend, going over her apartment after he left, waiting in the car downstairs some streets over,

as if you were in a box waiting to be cranked to get let out. When they broke up, months later you both decided to get things going.

Tommy got into his get laid phase, and it seemed like he was having all the fun. He was happy for you but worried. Worried like, it's too early to want to be with someone for so long. Worried like, it's unnatural to be with someone for so long. You grew up knowing this girl that you best grow older forgetting. Not believing him was your fourth mistake.

Jenny would let you put your hand on her lap when you drove. Sometimes, she'd even hold it, fingers interlocking and all. Eventually, when you sat on her bed and she walked over, you'd feel like God when you grabbed her from behind her knees and pulled upward over to her waist: as if you were creating the oceans, the currents with your fingertips, pulling the breeze through her exhale. As if you were turning a large page.

She'd never kiss you fully, never letting her lips close to press on.

Then you'd stand in her room in the dark and you could see her convulse slightly from her chest, hiccupping to breathe, sniffing to prevent gunk from spilling down her lips. She'd tell you about unexplainable moods of despair and anxiety, maybe related to a father she never knew and a mother that would have to work jobs late and leave her at home, in the dark, doing the same thing. In a fucked up way, you made up for the missing father, became counselor, became almost-lover, became the almighty, the all-providing. Even though the birds should not be concerned about what they wear, you had to dress her in the silk of attention. This was before going to bible studies on campus made her feel like she belonged somewhere.

The little things started irritating you. How she would let the nail polish on her toes chip. How she could never finish meals or offer to pay. How you'd always take home leftovers

because she didn't want to waste food. You never ate her meals. Even your sink garbage disposal sounded like it disagreed with the way things were.

You tagged along to her church outings and clapped in circles, watched her get baptized at the beach. She touched you less. You were a sin that she confessed to her new church.

Soon, being with her became habitual, like going to the bathroom an hour after your first coffee of the day, getting voicemails from Tommy at three in the morning about how blasted or high he was. You'd wake up to hear him calling, the bedside vibrating until you silenced it. You listened to them right then but always went back to bed because you didn't want to deal with it.

You let the campus disciples talk to you about the kingdom and the one true king. This was your fifth mistake. She wanted you to be saved because you were of the world.

The bells didn't ring anymore. You wanted to do what mattered and just forget ever having screamed on drives home after having your accordion spinal chord bent backward, or left staring at her through storm paint.

You believed that God would be enough for her, but He could never be enough for you.

"Jonah, I'm not going to make an effort to see you anymore," she said. "If you want to spend time with me, you call."

When you think about her now, your past seems more like an alternate universe that you only see through the opening of a shadow cast in your head when certain lights turn on, a cut-out version of yourself from dark rooms, because it involved a future with imagined versions of you that were older. Those scenes playing out in a sunlit sepia of smiles and laughter.

"I can't wait until you become one of those people I ignore in passing."

This was the last thing you told her, soft as a prayer. Your last mistake was that you didn't say this sooner.

## Planet

My best friend Tommy is missing, which is why I'm hanging with Savion at his place tonight. I know he's missing because he hasn't posted any updates or liked anything for a week now, and usually that guy writes paragraphs whenever he's online. Tweets about anything, sometimes directly about his ex. The kind of guy whose worst fear would be losing his thumbs: the equivalent of forgetting how to talk.

Savion and I are working on a list, in order of importance, of who are the people we went to high school with – people that need retribution. One suggestion that came up was using a Molotov cocktail. A drive-by and right into the window. Putting a cat into a bottle full of liquor and setting the tail on fire – Molotov cat tail.

Not like we were bullied or anything. These are people we just don't mind fucking with if we had the chance. Since we went to a small school, sometimes we quiz each other on the names of our classmates, last name included. One time we forgot one person. Who's that guy that hung out with so and so? Once, said classmate made a Facebook page and added everyone in our grade, and we joked that maybe he's really dead and it's his mom pretending to be him, and soon she'll send an event to all of us for his funeral. While taking a break thinking about who his number four is, Savion tries to text everyone he knows who sells weed.

“It can't be *that* hard to get some trees,” he says. “What about your guy?”

“You are my guy. You're my weed guy. You're my pill guy.” I start peeling at his couch.

“That's fucked up man. I'm like third in line from the source.”

I tell Savion that I'm worried about Tommy missing but he's occupied trying to text some dealers or people that know dealers and are willing to sell their own stash.

“Fuck that guy, no-show tonight,” he says. “I text in code. NSA, you know?”

“That’s the point,” I say. “What if he *never* shows?”

Savion tells me that maybe we should put his face on milk cartons and finishes his beer. Tells me we always end up losing him when we go out and get plastered, but that’s all his fault. Dude just runs away. I can hear the anti-Tommy drums starting. I bring up Martin and how he moved away and left the group. The boys. Brothas. This shuts him up. Our friends are landing on planet what-the-fuck-is-going-on and we are moons.

“I feel like some nights the reason I can’t sleep is cause maybe I can feel my hair growing,” he says.

I ask him what pill we took earlier and he tells me it’s Xanax’s ugly cousin, and I’m not sure what that means. I feel normal aside from my head sometimes feeling like the way a balloon full of water looks when it’s thrown in the air.

“What’s Xanax’s pretty cousin then?”

“Molly,” he says. “She’s the one that likes to dance.”

“That makes sense. You know, every time I drink this beer I think of every other time I drank this beer which is why I love this fucking beer.”

Savion is pulling on his hair. I scroll through my Facebook feed on my phone to look for Tommy. Instead, I see names of people I used to know, reminding me they exist when I really couldn’t care less about them. I have notifications about people graduating college, people I haven’t seen for years. I’ll click maybe for funeral invites. If Tommy’s account became a memorialized page, it’d have the worst self-inscribed epitaphs. It’s like I’m watching a really slow time-lapse of a person’s life at random moments all together.

Savion starts telling me about how we should rob a pizza guy one day. Think of all the pizza we could get. I tell him that robbers are calculated with what they want and that robbing

someone for food is borderline desperate. Not even homeless people do that. But then there are the tips. The cash from deliveries. Or maybe we should target a bank. We could plan it.

I start to think that we are not planets or moons. I don't want to think about Tommy or what's missing as I'm starting to feel like I'm missing, molecules of oxygen bumping off of other unseen things. I am not my body or a funeral invite or the last name of a guy a classmate won't remember.

We are the empty spaces on the cardboard paper universe held up to the light shining through star holes – our punctures. We are the tips we earn and steal: whatever is extra and leftover.

I type all of this up into a status update but then I delete it.

When we get the weed and head to the park, I call Tommy just in case he wants to pick up and join us. Maybe I could be using my time better. I wonder where I would stand on someone else's list. I could make a few number ones.

After we smoke, I bend my knees because it's almost like I'm leaning back, and at this angle I can look at the sky. This is comfortable. And then I realize: I rather like being bent like this. I think we all do.

## Evaporate

*Karen*

Cathy is trying to convince me to have a three way with her boyfriend Derek, saying that it's going to save her relationship. Right before she was telling me how annoyed she is with an old classmate that tweeted about going to a rave and used a syringe emoji, calling her a druggie. But then she changed the subject because sometimes she thinks the way a mouse would move through a maze.

“Come on, Karen. You're leaving me anyway.” Cathy scrolls through her phone with her left thumb, liking things with her right. “Oh my god, like if you're larger than the animal whose print you're wearing, just don't.”

“I'm not leaving, I'm just going to study somewhere else.” She hands me the vaporizer, which looks like a microphone with a nipple. “I mean I'm flattered, but I just don't want to be intimate like that.”

“I bet you haven't gotten any since you broke up with Tommy.” It takes Cathy a good five seconds to realize that she's pissed me off. Her already faulty I'm-about-to-say-something-inappropriate-alarm went off too late and surprises her like a phone ringing during a church sermon. In the moment that Cathy should be changing the conversation the most, she doesn't.

I exhale wisps. The vaporized smoke looks like what I imagine the way sighs would look if you could see them. I imagine that the sigh that I let out when Tommy told me that *I* was the cold one fumed his entire car like dry ice.

