



ART, AGE & ALCOHOL

Stories and Poetry by Nicholas Steven Kerkhoff

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sometimes
life right
comes only
from the lips
of a bottle



THE OIL OF HYSSOP

The one thing I could always do, the one talent I could always fall back on, ever since I discovered it at nine years old with a half-rack of Schlitz in my grandfather's basement, was that I could drink like a son-of-a-bitch. I could hold my weight in wine, I could ingest my height in beer. I could stay awake for thirty-nine hours and be continually drunk. I could drink, puke and die, then roll over to do it again the next day. But this talent never really came in handy until after the apocalypse. Now in this heaven-forsaken time of human suffering I thank God every day, drunkenly, cursing up at the sky and yelling my slobbering praise for the hold of my alcohol, all the while the world continues going to shit. And since I work for a traveling comedy troupe, it's good to have such clear insight into contemporary life.

So this day like almost all others I'm loaded, and sitting around watching the bottom left corner of an old eighty-seven inch television. Giant and flat and turned on its end, the far side is jutting up to the ceiling and thin cracks run along its surface. Only fourteen inches of the whole goddamn thing can we get to work, me and my partner Pokey. We're sitting on the up-turned bottoms of two plastic five-gallon buckets with cushions strapped down. We're drinking liquor made from fermented raisins and rotten apples while watching hip-hop videos from nineteen ninety-seven on this small fourteen inches of pleasure. Our bit comes on in about ten minutes. We're trying to get drunk and jubilant enough for it. Mary, the pratfall mime from act 3 comes in to bother us, as is routine.

"How can you two watch this shit? That flaunted decadence is exactly what got us into the position we're in today! Ostentatious! Ridiculous! Crap!"

"Shut up," we say in near unison, trying to concentrate.

It's quiet for a moment and we just sit there slugging away, as she stands over our shoulders, all of us for a time watching the large-breasted women gyrate their beautiful clean skin all over the rapping and bejewelled ghetto adonis.

"Those tits are so fake."

"SHUT UP!"

There's one thing people still need when everything else is down, almost more than the dire daily need of food. That's entertainment. And that is why I got into this job, because me, I need more than just food. I need liquor,

and that costs more to make and buy and consume than just regular living, which is fucking damn hard enough. You're rich if you have a full-body lead blanket to sleep under at night. I don't, but I have a chain mail shirt. I'm always wearing that, except when Pokey strips it off my limp passed-out carcass and I have to coerce/beg/steal it back. He can be a real jerk about it sometimes.

"Two minutes, Casablanca!" the stage manager shouts at us. That's our show tonight, Casablanca highlights, and I'll be the one in 40's drag. I play a decent Bergman, but I prefer Louie, the clever, womanizing, self-interested Prefect of Police. He's the only one whose motivations make any sense.

"Damn it! Have you seen the Fedora?" Pokey asks frantically, searching around through the piles of ratty costumes.

"No, no, it's Blanca tonight, not Falcon!"

"Oh.... oh yeah. Those raisins make some decent shit, eh? High sugar, good liqs. I'm totally swimming. But weren't we going to start doing Star Wars again?"

"Naw."

People can still watch these films, it's not like they've been destroyed. At least if they can find enough electricity to power a panel. But for some reason they love to watch us act them out. Probably because we do it completely smashed, stumbling, falling, and on occasion fighting each other or puking on stage. That kind of stuff gets a big response. People love making fun of the rich past, it's the only way to deal with it.

After the show I'm out back behind this old prison we're in. We always perform in places built with a lot of concrete and metal, or underground. It's the only way to get people to the show. I'd just made a deal with a doctor from tonight's audience. He extracted three pints of my blood and I got sixteen ounces of high-proof grain alcohol, with a lovely light amber color. I don't even know why he needed the blood, and I didn't ask him, yet I assumed it to be a good cause, for the few fleeting moments that I cared. Because why should I care? I'll only just get higher with less red and more brown in my system. My back is against the wall, the night's pale moon is up and I see it with my face to

the sky, chugging the beautiful little bottle like it will save me.

“What are you drinking?” she says quietly and slowly from my side.

Shit! Shit! Because I know I’m doing wrong, and I try to suck hard one last quick gulp before it seems like I’m doing just that, but the neck is narrow and I haven’t even gotten half of it. I fear the repercussions of delay and pull the hole from my lips, fast, like I’m startled and meant to.

“Huh? Nothing.”

“What’s in the bottle?”

I don’t respond. My eyes act sheepish, I act guilty. I can feel the warmth growing in my stomach. I’ll know how to deal with this situation in one more minute.

“That’s alcohol isn’t it? I saw him take your blood.”

“Would have been easier and faster to give him a blow.”

“And you snuck off here, out in fucking air, to drink it all by yourself.”

I have no good explanation, so I just look down at the bare hard dirt saying, “Well, it was *my* blood.”

“Oh, your blood, huh? Your blood! Is that what it was? It wasn’t the fucking potatoes I gave my ass for yesterday or the spinach that Pokey stole coming out through that needle? I can’t fucking understand you! Give me that thing.”

I hand it to her and she drinks all the rest. I’m too guilty and still too desirous and guilty and forlorn to watch her finish it. I try looking off to the horizon, but my head just pulls itself back to the dead ground between my feet.

“Come on, you know we can’t stay out here,” she says and I follow her back to Cell Block 6, where we’re sleeping tonight.

We close the bar metal gate to our room, even though it doesn’t lock. It feels nice to be enclosed. The old prison bed frame is still here, and we sleep on the rusted springs of the lower bunk with our two valuable blankets, one above us and one below. We’re causing a light red dust to cover the floor beneath the whining metal skeleton and the sounds it makes remark that it can barely support us, as it sags near the floor, folding us into the middle, so close to each other that we don’t mind.

As every night, she grabs at me like the edges of a lifeboat. She digs her head up under mine and through her hair and the compression on my chest I can barely breathe. Her legs desperately twist around my own like ivy clinging to a trunk and her nails clutch at my back-skin, pulling it tight over my loose bones. As with every night, she starts to sob.

“Mary,” I say gently, like every night, “Mary, there are still good things.”

All I feel is her head shivering through my hollow ribs and the comfort of my liquor fading away into the headache of my low blood level.

“At least it’s good to be close to someone,” I try.

She looks up at me. “It’s good to be close to *you*.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“Did you?”

“Yes,” and we don’t talk more.

The next day we’re moving on, sitting under the slapping metal roof of our bumping covered wagon as a single flatbed pickup pulls the sluggish length of the entire twelve piece theatric ensemble across the prairie land of our despair and I’m back on the old raisin liqs. Pokey and I are working on bringing E.T. to the stage, but Spielberg’s rampant naiveté is so hard to deal with. There’s nothing wondrous left in childhood and no one can appreciate irony.

Me, with the big mask on, a rubber pumpkin painted brown: “God dammit, we need better material than this.”