“Oh my god, Savion just texted me seeing if I could sell him some weed.”

“Tell them to fuck off.”

Cathy looks up from her phone.

“How do you know it’s a *them*?”

I get up and start walking in circles around her living room. I’m hoping to make Cathy dizzy.

“Because,” I say, trailing my hand across the back of her couch. “No one likes to smoke alone.”

“I don’t know about you,” she says, giving one definitive laugh. “Like that time you got high and told me you felt like you were in a crowded room and everyone was looking at you.”

It’s only after smoking that I can feel, I remember when Tommy once told me that I was fire. How hot I could get when we lay together in bed, swore that he could see steam rising from the blanket. Walking around the room, I can actually feel how warm the blood in my legs are.

I pause at the window, and when I blink the street lamp light streaks and I can see lightning. Even though it’s a thought I try not to have, it happens like the urge to shift during sleep, and I wonder what Tommy is up to. I can hear Cathy going on about how she hasn’t heard from Derek in a while and feels like he doesn’t care about her anymore. I want to feel bad for her but I don’t. But then I try to remember that Cathy is the kind of person that looks at her feet while she walks and realize I should try.

She’s brings up the threesome again, but I want her to know that it’s not an option. I don’t want to be warm anymore. I don’t want to steam. I never told Tommy this, but he was just the same. Being held by him was like taking a hot shower with a fever. We were two glowing coals smashed together.

I stand in front of Cathy and take off my clothes. I rub what feels like ash off of my shoulders and elbows and I hug Cathy, who’s crying now, hoping I can evaporate her.

## Cutting

*Martin*

There are two seasons when it comes to bodybuilding: bulking and cutting. You're supposed to bulk in the winter because you won't have a reason to show your body. Then you cut in the spring in time for summer to hit the beach, so all the ladies can be admiring.

My trainer is thinking about pulling me out of my contest. Says I'm not in the right mindset. Probably cause I hit a guy that said I kept staring at him, but shit, not like I can see anyway cause I don't wear my glasses in the gym. Says I was eying him out, and since I was jacked up on pre-workouts, I showed him what's up. Ever since I moved to Vegas, it's just been me. Training every day, eating almost throughout the whole day. I eat whole grain wheat bread every night with egg whites, and it just bums me the fuck out sometimes.

Some days it's easy to not think about anything. I get stuck in my numbers, in counting my reps and seconds to rest. Zone in on scoping the gym for where I gotta be next. Sometimes I just watch guys and see what they're doing wrong, thinking to myself they'll never make progress. It's all about form, but a lot of people think it's about how heavy you can go. They just wasting time.

When I see myself in the mirrors, I see the guy I'm going to be tomorrow. Even though I wear a hoodie to the gym, I know change is happening on the inside. I text the boys back home pics of my progress. They're my mirror too. Telling me how good I look. And I know it.

But some days, I let it get to me. Numbers become what feels like life-sentences at the gym. Feel like a prisoner marking days on the wall. I walk around sweating like I'm circling dunes with my gallon jug of water. Like all I need to survive is in what I can carry with me. Start

to miss my friends and think, I'm gonna win this contest for them. If not for me, I moved away from home to win something.

I think it's cause I finally cycled off the testosterone. The chemicals change your mind, and sometimes you just have to lose yourself when you're doing twenty minutes on the Stairmaster and trying to burn twelve thousand calories. You get emotional, mostly sad or sometimes you feel nothing but the pain in the muscles when every fiber is tearing, yelling at you – this is how to survive. This is how you're going to live and get stronger. You lift what you feel sometimes, and if you add more plates, you own that in your grip and you become what you get to push away, more and more until that's all you feel when you go to bed. How tired you can get. How much you can hurt the next day.

But then, whether I win or not, it really doesn't matter. At a certain point, I have to stop drinking water. I need to fast. I need to get close to dying to finally be my best.

## Evaluation of Our Highs

Tommy leaned over with his head between his knees, lifted out and panned around the room.

“Woah, it’s like my head just came from a Stargate.”

“None of us watched that shit,” I said. “But I can guess what you mean.”

Tommy likes to move when he’s stoned, swaying like a rock suspended from the ceiling. He has less control over his thoughts, bringing up how great it would be for all of us to get Jello and I’d instantly think about all the reasons why we wouldn’t be patient enough to make it ourselves and would actually have to plan in advance, something we don’t typically do unless it involves drinking or other drugs, so what makes him think that someone will boil water and stir powder a night in advance and then bring a bowl of that stuff for us to eat? By then we’d want to eat something else anyway.

Somehow he started talking about how some people cannot drink alcohol but will do shots of vodka through their eyeballs. I blinked slowly. I thought going from jello to vodka wasn’t too far a jump.

“Guys, doesn’t it feel like we’re in a movie right now?” Tommy’s head fixed toward his left shoulder.

“If we’re in a movie, then Sav would be the director,” I said. “Cause he’s our substance provider and he give us the vision.” Savion passed me the pipe and I inhaled while watching for the glow from the remaining embers in the bud, just in case it caught on so I didn’t have to use the lighter and burn my thumb again. “And you, Tommy, you’d be the cameraman.”

Tommy asked why without the anger that would have tempered his question if he were as drunk as he was high. But we were just smoking that day. Instead, I told him that I hated how some movie trailers quote reviews with just adjectives that pop up on the screen.

“Thrilling!”

“Incredible.”

Tommy always lies down and crosses his arms. Eventually he closes his eyes and nods off for a bit. “What are you then, Jonah?”

“The screenwriter. And you’re not the cameraman. Actually, I think you’re the main character who’s got problems and is always running from something. That’s how I’d write you.”

EXT. THE WOODS NEAR TOMMY’S PLACE.

Typically a place for casual hikers and mountain bikers, Jonah and friends walk off path toward their designated smoking area where Tommy is freed of inhibitions and anxiety of partaking in illegal substances, which is why they are not allowed to smoke at his place.

Tommy lies down while Savion scrolls through his phone, which he had put in a plastic bag just in case it rained, probably looking at memes.

SAVION

Who hasn’t had the green yet?

Savion always makes sure that everyone ends up taking the first hit, which is the hardest, meaning you pave the way through the brush, basically.

He inspects the bowl with the bottom corner of the Bic lighter, mashing around the ash to find something smoke-able but ends up dumping what may have been the fourth round between us.

Around this time is when Tommy will exclaim that his friends are not high enough, in order to set himself up as some kind of superior shaman. Once, Savion drank so much tequila and pineapple juice, which Jonah bought on his insistence, that they deemed him Shamian for becoming so enlightened.

TOMMY

You guys aren't even that high.  
You guys aren't like me.

Savion puts the pipe back into his waterproof case, which is meant for fishing lines. He shows us memes that I look at and laugh at without having read any of the words to begin with.

JONAH

I just feel tired, the same kind of exhaustion I feel after I walk out of movies.

## A Break Up in Stages

After three and a half months, which winds up being the halfway point in your relationship, this is the first time Mia wanted to break up with you.

Before that, while you were first dating, you'd continue past her driveway when it was about time to drop her off just so you could hold her hand longer because that was a new thing. You were gentle, like you were trying to warm up a hatchling. You'd circle around and trace these streets three times before goodnight.

Mia would tell you about how she wanted to go on these road trips, how she'd want to stop at random locations and stand or sit there for a moment. She'd call them anywhere spaces because no one else could occupy them, and she wanted to be the only person existing there and knew no one else could choose to stop at that exact spot. Then she'd yawn and tell you how bored she was at college, at the same time saying how inspired she was and how she dreamed to be like certain lead singers. But Mia couldn't fall asleep at night, so she'd doubt having the energy to do anything right.

That's when you still thought about the value of hands. That's when you'd tell her to think about all the things that made her tired while she was up. To only think about silence and pretend that her mind was a white room. Pretend it's an anywhere space. She'd squeeze your fingers at that, and you'd tell her something cheesy like you can't be a dreamer if you stay up all night.