Pokey with his finger dipped in red paint: “Like what?”

“I dunno, but something original.”

I go back to the bottle to think, leaning my back against the lurching tin sides of our wagon, alien pumpkin mask tipped up over my forehead. The sun’s falling in on my pale legs. The front and back are open so we’re wearing filter masks and I must pull mine aside to drink. The air is the worst for you, but it still feels nice when it’s warm and moving over your bare skin so innocently.

We’re on a highway, an interstate, if that meant anything. It’s just barely less rocky and uneven than the scrub land around us, yet roads were built to be used, were they not? Mary is sleeping under us, under both blankets, in the trough of our wagon with the assorted bottles and tins of water and broth and

clean soil clanking about her. We all look and feel like ancient gypsy europeans. Our bottles are thick leaded glass jugs of distorted sagging opacity, like old square windows though which to watch the ocean. They're caked with mineral deposits from the deepest wells. Water that hasn't seen sunlight since the dinosaurs, so we can know it's clean.

Pokey and I sit looking at each other from across the gulf of Mary asleep, thinking or not, and drinking. The wagon stops. It lurches forward and back and forward into repose. Mary wakes up. She squints her eyes while we don't move. She gets up and pukes a little off the end. I should go over to her, but I don't. Pokey stares at me.

"Where are we?" Mary asks, wiping her mouth and resting her breather back into place.

"Nowhere," I say, "Probably another broken overpass we have to go around and they have to talk about first."

"Are you guys working?"

Pokey: "We were..."

"Well I'll see if I can make some food then if we're stopped."

Pokey keeps staring at me. I look out the back of the wagon, get up and go out there. It's hot and dry, and there's a light sand in the wind. I move around the side, away from Pokey's following eyes, and onto the open road. The blacktop is cracked and uneven, broken into big chunks like playing cards scattered carelessly about. The ancient discipline of the yellow line relenting as it disappears into the future. I scuff my shoe at the edge of one crooked slab, flaking off pebbles and tar pieces that willingly crumble and disintegrate, jumping to the ground near a rare and inscrutable single weed poking itself up through the cracks. It's brown and miserable looking, yet alive. More plants grow in the fissures of the highway than in one mile of the waste around us. Maybe the cement shields them somehow, but I'm more willing to bet it's the urine of travelers on which they root.

The sun is bright and potent and its light gleams off the long line of metal wagons baking in front of me. Heat-distorted air wafts up from their big black tires, twisting the image of a man walking toward me. My boss. He's come down to tell us that we all have to chip in for the impromptu toll-stop which is detaining us. Lousy brigands.

I climb back in our wagon-home to rustle up some piece of suitable currency. He suggests alcohol, while I look for something else. Pokey gives up a small jar of pickled eggs. I suppose that will do. Mary cooks.

The next place is always the same. We find first a spot to set up, this time it's a dark parking garage thirteen floors below sea level, cultivating a community. Pokey and I are passing the last couple inches of fruit-wine between us, picking the bitter dregs from our teeth as the caravan slowly worms its way down the coil of old parking stalls. We click our jaws, watching the people grow richer as the depth increases. Dirty pale children chase us while the wagontrain spirals its way downward, like a giant centipede into a labyrinth, each section following the one preceding it with a slow precision, the ends turning old corners as the head moves through new ones. We stop, one level before the last, unload the props, construct a stage, get more drunk.

Mary says: "I need to rest before the show." We know that she is dying. The whir of the giant fans, sucking and filtering the air down to this level pervades everything, filling your senses. We make up for Casablanca, the last time we'll do it.

Ilsa: "You're saying this only to make me go."

Rick: "I'm saying it because it's true. Inside both of us we know you belong to Victor. You're part of his work, the thing that keeps him going. If that plane leaves the ground and you're not on it, you'll regret it."

Ilsa: "No."

Rick: "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life."

Ilsa: "But what about us?"

Rick: "We'll always have Paris. We didn't, we'd lost it, until you came to Casablanca. We got it back last night."

Ilsa: "And I said I would never leave you," as I fall over, drunk almost to coma.

Mary dies that night. Pokey and I bury her the next day, marked only by a pile of stones. We say nothing to each other as we dig open the hard packed

earth. Our breath, loud and labored, rattles through the tubes that cover all our inhales. I am barely alive when we finish. That same day the caravan moves on, continuing its slow sad weave across the land and we stop our act, each dissolving into bit parts of the more sober show. Not long and Pokey meets a nice clean girl from the coast. I continue with the troupe and never see him again.

In the hardship of winter the show finally disbands, aching and numbly rended apart like the last clinging meat from a frozen bone. Everyone goes their separate ways and I try to lose myself wandering into the sanctuary of a more northern, harsh and safer wilderness. I don't plan a long stay. Yet it's there in the snow drifts beneath the scattered stunted trees that I meet a man with a large cache of potatoes. In a shivering burst of enthusiasm I tell him of the wonders of distillery, that we may make and sell hooch in the bosom of the mountains, providing bounty enough that I can drink it in continually with the daylight, and in the cold night air close in among the stars, burn up my memories like thick logs that smolder slowly away throughout a long night.

when you looked up
i said
give me your saddest
simplest, nondescript
angry look

she did
and i
 gasp

She sits on the porch steps
when she smokes cigarettes
watching nothing
making an art of the action
of her lips

i'm coming back from the corner store
eleven cans under my arm
and one for her

we sit
she smokes
and we discuss the neighborhood

i look at the new weeds
in the old cement cracks
in front of us
and try to think of fun things to say

she wears good clothing and interesting shoes
and i wonder if we're relating well to each other

i really like to watch her hands
from atop her crossed knees flicking ashes
then to her mouth where her cheeks
suck in slightly as the cherry brightens

they're a little too old for her
her hands
maybe because she tells me
she's smoked since sixteen

we're twenty-six each
sitting on the porch steps
of an old house
during a Portland Oregon summer



THURSDAY

I was hoping the border might wake you. Coming into California, we have to declare fruit.

Now the sun is shining through mid-day mixed blue/grey sky after seven hours of driving, coming down out of the pass, out of Oregon, and thank god we missed any snow. Falling now from mountains into desert; Central California is all scrub land. Bushes, red cracked rocks and parched gullies. Long-distance pebble-strewn brown vistas ahead; the brakes squeal as we pass slow diesel trucks and their trailers. All of California itself is an island, caught between long mountains and endless ocean. Only way the fruit flies can get in: is traveling in our car. So like no other border in these United States, I'm stopped and asked to declare.

"Are you caring any fruits or vegetables today?"

"I have two bananas."

"I'm sorry I'll have to take them."

"That's okay, they're ripe."

"And would you like a free map of California?"

Then you groaned slightly in your seat and I thought you might wake. Instead you rolled yourself tighter into more dreams. Pleasant ones I hope. Dreams I myself would like to get to soon, if only you would wake and take your turn at the wheel. I'll pull over at the next rest station and nudge you. Thirty miles from here.

But when we stop I can't do it. Caught looking at you lying there, curled up in that big fuzzy orange sweatshirt, nestled against the brown vinyl seat and the uncomfortable door. I wanted to kiss you there, leave you there tenderly forever. In our yellow 1974 Volvo Station Wagon just past Yreka California, a rest stop in the early afternoon, this autumn-day drive back to Sacramento, to my family, to the recriminations and pumpkin pie that follow every Thanksgiving. This time I'm bringing you, my lovely new dear to meet them --and I don't know if it will succeed. So I stretch, pulling myself out of the car, stiff from these long morning miles.

I wander hard-legged up to the cold blue tile restroom and relieve myself. Coming back on the curving paths, dropping a bottle into the trash, empty of this morning's orange juice, I climb into the driver's seat again, smiling. Because I-5 is long and straight and beautiful, but keep sleeping my darling.

And I will recall, lazily, at 70 miles an hour, our first meeting in that chilly dark, drizzling legend of a last April Seattle, seven short months ago, outside that place we both frequented. I'd never talked to you, I'd seen you --in the mist with your many friends, gregarious and unreachable-- but it was you who spoke to me first.

“Don't I,” beauty said to me, “know you from somewhere?”

And myself, frozen in a hot sweat, stood simply blinking.

So you asked “You live on capital hill, don't you?” maybe twice.

And I did.

In a lonely studio apartment, until two months into June I was moving into your place on the comb of Queen Ann, that Sunday truck sputtering through downtown traffic, I remember, and your half-a-view blocked by the next house on the rise; we see the saucer of the Space Needle on clear days.

My dog, my chest of drawers - your cat, your place - after that first day, we all became such best friends so suddenly. So improbably. Living a joy. A delight I never would have thought before. Begging for no ends in life. Even to think of it!

Summer was spent dancing in our socks, slow motion through dusty sun beams across your dark hardwood floors, framed by victorian windows and Seattle's best three months. Cat and dog not caring, in the corner, sleeping companionably, just two-colored fuzz. We had freedom, we had passion; a wonder made the mornings and the evenings go everyday regretted.

Why me? I know I asked.

And could you promise me it would not end?

But anyway: -For life!! --For gladness!!!

And for this road that, through crisp California valleys, speeds us on into inevitable crimson sunset.

los angeles girl
cellphone in your ear
just back from a workout
leaving Whole Foods with an organic plum in bag

can I ask you a question:

why do you believe in magazines?
which celebrity would you not fuck?
how does a glance measure a man?
what exactly are you looking for?

i don't mind a little yoga myself
i like organic nonfat yogurt with granola sprinkles
who *doesn't* go to the beach on the weekends? I've seen the traffic...

in a city this large you'd think parking would be easier, wouldn't you?
no cheap organic almonds? yes, the price has been high. wrong season.

quinoa is like rice
only round...

you wouldn't like my car
my surfboard takes up
two seats

i'll talk to you later when i'm famous

she's ebullient
and two years ago
i told her the truth
if that's what it was
that i loved her

ambiguously she escaped me
and now she writes me back
inviting my anxiety
for a weekend trip with her friends

making me confused
and i want to tell her no
but loneliness begs trying

so i'll travel there
struggling upwards
against the weight
of expectation

what's her game anyway?
i can't ask

we were old friends
who are now nothing
but conjecture
won't satisfy
an evil longing
for prescience



ABOUT TIME

It's wonderful to be back in Seattle; on Capital Hill, where two kids light weed, this New Year's Eve night by the bus stop behind us. I'm three drinks in already, and that scent is the homesickness of being back here. Eight o'clock on a gloved and frosty final night of last year, waiting for our ride, smelling this scent, I'm happy again.

We crowd into the bare white fluorescent light of a double-length nighttime bus, drop our coins, walk across the accordion middle back into plastic seats where, with the other kids around us, groups just like ours, partly drunk into the early evening, we loudly anticipate the length of the party still joyfully awaiting us.

My three friends: Chris, Teresa and Amy; the four of us on our way to another friend's apartment, we discuss in even tones the things we're noticing and thinking. *Teresa may speak her mind about wine while Chris says his share pulling hands through her hair*; writing down in my pocket notebook, these ridiculous poetry, lyrics, or whatever, --simple ideas as they occur to me.

Our bus stop arrives. Then the few block walk along the frozen concrete to Mike's apartment; the ice crystals on the sidewalk reflecting orange glint under the safety of streetlights. *He resides in a four-story, middle-class tenement, iceblock of twenty-somethings*. We're knocking up the third floor door, giggling out party enthusiasm. Shedding our coats at the entrance; we're pulled into the dry indoor air, a warm December party. His new friends are lounging on the futon and resting in the chairs, dotted along the kitchen counters chatting (we're his old friends) and we're not. Awkwardly threading our way through, trying not to look awkward. We notice their better dress: the slacks and skirts with fashionable shirts. They're talking consensus politics and drinking what-is-that: white wine, out of glass, while we fill plastic cups with frozen beer from the pony-keg on the porch.

Mike is newly gay. And we didn't know this (that he was actually always gay) before, when we all along knew him. But it's alright, he's out, and things are different, and not only this new crowd, but our ability to understand him. The new him. Which he'd been hiding, he said, before. And now, well... now we get to know the new Mike which is the Real Mike we never knew anyway.

Staying on the porch, out in the cold, Chris, Teresa, and I smoking Chris' city cigarettes, shivering. *Shoulders hunched, one arm crossed and holding*

the sleeve of the other, a shaking hand back and forth brings the smoldering bee from lips to hips. Soon we're frozen. So we go in again, once we've tossed the butts off the balcony (onto the roof below), to: "let's make new friends!" the chant, as we join the inside heat again, to chat it up. The television is flashing the earth's other boisterous parties and suddenly on the east coast it's New Years there already; the ball has dropped, and I'm drinking more. We mingle about.

I talk faux-intellectual with a guy flown in from London. Amy's in the hall, chatting up some hemp-clad vegan. She looks a little bored and I excuse myself to interrupt. Then the earthquake comes. We duck, eyes wide and spilling drinks, starting a run for the door. Then it's over.

Back walking the streets a couple hours later, swaying, slurring, with only an hour to go: "Whirr we going now?"

"To the bars!"

To the bars! To the bars! Of course!

The ground shakes slightly. My penis sways in my jeans, and my head swims with the beauty of the night. Teresa is sexy and joking about: "...wanting to get laid tonight!" and I laugh, or trying to, turning away. And the ground is rolling slightly, cracking the iced-over cement.

In the bars: smoke.

In the smoke: noise.

Shoulder to shoulder, I squeeze up for expensive drafts of cheapdrink at the impossibly crowded, enameled, empty-cup littered, wood/brass bartop, with the pushy people and their cigarette butts floating in dregs of build-up; the earth merely quivers. I grab a girl's ass. She punches me on the arm. I'm bored, actually.