That first time Mia wanted to break up she texted you. That's when you drove over to her apartment real fast and practically begged her to buzz you in. Your boys would've told you, "It ain't worth it," and you will never mention that night to them. You punched her apartment number on the intercom and got her voicemail, called her phone, texted her on repeat, let people

actually going up go past you and didn't accept their offer to let you in. Even your voice sounded like it was on its knees, words coming out hard against the ground. She eventually let you up and that's when you told her all this dark, honest shit like how you hate people in general and have a hard time talking to anyone because you've never really talked to your parents, and can't anymore since they moved back to their home country, or been close with anyone for a long time – but her. You pinched your runny nose to make it stop and could smell the metal buttons on your fingers through snot.

That night, she mounted you as you sat upright on her bed, and you just held her, imagining that together you and Mia were a giant boulder that could stay in place forever.

The second time you didn't even know about it because all she did was change her Facebook relationship status to single. Your boys probably noticed before you did but never brought it up. Much later they tell you they knew something was up. When you questioned Mia, she just shrugged. Her shoulders were pebbles rolling over.

But before that you'd smell her hair by her neck so she could feel you doing it. You'd grab a handful and pour it across your face, telling her that it felt like it was protecting you even though you read that shit in a book. You'd drum on her body to whatever song was playing on your computer. Sometimes you started up a new beat and asked her what song you were playing, thinking that your minds were on the same channel to this rhythm on her bongo-ass set. When she went to the bathroom to clean up, you'd lay out her clothes on your bed as if her body disappeared while she was lying there. The improvised solos always made her laugh.

After you talked your way over the second time, everything proceeded like normal. You drummed less and pretended you were blind while you just stroked the length of her, as if you were writing with all your fingers, "I still love all of you." You laid out her clothes.

But when Mia was really not in the mood to talk to you, she put on her headphones during drives, always the same singer, even though you were already playing music. You asked her why she was doing that and she told you that she wanted to listen to her own stuff. You released and squeezed the steering wheel, both your hands left on the whole way. Sometimes, you let go and watched the wheel turn. Even when you were driving and there was music and she didn't have headphones in, nothing was quieter – a silence that could put you to sleep if you thought about it.

You stopped laying out her clothes. There was no beat. Sometimes she just looked out the window. You wanted to leave her at an anywhere space. You braked hard once and she didn't say goodnight when she left.

The third time is the last time. Before that it got harder to talk to Mia. You saw her eavesdropping on the conversation happening at the table near you. She kept doing this on date night. You watched her stare and you wondered if there was ever a time that your conversations were worthy for someone else to listen in on.

For the last time that it happens, Mia calls you, leaves a long voicemail, texts enough to amount to everything she decided not to say to your face, and changes her status. It all plays out like a ballad telling a story that you already knew the ending to.

She asks you, "Jonah, do you have...anything to say?" In that pause you could tell that she was waiting for you to convince her otherwise. Only you two could exist in and trace the lines of that space, heavy, and there you saw a vision of a fourth time, of empty clothes, of two songs playing simultaneously.

And you have nothing to say back because your mind is covered by single sheets of paper, each one bearing memories that are slowly turning over on their own to show the blank side. This is your answer as you begin to create the walls of your white room.

## Voicemails from Tommy

12:06 a.m.

Mr. Jonah! My dear friend I just got handed ecstasy from this guy who I think is pre-op and his lady friend, who I'm pretty certain is a prostitute. But I just started talking to them and had some vodka shots and they dragged me to the bathroom and we just took them. I didn't want to puss out so I did and man, I just haven't been getting lucky with any one here. I remember when me and Savion would go out and make up names and one time I accidentally called him by his regular name in front of these two girls we were chatting up. Then we decided to bail and ran out the door and I knocked over the Samoan bouncer's strawberry ICEE and we just ran because Savion yelled at me to. I never had to run away from anything before.

1:15 a.m.

I got in a cab with them and don't know where I am because I just got out. I think they were trying to take me with them to one of their places. I'm walking and I'm the only one on the street. My clothes feel nice on me. It's like my life has been like piss and it's been on hold and me not pissing has been painful. But now things are flowing. My car is still parked at Chinatown so I'm not sure how I'm going to get home. You're probably sleeping. But if I really needed someone to get me, you'd get me wouldn't you? And let me crash? At your place? I know it would be an inconvenience, but you're probably sleeping. It's weird: I heard someone talking at the bar, saying that he knew a guy that would tear pages out of books whenever he finished reading one because he said it helped him keep his place.

1:55 a.m.

I just sat down on the patch of grass and felt around this whole time. Pulling at them and hearing the sound of tearing was really good. Feel like I just gotta wait this out but I'm not sure how long that might take. It's like I'm in this sphere and I can feel everything around me and just really be there, right in the center, and I'm just slowly losing this ability to be close to the sensations on my skin, when I breathe. But maybe this is the real me and soon I'll be climbing out of myself and become sober and recover by clawing through this bubble. I'm starting to wonder if I can hear anything. I feel like maybe I'm stuck in a drop of water and it's making everything clear, like I'm in the glass that makes things more visible. I can't even hear myself talking right now.

2:15 a.m.

I decided to try walking home from where I am and know where I am. It's just I'm moving slow. You ever stand somewhere windy and just stand there and feel like you're cutting air with your body? Walking feels like making slow cuts. Hey man, I'm wondering how tonight would've been if you came out. I probably wouldn't be like this. Last time I saw you, I remember coming over to your place after my Pre-Calculus class and that's the worst I've ever seen you look. You were just so sad looking, like I walked into an emotional ICU or something. That girl you liked since high school, I remember how we used to drive around in my car when my parents just got it for me and you'd tell me about how you and Jenny were gonna work out,

2:18 a.m.

and, where was I? I must have pressed end call. You know I was happy for you then and it seemed like she was all you thought you ever needed. You were my example of things being

okay and I'm sorry I wasn't around when, you know. But you know I'm here, and I guess I'm just checking up on you. But man, we're in college and now its just time to try everything and that's what I'm doing. I want to do everything possible that might be bad for me, and I don't give a fuck that tomorrow when I wake up, all day my body is going to be screaming at me for fucking things up and all I'll want is water. But all I want to be able to do is look back sometime and say, I survived.

3:02 a.m.

I wish I didn't have to say this, but it looks like it's not getting any better. I'm running low on battery. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Sleep well, brother.

3:28 a.m.

Got home safe. I never had to run away from anything but that Samoan guy.

## Two Words

*Cathy*

Whoever he was when he got ran over was the person that got killed. Derek was Amanda when she was crossing the street where a car was supposed to stop. At least, that's what Derek believes. Sometimes, Derek switching into Amanda was just the best thing about our relationship, and now I don't know what I'm going to do without that. She would get excited to see me more than he would. It's like they take turns waking up. It's like the sad stories you hear about a family's pet dying on the plane during a trip. Now I'm just looking at the cage with something lifeless inside.

"Do you know where she was going?" I squeeze his wrist and flick at the patient bracelet with my finger. "Why was she out so late anyway?"

"Don't know," Derek mumbles. He's swollen and looks like someone smashed rotten berries on his face and then pulled the skin over it. "I only sometimes remember what she does."

He looks upset that I'm asking more about her. Or maybe it's just the broken look he has. The doctor said it was mostly the impact of his head hitting the pavement that made him sustain the worst injuries, that the blunt force of it must have knocked him back to the main consciousness – the original personality.

I never liked the way he tensed his eyebrows whenever I talked about something that excited me, like I was stupid. Two words were the most I could get out of him most of the time.

That's cool. That's fine.

Derek always made me feel afraid of being punished for not being as smart as him, and he just wouldn't react the way I wanted him to, making me a child facing a wall. As if I muddled the quality of our conversations.

All right. Okay, Cathy.

But Amanda had the reverse effect. Like when I took art classes as a kid and let too much water soak up in my brush, my paintings would get wet and look like water color work, Amanda became the teacher that told me it was okay that this happened. She'd tell me wonderful things like saxophones are instruments that open and close wounds to let them breathe and make music. All I'd get from Derek, very much like now with him just lying there, eyelid somewhat open, is silence – one of us feeling like the way he looks.

It's okay. Something wrong?