We carve out a little spot, like bears at the beach, you'd think there was a rotting whale carcass in here. It's nearly impossible to talk above the noise because everyone is talking above the noise. We acquire two stools; the rest of us must stand.

Living in a city... being back in *this* city; on the streets, so many people just like me, too many dressed like me I notice. I'm a disaffected well-educated bohemian geek and it shows. Seattle has the fragrance of aptitude and distract-

tion; a persistent attempt at fun, with blotches of frustration.

I make it a priority in my head tonight: Kiss Teresa!
Maybe!

Lovely Teresa is a wonderful hyper little girl (about 5' 1") but never trust a word she says.

If she says she'll call you later, she won't. And if she says she wants to "hang out again soon!" she doesn't mean it, or at least she only means it for that moment. But if she says she loves you and you're her favorite person in all the world, well... she *might* mean that; she has to at least once. Because I've loved her for a long time and that means something in the karma bank. Throughout her frayed string of poorly chosen boyfriends I've held my tormented and true torch shining private knowledge in my head repeating, oscillating the energy of many years, contained barely at skull edge on too many a too-drunken night.

We've remained friends, I've remained hers.

She says odd things, at odd moments, like once, in line for a beer at a professional baseball game she told me: "You're the type of person I could truly spend the rest of my life with," off-handedly of course. And the giantness of the stadium sat on me for a moment surrounded by ten thousand briefly silent people. I blinked. We bought our beers and nothing more was said of it. We walked back to our seats and what could I say, walking, struggling, behind her with the brew cups, to where our friends waited thirstily through the fifth inning for us.

She probably never had that notion again.

Four innings later the Mariners lost and we all went home.

But tonight somehow I think, I believe, it could be done. This final night. Last night of a last rotten year. This random date which means nothing to the universe marks my deadline against a tomorrow's hopeful sunrise in her bed instead of on a floor cold in some friend's house far from my own, far from her; as bright it breaks the black of tonight, forgetting and correcting past mistakes and neglects, the new year's sun. One more orbit. If only I could wake up naked next to her, intertwined with her, just once! It's almost this new year, almost tomorrow again.

“I had a dream the other night that I met Kurt Cobain in the checkout line of the ThriftWay buying organic peaches before he died and asked him to come to Oahu on vacation with me and he did. So he was there, instead of at his home in front of that shotgun. We swam in the warm water together and forgot his problems, throwing amps and guitars into the ocean, drinking Red Stripe and letting only the waves wreck themselves.”

“Red Stripe is Jamaican beer.”

“It could have been Jamaica. It was a dream. He probably would have killed himself anyway, if I’d slept any longer.”

I can tell this to Chris because he understands we don’t have any solutions or we wouldn’t be drinking here in the rainy city again. We have no secluded pastoral walden home and hearth, no book or dog, snifter of brandy; we have no cozy personal philosophy to cuddle with on dark winter evenings. We walk through the pine trees bordering someone’s million-dollar city-house. We smoke weed out of his hand-blown glass pipe. We barely notice the man in his ragged layered coats sleeping curled, filthy in a filthy blanket beside us, disguised among the dead leaves and brown fir needles. It’s only the eighty ounces of recently finished malt liquor in two empty bottles rattling down beside us when Chris kicks them over accidentally that shows us the bearded old bum who doesn’t even wake up or budge at the noise. Perhaps he’s dead. We don’t check. We go instead to that bench down the block.

Sitting in a single spot makes me drunk-dizzy, sitting here thinking, what the fuck am I doing smoking more weed except I’m used to it. Fucking myself up because this is what we do: we party, we have fun. That’s something. Escape or something, tearing down a thing or building some other thing up. Whatever it is, it’s not our invention. I’m kin to a long line of drunk ancestors, from my martini-addicted uncle, to a drunken monkey a million years ago munching fermented fruit.

We stumble back to the club, as midnight approaches a light snow begins to fall; the flakes drift around in the bright light-cones cast off a hundred Seattle street lights up and down the length of her damp cold and safe streets.

The crowd back in the bar is joining together in the crescendo: 10, 9, 8, 7... just as I ordered one more drink.... 6, 5, 4....I’m pounding it.... 3, 2,

1.... watching Teresa kiss some tall blond guy she met ten minutes ago while I was out in the cold. And I suppose that's my fault. If television has taught me anything, it's to be a more assertive and aggressive *mack*. Wishing I was a black american tv bad-ass and I could walk up and say just, "Bitch please!" because I don't know what else I'm supposed to do, this ineffectual bourgeoisie me.

I sway my way outside again as the people, pouring out of bar doors, stumble between the growing snow flurries falling through taxicab headlights idling for guaranteed fairs in a drunken city that doesn't generally use cabs. The people holler, shout and say "HAPPY-FUCKING-NEW-YEAR!" when they pass me, all lushed and loud, cheering up from the bottom of their young booze-addled souls. Slower then the rest of them, but I get into it, as the fire-works shooting off the Space Needle in the glistening white night are a comfort, hot burning streaks in the frozen air.

Then Teresa comes out of the bar behind me.

"I was looking for you," she says, arms encircling my waste.

I turn and smile as we're embracing and she kisses me lightly on the lips.

Her soft head tilts back and she looks right into me saying in the crowded quiet street: "Have a good new year Nicky." Her glinting brown eyes staring deep into mine. You too, I say simply, kissing her again.

Maybe I think, maybe it will work this year.

She was small, yet powerful. Her body, like a rubberband ball felt taut and packed. When she was under me, when I tried to envelop her with my own body, I could still not possess her, for she simply radiated out past me, between the cracks of us, red and glowing through my thinner skin. And I had no protection from her, no shield for her glowing influence upon and beyond me. She had a tattoo in the very center of her chest saying “trust” to me every time I read it and kissed it and I can still well remember the first time I uncovered it and my blank stare, which I hid from her, that came from facing such an insistent prerogative. I know I maybe blushed, but pressing my whole head into her, I covered myself, pleading pleasantries. She owned me; sadly; greatly.

I was out surfing in a hard rain tonight. The border of the clouds two miles out in the ocean I could see was still sunny, but above me, coming straight down, killing the wind, pattering around me sweetly, dappling the water in all directions like the flattened surface of some giant golfball, the rain kept pressing, while smooth humps of swell were slowly rolling in at me, in the dusk paddling. They had this odd look like wind swept sand dunes, only moving, towards me. I paddled and caught a few, and going down the line in the rain is really the oddest thing; it hitting your face like you're riding a bike in a storm, but you're trying to surf, blinking, gasping, trying to stay with it.

It really began at fourteen when his family moved to New York. He'd played ball before, but nothing like these high-attitude street courts, rimmed by chainlink, haunted by hobos and tough-kids. With drugs on the sidelines, whatever you needed; baller's girlfriends, gangs of friends and forties, gold chains and protect-the-rep.

Ken only played; Ken merely played. He played well and that's what mattered. All posturing aside, most of them still had a basic respect for the game, a love even, for basketball, which was down deep. A reverence for its structure and its difficulty and finesse; a style of perfection.

Of course ego overran respect sometimes more often than not, but it came back again on a good move, a nice play, a flowing game, a finger roll down the lane, three points with pressure; the perfect jump shot had to be respected no matter who threw it up, no matter how skinny or white he was.

The kid could play; he could play. And that's what mattered.



VACATION

But I've never been stoned --he looked at her oddly-- she said in a vinegar-and-oil agitated mix-up of confidence and fright, little bubbles of each swirling about in her mind.

As he stood there, with the smoldering tip held aloft, offering it to her shoulder, between brown fingers still burning, she tried not to turn her body towards it for fear of an impulsive acceptance. Peer pressure is, as they say, a real bitch. It's female. A person who doesn't smoke evidently, his slack-stoned face remarks, considering her; baffled. As if no one had ever not smoked pot before! As if it was some part of preschool for which she was absent, sick. You could almost see the outline of his dick in those jeans, that's pretty disgusting; why should I listen to this guy?

"So here's your chance now," he says, with the slightest hint of force.

I don't think I want to, she meant to say, but said instead: "Alright," and on into the cloudy world, this little girl skipped up its empyrean highway.

And when later, as he grabbed clumsily at my boobs, she thought, "This is the payment."

It was summer.

It was the beach.

It was vacation.

So okay? A time for experimentation is all I'm saying. Not that I need to make any excuses. If you've been there, and if you were young, then you know: all about coming in the car, with all our bags behind us (and a big plastic box on top), a slow blood-spot streaking the freeway: our red mini-van which I try to disassociate myself from quickly whenever we stop for gas.

Fast out the sliding side door into the airconditioned, linoleum, fluorescent-lit, snackracks-ringed-by-freezers little convenience store, while dad considers his pump options, button choices, payment methods, and shouts to mom through the window to pull the lever for the gas door which he always forgets to pull himself. So Mom must stop twisting around to Mary-Little-Sister like she always is with her mess in the backseat (snack containers, picture books, word-speller and the many scattered candy wrappers from bribing her cooperation) undo her own seatbelt and stretch across the gulf between where she normally sits, watching and commenting, to where daddy drives cursing.

She fumbles for the gas hatch button and it pops. I'm gone already and I don't look back. Freedom is a fickle and momentary pleasure.

Cold on my face, the gust of dry A/C air that pulls me in from the parking-lot humidity. They will say this about her daughter: she gets out of there quick! I go into the store and it's busy; all tourists like us, from highway to the ocean: not yet burned, not yet broke, still not happy.

A couple stringbean boy-brothers, one a head taller than the other, are in the second isle contemplating chips. She's there for a peak. Maybe they'll look at her. Just act a little aloof, simply browse. Pull your shoulders back a bit. Pretend you're looking past them. Don't look down at yourself. (I hate this tee-shirt!) Pose a little? As best as she can a little, the young woman, doesn't even know why, but she likes to be looked at... a little... sometimes...

(And I remember going back to that place on the way home, when I was stoned the whole trip, with my mother yelling at me, and it was pretty much the same...

...only more so.)

But still young and innocent, when we finally hit the coast there's that rush of enthusiasm. MaryMyLittleSister and I: THROW OFF THE SEAT-BELTS! FLING OPEN THE DOOR! JUMP OUT OF THE VAN! RUN! RUN!!

And over the first dune, look upon it: The Beach!

The ocean finally there, moving calmly and quiet, as though it had been waiting for us. All pale blue, from shore to sky. Nonchalant water splashing lightly upon nice white sand. A scattered crowd of indiscriminate people-shapes and their umbrellas casting little shadows in the heat of a very-bright midday beach-sun; they blanket the sand with a randomness like starpoints. Crumbling waves send out a distant echo and it's the only sound besides the gulls cawing and cartwheeling. My sister and I stand there, hand-in-hand, ensconced and joyful, legs cramped, sugar-exhausted and joyous, until Mom calls us to "*get back here and help unload the van!*"

Every time I see my cousins --I haven't seen them in a year or more, and

they've changed. They're always into something new, like: "You don't have one of these dolls?" "Don't you have that jump rope?" "A *chinese* jump rope?" "Your ears aren't pierced?" "No make-up?" "Don't you have a bra yet?"

Everytime more frustrating. I'm always the one caught behind.

My cousin Becky (now insisting she be called Becca) is a year older than me, and has always made a joke about the things I haven't found out yet: "Of course Santa Claus isn't real!" "Storks don't bring babies!" "The tooth fairy is your parents." And this year: "What's a blowjob? You don't know?! Oh my God, she doesn't know what a blow job is! Dummy! It's when you put his penis in your mouth and blow on it, stupid! Oh you're such a kid. What a kid you are!"

So she's kind of a bitch, yeah, but who else am I supposed to hang out with? She does truly know a lot of cool stuff, all the stuff which I need to learn and know myself: all about bands and boys and bras and being a real girl, one that people will notice.

The first night she steals us a beer we split together, to impress me which it does, because I've only ever had a stolen sip or two before. Her older brother is making fun of us for savoring it so dramatically, and we disdain to give my own little sister a sip, even after she decided it wasn't so "Gross!" after all and wanted a drink, but still scared by the adulthood of it, just a taste. I was too, scared, or actually nervous, and it didn't taste too great anyhow. And we didn't feel it, not much, though we acted like we did. Drunk on the newness and the excitement. Imitating poorly the drunks we'd seen on TV or in our own family late those wedding nights, when they didn't care or couldn't hide it, stumbling around, saying the weirdest things.

We go down to the beach after our hotdog dinner on the porch. The mostly full moon is lighting up the still crashing waves. And I remember the first time I was at a beach and thought the ocean would be calm at night, like a lake. But it doesn't seem to notice day or night, it just keeps going and crashing, rising and falling forever.

I'm terrible at this game called Truth or Dare --if a person can really be bad at it. I end up in my underwear in the ocean, shivering, running back up the beach, triumphant but embarrassed in the darkness (thank goodness). My nice underwear too; Mom will be pissed, if she finds out, which she won't!

I'm better at that already: hiding the truth from my parents. Still, I'm terrible at Truth or Dare.

In the hot afternoons, like a thousand other families to the left and right of us, up and down the shore, we sit out all day in the blazing sun on towels and foldable chairs, with our sun-screen bottles, inflatable rafts, beer cans in melting icy water at the bottom of the cooler, various beach toys scattered around and we fry. *Sizzle!* It's hot and it's humid. Back and forth to the ocean every now and again, out into the waves with my cousins. The younger kids staying in the shallows while us older ones go out to where we can barely touch; goofing around and talking; giggling at boys; trying to make the cuter ones swim closer and then swimming away from them.