It's strange that whenever I talked about Derek to Amanda, she never realized it was her. All the negatives, she thought she could never be that way because she was on a different charge. You tend to overlook the small gestures that people do for you, like when my mother would peel apples and cut them up for me on numerous occasions when I was a kid. It's these things that are lost with Amanda's death that will force me to peel away what I can from Derek, what's under his skin, to see if anything is left over and isn't dead. She always doubled Derek.

You're the best, Cathy.

When I found out about the accident, I immediately thought about Derek's safety and didn't even imagine that Amanda could be gone. Lately, I've noticed that Derek doesn't respond when I tell him that I love him, as if what he could say wouldn't fit with the amount of words he allows. Missing the personal pronoun, it could work, but even that would seem more like a shrug of affection. In the waiting room, I scrolled through my phone and watched a short video that was a wide-shot of a paraplegic Jack Russell terrier with his broken legs attached to wheels running down a hill, and I just bawled. I wondered what would need to be built to fix this, what

the right words were. I replayed the video and watched the dog trot as if it were the hill, not the legs, getting in the way of where it needed to be.

As Derek sleeps, I decide to return to what I've said and meant early in our relationship. I whisper close to his face that I love him, again and again, spoken softly as if the words could be like mesh on a boxing glove that covered the force of a repeated jab, hoping the words somehow become harder and bring her back.

## Worry

When you hit a man, you become aware of your car first, how large it actually is, and then how small you really are in comparison.

Which brings on the sickness in high moments of stress. I wondered if all those times I wished I could throw up on command to feel better would culminate into the moment where I felt uneasy enough to actually do it, without knowing where I could follow through or if I could use a finger.

The sound of collision reinforces the fact that cars are hollow. Can cave like cardboard.

I start to lose the face of the victim and soon it becomes a template for people I know. My best friend Jonah, my ex – these outlines appear and dissolve, taste like old ice melting in a cup of water. How I would've felt had I ran each of them over becomes different variations of the same shock.

The initial jerk against the seatbelt, the moment of impact right before being slung back to the seat, must be what I imagine getting sucked into a black hole feels like – of matter being stretched, or however that works.

I drove far. For a while, I could see the moon and decided to follow it. In contrast to the sky, it looked like the small opening of a tunnel letting you know that there's a world outside. Something I could crawl through.

I watched the rain collecting on the windshield, dyed by the colors of traffic lights, blurring.

As I drove further, it didn't feeling like I was accelerating but sliding on a narrow, frozen black lake.

I scrolled through my phone while waiting at an intersection and saw close-ups of food, group pictures at the beach, a screenshot of a Google search for the suicide hotline with a caption explaining how long the person was being put on hold. I saw people blowing smoke.

I thought about turning around to see if he was alive.

The other week, I considered stealing quarters from one of those donation posters that want your support for Nina who lives with leukemia because I had to do laundry that day. I started to believe that I deserved to hit a man, or at least come to understand what getting hit by a car feels like.

I turned off my phone.

People in other cars stared at me as if they knew that I wasn't driving to get somewhere. That I had no purpose. I realized that I knew none of these people and would never drive by them on this road at any other moment. This made me feel guarded in my lane. That I could count on these strangers to escort me to nowhere.

But soon I hated them because they had places to be. These people couldn't care about the sickness fastened to my body, preventing me from knowing what tomorrow could mean. They saw the consequence in my life when I caught them staring at my damage – in terms of what could be insured.

So I continued driving, staring back and making as much eye contact with people as possible so they could know that I didn't care about where I was going but all that I wanted to do was acknowledge they were there, so they could see my worry. And maybe, I could begin to see some of theirs.

## Hands

*Savior*

My dad wanted me to kill him, at least that's what I've heard in his exhales, a syllable for each breath. His body looked like pillows shaped to look like a person under his blanket, the most human thing about him being his head popping out. Must've been hearing shit after smoking, even though it feels like my hearing gets super sonic when I'm high. Maybe I was hearing thoughts.

My dealer said he has a cousin that can get me a gun, just don't barf when he hands it to me. Last time I saw him, he had liquid oxycontin prescribed for his chronic tongue pain, and I took a drop of that and couldn't handle. He told me a drop at a time can bring you to inject.

Told him I'm not going to shoot the man, it needs to be a clean death – untraceable. They'd think I planned to see how many pain meds I could get from the doctor just so I could off the guy when I didn't need him. Can't make him overdose either because then that'd be my fault, unless I pinned it on the home nurse.

“Hire someone else to do it. Get someone to break in and stab him in the chest.”

“Can't afford to hire no dude,” I said, explaining that this plan means some things would need to get stolen too. No one just breaks into homes just to murder. “And you owe me money, speaking of, for buying you those mongoose cages off of Amazon. And I don't want him to be in pain when he goes.”

My dealer told me about how he had to put the cage in a bucket with a cinder block on top because the mongoose freaks the fuck out as the hose fills it up. It'll poke its head through to keep breathing and shaking as if it could struggle out. He lifted the block and tapped it against the cage to get it to stop. This gave me the wrong image of dad in an inescapable magic trick,

where he was just the random audience member chosen to drown. Can't trust anyone with the whispers I think I hear. Saying that I didn't want him to be in pain when he hasn't been, what with me getting most of his doses, makes me regret the irony. Someone called my phone but I pressed ignore.

“Forget it, I'll just hope he dies in his sleep.”

“You gonna put him on some ambs?”

I threw him the package of the pills I saved and he gave me an orange bottle full of nugs.

“Forget it, man, I'm not gonna do anything to him.”

When I got home that night, the mail had my third rejection letter for medical school. When I wrote my personal essay and had my friend Jonah read over it, he told me to play up the story about dad, how I wanted to become a doctor after learning about all of his medications and treatment options. But really it's the fact that the people I graduated high school with make more money than I do. I folded the letter and put it in the drawer. I pulled out my container, took one for every letter so far.

Every time I swallowed, I wondered how something so small could affect me. I imagined the pill rafting around my system. Something about staying up after taking zolpidem, it's like your brain pulses with a warm paper towel over it. You can feel the grooves when you have thoughts, as if they grew fingers and traced them with a light touch, making it feel like a million, microscopic hands giving you a chill by clawing all around your skin when the body reacts. The body moves with less effort, on its own, as if you were dreaming and shifting but awake and in control of this numb protection, these hands on you – reassuring touches.

I took two .25 milligrams of alprazolam. The hands became larger but thin, like a stack of just printed-paper, and found their way under my skull from behind my neck and rested on my

brain like paper mache. I considered getting a job to start saving money to pay for school if I passed my second round of applications, anticipating that. My mother called, but I pressed ignore.

Last winter, I worked for a promotions company and had to dress as Santa Claus at the mall, and everyone yelled my name. I felt wanted, but needed in a sense that they wanted things from me. That they could write down and wish and I worked at my North pole pharmacy and dealt happiness to all. Some kids would tap me on the chest just to make sure I was real.

At my dad's bed, I watched him sleep and the desire for money became replaced with health and a fear of becoming old. Instead of the last pill, I unpackaged a fentanyl patch and decided where to place it, eventually put it on my chest as if I were making a pledge. These patches are only needed for chronic pain treatment, but I heard it's the best way to administer relief.

It felt like I screwed in a bulb where my heart was supposed to be, and the warmth from the patch made me glow from wherever the center of me was. I tapped my chest to see if it made me numb, like I was Santa freezing over.

Watching my dad, I couldn't breathe. The warmth in my head became replaced with the sound of TV static if it was silent and felt rather than heard. In his gaping mouth, I saw futures, funerals, more rejections. I floated above the hole and didn't want to be a part of any of that.

I peeled off the patch and threw it on the ground. It looked like the skin of a ghost that could no longer control me. Dad woke up and reached for me, closing his mouth. I dug into my center and cracked open my ribs to find something to offer him.

## Stranded

You wrote about cameras and eternity, but later ended on a note that your life itself never looked as good as it did on camera. Your piece in our nonfiction workshop wasn't up for class discussion yet, but with the reaction that I got from everyone including the professor, you wanted feedback on what you had.

His very recent ex-girlfriend kept calling even though you hung out with him that night, waiting around as he yelled at her while whispering apologies to you. She was going to come over to talk to him. He said words like "suicidal" and "crazy" and he paid for your car ride home. He was older than you and you kept emphasizing the word "childish."

You wrote about another guy that could never admit to feeling anything for you. You used words like "timid" and "reluctant." You slept over at his dorm and described how his elbow kept jutting into your back.

I asked you for background on these characters so I could see the context. When I read your pieces, I told you to chart your emotional response.

Draw out your metaphors.

Combine your images with the explicit.

The details make up everything.

I said that by the end of the story, the reader should understand why the story was being told, and this should make everything clear like leaving a noisy bar.

Your pieces got great feedback. Everyone seemed to understand you more. They saw themes like longing and denial. But they didn't understand you the way I did, the way I knew you in drafts – before you could explain yourself.

I imagined you as you were treated. When I looked at you, I thought it was unfair. I wanted to love you in your pieces and give you something good so you wouldn't have anything tragic to write about.

After you told me you weren't interested, we continued dialogue. I told you things like I didn't want to drink around you because I wanted everything to be clear. I called you crazy.

You told me that whenever you thought about us, you could hear The Smiths playing in your head, how you couldn't wait to read Morrissey's memoir.

I eventually explained to you everything that I hated about people. How they'd sit in the back of theatres when obviously there's the perfect spot with a fuller picture.

I told you small details about myself like how I'll get nosebleeds if I eat too much chocolate or cough from too much ice cream.

You started blogging about our relationship and looked at me for the right feedback that you expected. As if you were celebrating us with applause of words, you clapped to turn on my approval lamp. All I said was, "Oh."

I once said that smelling your hair was what I imagined snorting lines of powdered gold was like.

You'd have me rub your stomach whenever you got menstrual cramps.

I explained that I didn't want people to read about us. I tried to explain by saying that they shouldn't see us from where they're sitting. If they wanted to know us, then they'd get a closer look. We didn't need to project anything for world.

You wrapped your forearms around your own stomach.

I'd tell you that if you were too sweet, I'd bleed. I'd bite your shoulders and cough to see if you understood what I meant. I elbowed your back on purpose.

When you described me, you used words like “distant” and “selfish.”

Once, you even said “manipulative.”

The way you looked at me when I ordered my first Guinness at dinner. You looked at your food like things got just as dark around the glass.

Dialogue moved aside and paved way for action. Interior thoughts kept on separate pages of a shared life split into volumes. I could almost hear you count my yawns in your head because you thought that I was bored by you.

I stopped walking you to your door.

I drove a little faster when I had to drop you off.

The number of love-related emojis came down to none. Goodnights were final with periods.

The time for responding to texts exceeded the appropriate margin that two people who care about each other would never pass. Five minutes became hours.

We both started using the word “tired” more.

Months after we stopped seeing each other, you texted me “Jonah...” at one in the morning, and I didn’t respond.

On multiple occasions, I’ve imagined you crying by yourself but I’ve ignored the various forms of the thought as routine, as if I were wiping away at myself in the same directions after getting out of the shower.

A few times I replied “Yes?” but got nothing back.

You texted me details when anything interesting really happened to you or came across something and just had to tell someone.

I found your strands of hair around my apartment, and they clung onto me for protection from being lost forever. I don't know how or when they fell from you.

You texted less.

Maybe I am strands. Maybe the right word is "stranded." What I find when I think about us are parts of you I could never understand. Your memories of me in stories I'll never hear.

Part three

## Bolt of Blue

After three weeks on the North Shore, I found Tommy with both of his forearms deep in sand. His biceps flexed as he squeezed and let go underneath. He told me that he killed a man and had been listening to eighties music in his car ever since. He asked me if I wanted something to drink and dug out a bottle of Jim Beam. Told me he buried it so he wouldn't drink more. The bottle had something like two shots left. Said that if it got too cold on the beach, he used the sand as a blanket until sunrise. He paid a guy to bring him garlic shrimp from food trucks.

I had too much to explain since he was gone that I didn't know where to start. Your ex-girlfriend is moving and she's been asking about you. Our classmate Derek got ran over around the time you went missing. People are looking for you. Authorities. Friends. Your Facebook page is becoming a memorial.

“Why are you wet?”

“I'm drenched, not wet.”

“I saw your car on the road. He's not dead, you know.”

We walked to my car at the entrance of the parking since it was chained off, leaving before the beach opened. While he brushed away at his arms, Tommy told me that he had to drive as far away from downtown as he could. Swore that people in other cars kept staring at him, but I just said that's the fear talking – translating what the eyes were going to see. He went for a swim one evening and got as far out as he could. Held his breath to see how far he could sink. Got tugged back and forth between waves. When he threw up a mix of garlic and bourbon, he swam back to shore and called me.

“Now you have something to write about,” he said. “If you were so inclined. Make me into news.”

When we got in the car, I grabbed his wrist and furry handcuffed him to the gearshift. “So you don’t run away. So you’re comfortable.” I wondered whether the handcuffs were necessary, if I really needed to go to the sex shop. “Why would you run, anyway?”

Tommy nodded, plucking at the pink fabric and flinging it before him. “It’s what I do.”

We drove in silence a bit before he began talking. I thought he would comment on how empty the streets were, as if it were some dawn to a day in the life of an apocalyptic world. His usual self would say that. Instead, he told me about how he kept listening to a song by New Order on repeat just to hear one line.

“Every time I think of you, I feel shot right through with a bolt of blue.”

He thought of the guy he hit. Told me what the impact felt like. He wondered, why bolt? It’s a shock of some sort, but it’s a consistent hit every time there’s the thought, providing the same charge.

“Blue could mean genre, as in longing or sadness,” he said. I told him the song is most likely about a desire for and reluctance about an extra-martial affair, some sort of third party, but Tommy insisted the line took on new contexts the farther he drove away, the more he listened.

Blue could mean ocean, a sort of floating in a space of thought that gets zapped with the sudden electric shot carried through water, causing a neurological reaction of pain, which could lead to some resonance of emotional aftermath.

A twang, something off-key and unharmonious, something like a slap of hands on a keyboard. The screech of a chipping reed.

Blue could be mean icicle. With the thoughts reoccurring and breaking off, they’d fall like rain.

It looked like Tommy's clothes were drying. "Maybe Bernard Sumner was just talking about Ian Curtis. Maybe the song is about a New Order living on without him. Singing without him."

Tommy pulled at the cuff hard enough to shift the gear into neutral, and I yelled at him at the same time the engine revved. I told him that I didn't want to take him to jail, but that if he was gone longer the consequences would be worse.

"Every day my confusion grows."

"Quit with the song, will you?"

We drove into the orange landscape as the morning became brighter with yellow, as Tommy cried without making noise.

I tried not to think of the line and any more colors, thought about joking that I'd bring him shrimp. I wanted to turn around and let him go back to the beach, but either way I knew that his tears and all that talk about blue could not help him, and I tried not to let this affect me. He banged on his thigh with his free hand, as if to punish himself, and for a moment it began to sound like thuds from under a frozen lake. The sounds softened as he stopped, as he disappeared, as we drove more into the light of what was going to melt him.

## The Call

“You’re toast, you hear me?”

At this point I was on my twenty-seventh call refusing appointments and already told the man that the restaurant would be booked for the next three months. This man’s anniversary was coming up in two weeks, and the threshold between pleading and demanding broke like football players running through a banner. I explained that the manager doesn’t take phone calls concerning booking and wouldn’t make special exceptions for patrons.

“We don’t serve that here sir, I apologize.”

I heard him mutter under his breath but only caught the mother part.

“It’s a phrase you imbecile. I mean if you don’t get me a table, I swear, sweet Jesus...”

“My name is Jonah, sir, not Jesus. Though I’m not even sure he could help you right now.”

His huffing suggested that he was preparing what to say next.

“I will cut you up into slices of toast and burn you!”

I heard him as if he were a tiny version of himself yelling into my ear canal. I flipped through the scheduling book to pretend that I was being ardent in finding him an opening for his occasion, even though he couldn’t see.

“Well sir, as a matter of fact, it is the bread that is sliced and then toasted. Toast can be a verb and noun, but it’s the bread that is the direct object of the toast-*ing*.”