MaryLittleSister still stays close to the shore. Mom doesn't want her going out too far even when someone's with her. But she enjoys building her never-completed sandcastles at the tide's edge, tempting it to rise and destroy them. She and my other baby cousins, filling bright-colored buckets, digging out a trench with little plastic shovels; forming conical castle walls and pouring water in the moat merely to watch the sand soak it up and return it back, by way of crabs and clams, underneath to the ocean.

- They chase the little fish that flash, fast and safe from small hands, in the final inch of incoming wave water.

- Find the occasional intact sea shell and show everyone.

- Dig at the bubbling holes which might hide some sea creature, but never finding one.

That was me as well, only a year or two ago. Now I'm embarrassed that I'm wearing a one-piece swimsuit. Becky (Becca) is wearing a bikini (of course) and it's funny because I actually have more boob than her this year. This pisses her off, both things: more breast and, still in a one-piece, as if to point it out! I'll get money from Mom tomorrow, buy another suit, and it'll be a bikini.

By late afternoon we're back at the house eating PB&J, burned by the sun, waiting for the evening to come down cool.

Then to this night in question, I didn't just kiss him. That's important. I

went farther than that... farther than I ever had before... *but not all the way*. Being high just made it all more crazy, bright, touching, weird and swimming; this feeling of being so close to another person, intertwined with them. Wrapped legs, wrapped arms, wrapped lips. All close in the cold sand, among the dark bushes, in the dunes between the houses and the ocean. Wave noise covering up our sounds, with the darkness covering our ignorance and embarrassment. He reached for my chest and I let him. His hand up under my shirt, and I put mine under his, feeling his ribs, his muscled back and the heat coming off his burnt skin. I was giggling from the electricity of it, but scared of myself and where it was going and what it was all about: being new, being young, being stoned.

And he was not the best lover, I know it now, the clumsy kid, and when he whispered in my ear, "I know you want it!" I guess I knew I didn't. Because high or not, when I felt his gentle hands turn toward clawing paws, I knew I didn't want any more.

...from him, anyway. Because that night, the smoke, the movement... it all belonged to me, a newer me who I don't even know very well. A girl who, on the morning we were leaving to go back home, was taking pipe hits for the drive back, hits for all my family. Behind the beach house, in bare feet, bargaining a puff from one of his friends for a kiss before I left, as I hear my Mom on the deck above me call, frustrated and wondering where I am, she's already back into stress mode for travel and life, more frets, and fears of my father's all-day grumpiness at being an hour late to get on the road in the morning because "*we'll hit all the traffic!*" Because we *must* make good time, to make good time.

I can't stand it. I'm sorry already. The occasional but intense pressure of not writing you is only relieved by one, tragic, foolish thing: *writing you* as if it's still old times. But time has pushed continually to this moment; things changed as they could not be prevented from doing. Myself, now different and somewhat the same, still working towards being a little better tomorrow always. No matter what image I may be in your brain and whether you ever conjure it, day by day by week, let me say: I'm still the same tender frightened harsh and loving person i always was. A bit older, maybe even slightly healthier, more itinerant, with the same stymied passion and regretless persistence towards desires which no one cares about but me.

Still not participating in the mainstream.

Still not dignified, not satisfied, not enlightened enough. Still caring.
Still not eating animals.

Still solipsistic....

What else can I write about, not knowing your life now at all and what you feel each moment? Knowing fancy writing doesn't impress you. Where are you and what you're worrying and loving and believing in today? I only started this off a memory; one fleeting glimpse of a time when we understood each other, or at

least cared enough to try; once. Probably that was not rare. Maybe it was one sided. I'm foolish, but this is sincere. Foolish none the less.

I've learned, or at least started, to surf the ocean since we last heard each other's voice --here's something to tell you. And I think you would like it, really: love it. The clean, beautiful water on cold foggy Pacific mornings. The perfect arc of a crystal wave waiting for you to mesh with it and glide with it and love it. The sea otters smashing breakfast on their chests among the kelp forests, and harbor-seals like lost dogs, bobbing their heads to the surface between feeding runs beneath our feet. It's a metaphor for life and life itself. Balance and chaos and life and death, all together in one wet, frustrating task towards perfection.

I hope somehow that no one talks like this in your life anymore, or if they do that they're not as crazy as me and you can just enjoy them for their output and not their crumbly sad inconsistent insides. I hope all your in-there feelings are fine and permanent and steady for living that joyful life you always strived for; the one which you are were so much better at than I. The one you deserve. And I can't fathom the twists of the past or their ridiculous motivations and reactions, and never did I decipher the plot which our characters played back then, and why, and for what reasons the future unfolded to this moment now, but I can remember good times and unique moments in my memory of importance.

I still brush my teeth for two minutes, and eat burritos and wonder at the night about stars and trees, and friendships I'd rather have in my life than not, only am too ignorant or foolish or ridiculous to give up on.

Mary in my hotel room crying, I can't help it. Thinking my father's thoughts. Between bleary eyes I write in my book, pencil sounds the only thing besides her sniffling sobs and the imperceptible whine of the television on mute, flashing white in the dark. I write about:

*a merry wept room
gentle lost moment
this infection in
spaces not described
even to her,*

...her breasts still showing, because she's not yet dressed, and I can't look. She's a better poet than I'll ever be. I'm turned away, but catch her eyes in the mirror. Hollow, it occurs to me. We've come full circle, and our lives are the deepest clichés. As my penis is still deflating, the sheets are on the floor, her hands are trembling, holding my letter, while I try to think of where to I can escape.

A year later I find her again at a party. The randomness of a small world seems mostly-so when you come face to face with a girl you destroyed one night; across a cheap keg in a full house with a drunken mind and a dumbfounded expression, thinking 'I may have destroyed you for one night, but you've wrecked

me for a year,' and so on.

Of course, it didn't go well.

A year after that, I'm in another relationship.

Two years later and I'm married.

But sixty longer years now, stuck here in this dying bed, I'm still thinking about it. Too soon, too soon! I write in my book:

-sorry.

how boring again
missing you

how sad
i dreamt you up

again last night

us, together

in that watery reality

as never
in this cold
granite morning

as never



GIVING UP

I said I'd quit in June.

When September came around and I was still drinking I actually started to worry. Two drinks later I stopped worrying. For about a year that was the pattern. Worry about drinking -- drink to stop worrying. Not a good cycle I said to myself generally two minutes before a drunken sleep too many nights, most of them in my own bed. The night I finally gave it up --February 14th, 1989-- was a long, long-long hard night until I saw the sun rise grey and worried on that next new cold morning and I never drank again.

I was at home, as things sometimes start simply enough, when I pulled the bottle down from the shelf for my first drink of the evening (two o'clock in the afternoon) but my hand only came half way to me. The vodka bottle suspended in mid-air, stuck in my grip, as I considered the possibility of putting it back on the shelf. Maybe I shouldn't drink tonight. It's bad for you and you'll feel like shit later. Don't do it, don't do it.

But... well.... I'd gone this far, I mean, I was halfway --I'd practically started pouring already, so that's fine, I could do my *not-drinking* some other night, because tonight actually I really did need it. And I'd limit myself to just a few, I promise. That's fine, that's good....

But the bottle found its way back up on the shelf, and as I looked at it up there with one hand fallen limp at my side and the other holding an empty glass, I merely shrugged and placed the tumbler off in its cabinet across the kitchen.

As if it was just that simple.

I went to sit down in my easy chair in the living room, but now I was focused on it. All I could think about: having a drink, having-a-drink-**hav-ing-a-drink!** Replaying in my brain like a stuck song refrain beating loud to the rhythm of my heart; all I could hear, thumping in my ears: *have a drink!* Thump-thump. *Have a drink!!* I need one now mostly to quit this stupid fuck-ing suspense. If I started, I wouldn't have to worry about not. Then the tension would be gone and I wouldn't have to think about this and that and there wouldn't be a tomorrow yet, and quitting then, or not, or whenever, whatever! It would all be over. And I'd assure myself it would happen, though later. Yes I'd quit. At some point. When I *really, actually, truly* needed to. Later. Not tonight. Not this night. Tonight, no, I need a drink.

But I sat
just there
in my lounging chair

going over and over and over it in my head, and over... and over... and over... tumbling it. And after a little while, I got up, I left the living room and went back into the kitchen. I flicked on the very hard pale-white fluorescent light, opened the frigid liquor cabinet door and looked in at it: bottles there, stared back at me, only those and nothing more.

So I stared hard back in at them. Penetrating. No demons, no monsters moving or conniving could I see, nor anything supernatural, only clear and helpless costly, fragile fucking stupid little glass bottles of distilled liquid, and I did not reach for them. I was now so disgusted that they would have this effect on me! (Though during a drunk, in them I often rejoiced, and hugged them close to my chest, like family, *like saviors*).

I suppose I might pour them out. Yes, send them swimming down the drain! Then I would be rid of the temptation. And surely I would not drive out and get more. (Would I?)

But no, I should leave them, because it really wouldn't be not-drinking if I just couldn't get any; if I threw my keys into the bushes and only the sink got drunk. Availability will always be half the battle.

Then the phone rang and suddenly the sun was already going down. I was in my chair. It had been some hours. And like a zombie-robot, blank and numb, I shuffled over to it.

"Hello?"

"Nick?"

"...."

"Nick?"

".....yes. Caroline?"

"How are you?"

"...."

"Okay?"

"...fine, fine..."

"Well I'm not. Were you going to ask me?"

"Yeah. How are you Caroline?"

“Not well. I’m coming over.”

“..um..”

-click-

Caroline.... Why her? Why now? She gets in my head so deep. And I can never clobber her out with ever any amount of drink, so I might as well not worry about it, though not giving in to it any less. Drunk or sober she’s a power. I wait in my easy chair with the TV babbling, not hearing it, shivering in my 72 degree world-house.

The door rattles. I don’t know how long, sometime later. I know her knock, I know her voice before I hear it, excited/dramatic, serious; alto-depth in a soprano body, a tight wrapped package, with ass to spare.

I’m tense yes, but eager too for any distraction.

When I open the door where she’s standing there in the entrance obsessed and depressed, both halves of my brain get electrified with yang. Too late for lunch, too early for dinner, I invite her in for a scotch. It feels nice to pour. Brown, smooth, the glug of the bottle, the spin of the cap; that aroma goes up my nose, into the back of my throat. Watching her coaxing it over her jabbering sweet lips sucking down each dainty gulp.... ohhhhh, I’m FUCKED! I’m totally destroyed already. Horny and sober; these pieces don’t fit. I’m the Sesame Street purple-monster of split wrong behavior.

She eyes me over the glass with these eyes so ominous. Head cocked down, lids cocked up, pupils dilated, boring hard into my face. “We have a party to go to,” she tells me. And that’s last thing I need to hear! But might as well test my mettle all the way to its hilt.

Have you ever been to a drunk party sober? All the stupid stupid people! Jesus Lord! Like a room full of baboons fighting over a banana tree. Oh, I want to be part of it so badly!

(I want to-be drunk, Iwanttobedrunk, iwanna, i wanna, i want, i want...)

In the car ride over, only a stick shift between us, I can smell her so easily.

She smelled like I wanted her. Like sober sex, filling my flexing nostrils.

Do I have to tell you how much easier this would be if I was drink-

ing?!

When I'm drinking I'm a smooth and easy person; I'm in control, downshifting across the corners. Steering, not a sidecar. She's telling me across the dashboard how she's getting all set-up so well in her super little existence. Figuring it out now at thirty-one, she tells me, trying to convince herself. Organized and computing a perfect future. I have no idea to what she suggests.

Paying off debts and making her own money now. She's investing in herself now!

And, *isn't about time you did that Nick? Do you ever think about your 401k?*

My four-oh-one-fucking-what?

What the fuck do I have to retire about? I haven't even been living! Most of my memory is a boozy blur.

I hear her ramble away barely over the shout of her smooth legs oozing out of a mini-skirt. She's wearing a lace black thong. (She bent over to unlock the passenger door.) It is far too hot in this car. Some awful thing is boiling, soon to be eating my brain.

I know some people at this party, which makes it even worse, and they keep offering me drinks.

"Nick! Nick! Glad to see you buddy! Where's your beer? Want me to get you one?"

"Naw, that's okay."

"Yeah right Nick! Ha, ha, ha! Come on, there's a cooler in the kitchen."

I follow him into kitchen for some reason.

"Here ya go."

"No thanks."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want it."

"You don't want it?"

"No, not right now."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want a beer."

"I think there's some vodka around here somewhere," he suggests

helpfully.

“No, I’m not drinking tonight.”

“What? Why not?”

“I don’t know, I’m just not.”

“Ah, come on. You’re kidding, right?”

“Really.”

“Are you sick?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then have a beer with me!”

“No, that’s alright.”

“Duuuuuude....it’s just a beer. Have a beer. Come on bro.”

“Can’t I *not* have a beer?” I say, getting a little upset.

“I guess so....

....so you want to smoke some pot?”

“no.”

When you drink with people all the time and they know you mostly as the drunk you, then it really offends and confuses them when you do not drink. Like I just threw their whole night out of wack and maybe their whole view of the universe.

I’m watching him walk over to another friend and say: *Nick’s not drinking tonight!* and that one replies *What? Why not?*

I don’t know, maybe you’d better go talk to him.

I’ll go see what’s up.

“Nick, what’s up. Mike says you’re not drinking?”

“Naw.”