I thought I heard the receiver on his end slam down, wondering if it’s actually possible for the sound of the slam that ends the conversation to transmit to the other end, like if you were to feel pain from a bullet in the brain. But that would mean that he was using something outdated like a flip phone or some landline.

The restaurant I worked at was the premiere place to dine. Patrons take photos in the kitchen with the chefs. Proposals happen as often as refills of water, yet everyone claps and drinks it up the same. Those couples make reservations on the spot for anniversary dinners based on a projected wedding date. There's a legend among the staff that a couple planned to go into labor here, but it may have just been coincidence that the water broke when their aperitif was served.

I initially applied to pay my way through graduate school by collecting tips as a waiter, but the restaurant moved me to the phones with three other people and all we do is reject people. Majority of the time, callers will follow through and make a reservation for dinner three months later, and a lot of the time we get callers who forget about prior commitments and have to go through the wait again.

"I'm begging you," she said. After a while on the phone, I could hear what exasperation sounded like, which came off a person's breath as an after-taste – the smell of alcohol. "My mother is ill and this is her last wish."

Just as I was tasked to do by the restaurant, adhering to response number seven on a list of scenario claims by callers, I forced the words.

"Is your loved one capable of sustaining the duration of a fourteen-course meal?"

Children have been born here, yet no one has died while dining. The closest it came to that was a choking incident on a meal that is suggested to be swallowed whole, which has since been removed from the any future rotation of courses. The extern who came up with the mode of consumption has been removed from the kitchen.

"I hope you enjoy what you do," she said.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but it's out of my control."

The pause in the call was filled with the voices of my coworkers repeating our refusals.

“I’m sure some things aren’t.”

I wanted to tell her about the secret rules in place that made sure that the restaurant ran at such a high level of sophistication, to the point of absurdity. How even if someone arrives on time for an appointment, they will lose their seats. How a certain standard of dress is upheld as a silent law, where one gentleman was refused because he wore a patterned tie on a striped dress shirt. How children under the age of twelve are not allowed. How a single toe cannot be crowded out of your footwear. How a certain amount of oil and light that it reflects on your skin is permissible. How some of the most powerful people in the state eat here two nights in a row because they can.

“Do you ever think about what it would be like to eat where you are? I mean, actually tasting the food, not the experience.”

Keeping the conversation beyond the recommended fifteen seconds already felt like a rebellion that I didn’t plan. My ear became a throat and I drank her voice as it flowed through the receiver like cream.

“Sometimes I do. Sometimes...I just need to know.”

My coworkers looked at me when they didn’t see me put down the phone and wait for a ring, which usually arrived in three-minute intervals.

“Well how about this for an idea,” she said. “Put me down for three, including yourself.”

The surprise took me so instantly that I began weighing the options of what I would wear, imagining what she would look like. I pictured the envy worn as masks for the rest of the evening on my coworkers’ faces. I saw carousel images of a proposal, an anniversary, life coming to be, and death punctuating all of it. A whole lifetime going through courses.

I flipped through pages and hoped to find an opening among the filled slots. I flipped back and forth, hoping that I could somehow shake the finality of names and the words on the pages off so that strokes would fall like dead ants. Searching, I tried to find a place for us in the cycle.

## The Locker

*Karen*

I smile my best while I stare at Cathy and a girl that's supposed to be me but looks like a version of her on the phone screen as she takes our picture outside of the club. All I can smell next to her is the makeup she insisted we share since that's what ladies who are sisters do. She's taking me out since I'm leaving for another college this weekend.

I'm surprised by how much stuff I let myself throw away. Clothes I've worn on a regular basis during certain periods of my life. Books that I've borrowed from boyfriends that I'd rather not return. Ticket stubs to movies that I've collected after they made my wallet thicker. Some things I couldn't get rid of like old photos from my iPhone that I've uploaded to my laptop. Even though I'm scared to look at them, I like knowing that they're there.

"Ugh, Karen it's too dark. We need to find better lighting."

Cathy practically forced me to roll with her before we left. The last time it took me three days to recover.

"It's not going to get better," I say.

Last night I got a text from my ex-boyfriend Tommy saying he misses me. I typed five different things that I deleted, things like "why" and "me too" and "what does this mean," but they all begged more conversation. Instead I wrote, "I hope your okay," not even bothering to correct the mistake.

On the dance floor, guys move with their elbows in the air, rocking their fists back and forth and in circular motions because they don't know how else to move. Some of them dip their knees and flay their arms as if they were bowing to the music. Cathy already found someone to groove on. Some girls are balancing on their heels and jerking on their pencil dresses every sway

of the hips, sip of their drinks. I start to feel the sameness of the scene as something just as solid as the wall I'm leaning on. That's something Tommy would say.

This girl next to me is wearing clear heels that look like they were made out of glitter and glue. On the wall behind the DJ, there's a hole where the disco ball from the ceiling is casting a shadow surrounded by red, green, and purple scratches of LED lights coming from the roof. I can't stop staring at the empty space. I feel my phone vibrate in my clutch and wonder if it's Tommy. I check and there's nothing. Maybe just the music making me feel a rhythm between us that's trying to surge and escalate until it bursts into the drop that everyone's heart's hinge on. Our minds are like toddlers that need to tire themselves out by screaming and that's the only way they can know whether they'll get what they want before it's refused to them. Another vibration. These people stay on the floor until the songs that they know and others know and can repeat from their memory come on so they can sing and for a moment believe that their voice does not belong to them and maybe their minds as well. I feel my phone again and try not to check. I resist the possibility of what being with him again could be like. But then the potential in not being. These thoughts colliding like ice in an empty cup until they chip away at each other and melt into a pool of something refreshing yet cold. If I were to make a movie about insects, this club would be a roach trap, the bar serving the bait. I can't stop staring at the empty space, and as I stare long enough it's like I'm a smaller version of myself controlling this larger body and staring out of eye sockets. I leave the headquarters but it takes a while since I pause at these holograms of people I know, replaying moments and moments like scenes from films I haven't seen in a while, some playing in static. The music from outside booms through the body's skin, but I walk down the spiral staircase in my throat, stopping at a corridor with a box at the end of the hall. When I get to the end, I see that it's a locker and around it are words like black slashes

on the wall that amount to sentences in fine print that are unreadable. The lines inch away like they are escaping the locker, and when I look inside it's what the universe looks like before galaxies lunge into fireworks spreading and burning embers around as stars – dark. I fit myself into the locker to hold the universe back from expanding and separating, creating time, the inevitable, finally seeing what I searched for in the empty space on the wall, what it reminded me of. I feel the galaxies charge into my back like elbows and knees, but I stay in the locker besides the pushing. I hear them grumble as I kneel there, wrapping my arms around my legs. As a few of them try to carry me away, I reject their brightness and rely on everything in me that weighs. The moments in my life where I've truly felt gravity. The heaviness in first kisses. I imagine that I'm wearing the glue heels so I can stick to the floor. I'm unaware of where I am besides knowing this confinement, or if my eyes are open or closed, and I panic when the locker door shuts and I cannot open it. I pull out my phone for some light, and around the locker I see words that I've said to Tommy that have found permanence, at least somewhere.

As I stare at the light, I think about how I can add to these words before I press send, before the universe keeps resuming.

## Swim

I held open the backpack strapped on my chest as Savion brought down the sledgehammer on the glass casing. He dressed like a shadow besides his Coors light hat. I grabbed at the necklaces and bracelets and filled the bag, dropping them in my extended stomach. I grabbed at glass mistaking them for diamonds. I held my breath to avoid wincing.

“Leave the heart-shaped shit!” Savion yelled at the jewelers while pointing his BB gun, keeping them busy gathering what I couldn’t to avoid hitting any alarms.

Before this, we bought long sleeve shirts in black. I suggested gloves but Savion insisted that we’d be spending more than what we stole if we did. We cycled through towers and tried on cheap shades.

“No, not those,” he told me. “Get something more *gang-stah*.”

Before this, we practiced using the sledgehammer on old TVs that were thrown away on the sidewalk. I ran out of the car and caved in gray screens. We used it on toilets.

“Those are harder to break. Probably the porcelain,” I said.

“No shit.”

Before this, I didn’t think that it could get worse.

Before this, I pulled up around the block of a McDonalds at three in the morning with the gas tank thirty dollars full. Savion pulled out a small BMX bike from the trunk and put on an old killer clown mask he had for a Halloween from a while back. He cycled over after we saw the drive-thru lane empty. I started the car and squeezed the wheel. I watched him cycling back fast, the wide-open grin and teeth morphing as the mask swayed back and forth. He had an ice cream cone in one hand.

Before this, we ate a papaya and watched a roach swimming in my apartment’s pool.

“I didn’t know roaches could swim.”

“They can’t. It’s just struggling to live because it fell in by accident,” he said.

Before this, we believed we could be crooks. All it takes is efficiency and time.

Organization. We talked about robbing pizza guys and eating their deliveries, sparing their lives if they had garlic bread.

“If we robbed a gold truck, we’d be rich,” I said.

“You mean a truck carrying gold or a truck made of it?”

Before this, I ran through the market area of Chinatown and grabbed a papaya. Savion would grab another fruit. This was so we could build our confidence. I thought a boulder would start chasing me, but aside from some screaming and pointing we got away. I ran by a man so bent over he was basically staring at the floor as he walked. When I met up with Savion he threw a dusty bundle of sticks at me.

“What are these?”

“I think they’re roots,” he said, wiping at his hands. “This is only the beginning.”

Before this, Savion told me that he filled out twelve applications to medical school, spending close to two grand on fees. He told me how he’d fill out the customer surveys on fast food receipts every time, hoping to win the fifty-thousand dollar grand prize.

“The winners are only in California. Sometimes I just write in the survey, ‘Is anyone even reading this?’”

Before this, we placed nails under front tires so they’d puncture people backing out of stalls.

Before this, I put a check in my bank account and the balance was fifty dollars less than what I deposited.

Before this, we didn't consider that we could feel guilty for being bad. At least me.

Before this, I practiced holding my breath in the pool. I made it to twenty-five seconds.

Before this, we didn't know that we'd save the worse things for later.

## Casket

*Cathy*

Today the Amanda part of Derek is dead, officially. She is non-existent though never really existed besides as a personality in Derek made up in a portion of his brain. It only takes a group of people to recognize that a body is just a house that someone disappears out of. I miss her. The casket is cheap relative to the cost that would be spent on an actual body, pampered and all. The parents paid what they felt was appropriate. A daughter to them. The mother is sobbing, and I see it start to transfer to the father. The mountains are an indifferent backdrop. I don't know what the son is thinking, but I know he didn't want this. To be reminded of a past and future. Acknowledge his split. Constantly remain one person. I'm still recovering from the other night, when I wanted to feel like my body belonged to others, to their touch. That their impact sent surges through receptors. That I am only real when thought of, when seen – felt. The lowering plays like a shared dream. We are tranced by the movement of life having to continue, but in how we observe others that are still living. I open the casket and crawl in, but the casket is made of glass. They see me descend and I watch the dirt fall like how God sprinkled it on the earth from the crust under his fingertips. The grains carry our memories and collect onto the glass, fixed into one area. I watch the dirt clump into a growing punctuation that blots out a column of the sky.

## Four Clubs

### **Club Grenade**

From our booth we watch a bald man hold a stack of bills and get a dance. The room is lit up like parts of an “open” neon sign. He folds the dollars long ways and slides it across the woman’s back. From behind her knees and up the thigh. His money becomes extensions of his fingers. They count every bare second. The bulky security guy who made us buy a drink when we sat down brings us our light beers and a red Corona for Martin. Savion insisted that we get bottles so they couldn’t drug us.

“We’re already drugged.”

“Drug us worse, Jonah, like keep us here and then operate on us,” Savion says. “And transform us into mama’s workers.”

I ask Martin how they made his Corona red, maybe someone bled in it.

“That man is sad,” Martin says. “Maybe his wife died and he’s here cause he’s lonely. It’s Grenadine. It’s like a syrup.”

“Did you say grenade?”

A few guys sit at the stage, a couple hanging back in the booth across the room from us. A dancer we were talking to earlier tells us about an undercover cop, and we leave her a couple bucks each.

### **Club Get Whatever You Want**

We go off on a side street from the main boulevard leading to the shopping center. The outside is painted black. Inside is blue, an aquarium collecting species from the deepest regions of the ocean. All the booths are empty inside except people who might be regulars at the bar. A

sign written in thick permanent marker reads “Minimum Credit charge \$75.” An older woman asks us what we want. Bottles. No blood Coronas. Three ladies join us, one on my lap, one forcing herself between me and Savion. A hand on his thigh. Another stands by Martin because he’s too bulky and takes up his whole side of the booth. The woman bounces on me, tells us to buy them drinks, twenty dollars each.

“That’s more than what we’re paying for ours!”

“Three hundred you get whatever you want.”

The two on our side of the booth leave, but the one standing by Martin hangs around. He wants her to get on the stage and perform but she insists she doesn’t know how. Martin wants a strip off – he goes first, then her. She says no, she’s really bad. I ask her about what she does when she’s not here at the club. Nothing, just stay at mama’s house. She just moved to Hawai‘i three days ago. She doesn’t dance because she hasn’t been taught how. Hasn’t built loyalty on the stage with bills that she must turn over to mama, who keeps her glowing under the neon. Hasn’t seen the hidden agony in a man’s face who pays for pleasure and gets it too fast.

“Do you like it here?” I ask.

“I think so.”

### **Club Hamster**

Martin tells us the clubs here aren’t like Vegas. Each place has a separate floor for audiences of both genders. I follow them to another club. It’s well lit. Booths lining the perimeter. Various stations of stages with booths attached to some sides and sitting areas at the edges. A waiter takes our order as soon as we sit down. Bottles. There’s a yakiniku next door to this building. A single owner for the whole thing. Meat for sale.

Martin holds a dollar in his palm and rubs it down the loin and grabs her. She takes the dollar with the others and leaves.

“You can’t do that.”

We leave, dodging an assembly line through the backdoor, where we were told was the entrance. I don’t see agony anywhere.

“Bro, the wheel is turning but the hamster is gone,” Martin says.

It takes me a while to register anything they’re saying. I hear nothing first and then the words come through overlaid on that silence. I wonder if people talking on phones in movies are actually hearing someone on the other end or if they’re just acting like they’re listening.

### **The Last Club**

In an alley between a bar and another club, we walk on a small bridge. Built on concrete. We duck under a canopy and brush against plants lining the path to the entrance. In the doorway behind the bouncer, a wall blocking a view of the inside is taped up with a collage of nude women from magazines carefully cut around limbs. We pass through hanging beads. We get a ticket for a drink. Only in glass. Okay, Red Bulls instead. They’re warm. The place smells like a towel at the point of being used too much and incense that have long burned out but still linger like a fading fog. A column is decorated with stuffed and plastic dolls. Mannequins stand on platforms. An old woman with bloated collagen lips and a heavy chest sagging over her ribs takes the stage. Her seaweed hair stays in place. Rigid movements. I drink from the can knowing that it will keep me awake when I want the opposite.

I don’t want to be here. I only want to think about moments in my life like the good dreams that I know I’ve had but can’t remember, dreams that involve love-making or new cars or

finding a bag of money or flying. But when I raise my limbs and look at my friends, I am more of a host to this flesh, a consciousness in something dying. Maybe I'll become plastic and stand on a platform and stay there. Things I've done in the past didn't happen to me, but in my memory, if I'm looking at myself from the outside, it's happening to someone that looks like me. A person I only know in mirrors. I am not really in this club. I may have been in others. But where I currently am, the life I'm living now is the only one I know. I feel something rising in me and look in my lap, knowing exactly what's going to happen next.

## Like Nothing

You, Jonah, get your money's worth after splitting three ways on a sixty-dollar bag of weed. Martin hooks it up with a strain called Romulan, some Star Trek reference he doesn't get but can infer that this batch of kush is supposed to be some intergalactic shit.

Savion wants to smoke it all, working out the specifics over group text that the amount you helped buy would yield about fifteen jays, so if you do one every ten minutes, you could kill the bag in about three hours.

You pick at the buds onto a paper towel and somehow the boys have designated you the joint roller because you're the one that has perfected the technique since the time you pulled up a "how-to" video from YouTube. At this rate, you could deactivate a bomb if you put your mind to it. You rip up old movie stubs for filters. Your fingers get sticky with crumbs of green and you sprinkle them into Martin's cup of water and call it tea. You look at the rolled up jays thinking God couldn't have been prouder of the first palm tree he created, more elegant than the sycamore.

The two tower fans stand at where your couch ends to keep the smoke in your living room. You step out beyond the fan threshold and there's no smell. A step back and you're in an insulated block of stink.

"Is everything moving slow?" Savion says. His cheeks and forehead are rosy.

You walk over to the couch like you're wearing an antique diving suit and speak in a giant's voice. "Whaaaaaat doooo youuuuu meeaaaaannnnnn sloooow Saaaaavvvv?"

Martin laughs but with no sound. You're not sure if he's really making no sound or if it's just you. He's leaning into the couch and his body is one with the cushions.

You watch Savion practice his French inhale and think that's how spirits get collected into the cosmos. Your soul will get inhaled into some being's nose.

Martin plays this song he's been really digging lately on his phone. For a moment you remember how you used to send texts with links to romantic shit to your girl Mia so she could forever associate a song with that phase in your lives. A playlist in progress.

You want to ignore this memory so you take another hit and hold everything in until something in your body says *breathe*.

Every time one of those songs played on the radio, a song you've either sent or listened to a lot with Mia or other girls, you forced yourself to make it all the way through. At least to the second chorus. Whatever you do, don't sing along.

It's okay to just nod and think, yes, that did happen.

Savion loads up his hookah with mint and grape shisha, a generous sprinkling of bud. When you inhale from the tube, the bubbling sound coming from the water makes you think it's your stomach that wants something.

You check your phone and cycle through different apps to see if you're still blocked from seeing anything Mia posts or snaps. Your phone pulls up a grey page. A lock.

You eat three slices of frozen pizza straight out of the oven and the cheese oozes around your teeth. Martin tackles the boxes of donuts like he's conducting a symphony.

The coal on the hookah crumbles like a burnt up hockey puck.

The boys pass around a pipe, a joint, and the hookah tube clockwise, everyone taking a hit from each until it's all done.

You check on your first real heartbreak's timeline since you unfollowed her and it takes you a minute to catch up on her life. You're surprised by how much her nephew has grown since

you last saw him at the hospital where he was born. He has a full head of curly hair. You're surprised that he's an older brother now to a new sibling, a younger sister.

You accidentally like one of her photos during a pass off, and somewhere in the world a blip of green flashes on her phone's maritime social screen that acknowledges how far away you've actually been this whole time.

The next hit is so hard that you burn your tongue on ash from inhaling just too much. The boys call you desperate.

The boys tell you not to suck too hard on the joint and burn yourself.

You tell them it's impossible and you'll never make the same mistake.

You turn off your phone. Everything does move slow, and you pretend like nothing happened, or will, besides this.

Testimony

“You should have shaved your eyebrows,” Savion said before I got out of Martin’s car.  
“To make yourself look more different.”

“Then they’d know who to look for if we got away.”

“Right, right. But I’m only going to give you five minutes. We should be out in three.  
Then we do it my way. I think I’m going to wear the cape.”

I wore Martin’s sweater that he used when he works out. It sagged on me as if it were trying to collapse into a pile of clothes. I could jump off a building and float to safety.

When I went up to the teller with a checking deposit slip in my hand, I pulled out my driver’s license and put it on the table by instinct.

“Oh shit.”

I took it back and the teller tensed her face since she was about to slide it closer to her keyboard.

I grabbed the pen but it was tangled in a chain of beads that connected it to the holder. I wrote on the back of the slip but it was out of ink, so I scratched a hurricane into the paper to get it going.

*I’m going to write here but pay close attention. Nod your head if you understand.*

“Do I know you? Is this a joke?”

*I’m robbing this bank.*

She looked at the other tellers in adjacent booths, her eyes bulging in a glance.

*NO.*

*Be cool.*

*Money in bag.*

“You look familiar,” she whispered, squinting at me. She didn’t read the slip. “Did we take a class together?”

*Hurry this is the easy way.*

I handed her a backpack from under the sweater.

“I remember you,” she said. “Nice handwriting for a guy. Dressed well. You’d always finish first for exams and just leave.”

I realized that we sat next to each other in Geography. I’d always try to write legibly in case she wanted to borrow notes from me one day. Did this the whole semester. Scribbled a caricature of the professor to see if she’d notice. I felt her adjust in her seat, making tectonic shifts. I could have been on the moon trying not to look at her even though we were so close.

“I never took you for wearing shades like that. I used to draw those on my suns as a kid. And that beanie. Anyway, this is the worst attempt at a pick up, ever.”

If I knew she were so talkative before, I would have talked to her earlier. Before I could start writing “forget this” and call Savion to abort mission, he ran in with a pellet-gun rifle and jumped on a booth, not without trying a couple of times.

“Everyone this is a robbery! I’m Señor Peligroso and I will shoot.” His bad Mexican accent was muffled because the luchador mask’s mouth-hole ended up being smaller than his lips anticipated.

We put our hands where he could see them and my sleeves drooped down to show my forearms. We paused like we were about to have our photo taken.

“Why are you guys doing this?”

In the seconds I took to respond they felt like years. I wanted to tell her that we had our reasons for wanting the money. A friend in jail. The lovers that became bad investments. The

jewelry we couldn't exchange after our first real crime. Not having medical insurance. Getting into accidents. Root canals. Taking care of dying parents. How we grew up never wanting anything specific or knowing what to want. But the testimony sat like a stone in my chest. The moon in my ribs.

I watched her inch her arm toward what could have been an alarm under her desk.

"Please. Don't."

She stood on an earth that no longer belonged to me and glowed like home. I was far away again: I looked at her through stars, as if I could map my way to each one to grab them and rewind the sky enough to be back in class. I felt something in my guts being yanked through space and the world became small like everything else and I was going back to the beginning to explode.

We had practiced catching up to Martin's car and opening the door to throw a heavy bag inside and then jump in ourselves. We moved up from five miles per hour to twenty-five. Martin had the doors locked on accident, and I held the waist of the jeans to keep them from tripping me.

"Okay!" Martin stared ahead but kept looking at the rearview mirror. "What's the plan, we gonna do the dress like bums thing and then ditch the car?"

"Don't drive so fast," Savion said. "Fast means suspicious. We're safe in rush hour."

I couldn't stop thinking about the teller. Her question stared at me like tired dogs caged at the humane society. *Why are you guys doing this?* I saw that question on the face of every woman I've ever loved. *Why are you doing this?* I saw myself in the reflection of their eyes with

my answer that I've always been afraid of thinking all the time. What I could say was only right for God after my lifetime to explain what I've done: *I don't know*.

I realized that there were things about my friends that I'd never know, and asking them questions about why I thought what we did was fucked up with all the other things we've done to ourselves, getting to the source of our problems would be a messy surgery. Money wouldn't change anything, but only make things easier. I wanted to know what made things difficult from the beginning. I would have to use my words as echolocation to find spots that need fixing, but I could get them wrong and only hear ringing in my ears. Maybe this what was needed to be done to prevent this, us becoming the bad guys.

Every wrong we've ever done in our lives could landslide onto the car to make themselves known, pile up and stop us from going any further.

The sirens called and split the cars behind us but I closed my eyes.

In a drip of sweat gliding down my forehead and neck, I realized that in an entire lifetime you think bad things can never happen to you but to other people, things like not fitting your clothes anymore, losing a limb, or cancer. In a moment or millisecond before combustion, I could finally know the potential in how we glow out and radiate when we save ourselves for big crimes, or for love. If the car were to die out, I would've gotten out to push.

Whatever colors they were, reds or blues, to help or arrest or put out the fires we carried, I felt them swirl around me, and this thought was a supernova raging inside.

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