“What’s wrong.”

“Nothing.”

“You don’t want a beer?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, see ya.”

Yeah, something’s wrong with him.

When I run into Caroline again, she's completely loaded or acting like it. Yammering all about herself and feeding off flirts. She's a shameless attention grabber, vampirically self-doubting. She tells me about some cute guy across the party. She does this by putting her hand on my chest and whispering it breathily in my ear. Does she know what this causes? Drunk or sober, she's a torment. Because when a girl with a strong inferiority complex who's never received the full approval of her parents (she's told me again and again), has created a slutty, outgoing, and outrageous persona for herself with no excuse but inertia to keep her standing, and when she's needing something, then nothing short of hysterics or catatonics will end the night well. I can see her trainwreck coming closer and only superman could force together the buckle in the tracks and bridge the gap with his body. My body certainly won't do it. I'm three drinks away from even being Clark Kent. So let the train wreck! See if I care Caroline!

"I love this song!" she says and grabs my hips, pulling them to her hips, pressing into me and forcing my movements to match the music. We sway together in the dark across someone's sticky hardwood floor, with fifty loud drunken identicals milling about, chatting, dancing and drinking around us. And we slowly establish an intimate rhythm. This is a rare and peaceful set of moments for us, mid-storm, swaying gently together, synced well, until the song ends and in the awkward darkness, she needs another drink. I follow her back to the kitchen. And no Caroline, *I don't want a drink. And yes, I'm sure.*

"So what's wrong with you then?"

"Nothing," to such a question. "What's wrong with you?"

"I got fired today."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I hated that job. I hate all my jobs."

"Yes, it would be nice not to work."

"Then what would I do?"

There's a pause. She drains her cup, shifts her head toward the floor. Pausing again.

"I'm bored," she says primarily to herself, turning away from me.

"I'm here," I say stupidly.

But she doesn't hear me over the volume of her thoughts. Because her defense against her boredom is to perform it out to everyone, anyone who will

give a moment's relief to her torments. I know sympathy for that and I wish either or both of us were capable of true vulnerability. But we were not built that way. That's what we have in common; a powerful but remote connection.

"That guy asked me to go home with him. Think he's cute enough?"

"No."

"He's got a nice car."

"What difference does that make?"

"I figure he has a nice apartment then. --Not like I only fuck rich guys, but a nice apartment is a nice apartment."

"So you're going to have sex with him then?"

"I don't know. It all depends.... Since I don't know him well, I need another hour or so to decide. Why? Do you care?"

"About what?"

"Whether I do or not."

"It's your life, it's your genitals, you decide what you want."

"I will, but that's not what I asked."

"Then no, I don't think you should."

"I didn't ask that either."

"Okay, I care."

"You do?"

"I don't think you should slut around for no reason. To get a little thrill or some small affection in a nice apartment. It's probably rent-controlled anyway."

"But it's fun! And perhaps he's the One. You never know."

"Then go! And do whatever."

"You're weird when you're sober, like you actually care about things."

"For a second maybe; seemed like you did too."

"I do. He might be a jerk. He might be perfect, I don't know yet."

"I meant..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"..."

"Get yourself a drink already! You're so peculiar right now I can't stand

it!”

And I wanted to! Worst of all at that moment, but instead I leaned over and completely soberly I kissed her. My lips came to hers. Pulling her bottom lip slightly between mine. She pressed back, but only for a moment. A spark jumped off in my brain. I could feel her breasts between our two t-shirts as they brushed against my chest. She looked into my eyes again. Then she turned away and she walked away. And I watched her go and didn't follow, though I could have, perhaps in a different moment and a different me. For the first time that night I didn't want alcohol. I only wanted her.

even my own pity
has been robbed from me

left dangling
unattached muscle
to no ligament
no talent

she is not that far away
i know
because i can almost hear her
not thinking about me
right now somewhere
 lost in her life
 in her mind, lost

i'd wish she was suffering
hard hard
if only i didn't...

There's a point beyond which it's hard to believe I could become more cynical; I'm crippled from the inside, and I can't watch one more commercial or drink one more beer. I've had a fourteen mushroom cocktail and my stomach won't quit complaining; eaten so much *culture*, I'm puking electronic newspaper and video politics are coming out my anus. In my brain is one way the world could be, and in my brain is the color green and the color red, and in my brain is a vivid scene about a girl's genitalia and some family dog on fire: his red red swinging fur on golden retriever body: ON FIRE!

And I'm optimistic about my chances, and I'm liking parties and weekend sports played during the week, and living off the land. I'm happy about today. Pretty worried about next year. I'm interested in going to bed, but thinking one more drink will be just all right. Thinking one more toke will be just fine, and I'm thinking the grains of sand in all the world together. Believing that hard work pays off over time.

I like musicians. They're so *necessary*. They let me believe whatever I want about their songs. And I like writers who explain the world through a story, and painters who paint, and actors who don't talk.

She was naked except for a pair of my checkerboard boxersshorts, which ringed her ankles. The humidity was up. The window up, blew in barely a breeze. And I could feel the sweat on her ass pushing into my palms. On the floor amid our moist clothes, my green shag carpet withered to brown in patches. My vinyl collection melted away. My hifi pumped bass and I figured this better not be a dream!

I had only just grown accustomed to life...

I came to LA for the stupid reasons, the sanest reasons, the only reason why anyone should ever come to this crowded polluted seashore. I came for money and success and found I wasn't the only one, and that's exactly why I came. And if I could have done it anywhere else, believe me, I would. I'd be in the woods.

But here's where they all come and I must go to join the stream, against a normal flow, the flow my life had followed so far (downstream with the water) toward an ocean I'd heard about once, the echoes of a vast blue paradise someday, but somehow now I'm not even swimming backwards, I've gone off walking on legs into the wrong woods, lost in these grey hard unpleasant woodlands.

In Venice Beach I walked by the expensive canal houses that seemed so cozy and new-age, and more like the houses I'm used to from up north and I walked down a couple alleys where kids played and a couple adults have a barbeque smoking up the thick atmosphere here, and then towards the beach where a tiny fraction of the millions walk, skate, bike, beneath the fading glow of a very red sunset as I walked out on the cement Venice pier to get closer to it. Waves crashing below me, red as well, but from a toxic algae bloom and not the sun.

What am I doing here?

Jim Morrison's words are running through my head because I'm strange and the people are stranger. Most of them knowing their place, as they pass me, thinking their own thoughts I could only guess at. I have no friends here.

It occurs to me that Fiona Apple lives somewhere about and I fantasize about a fated run-in, as if I could be so lucky; as if my life was more like the movies which I came to make, because I have nothing else to think about but the displacement I'm feeling, and this might somehow work into a fiction by me, perpetuating the whole notion of wondrous possibilities that don't occur in undreamt life.

The people I've met so far here are funny, but normal, and not really worth writing about because you've met them too. They're average, or as differently normal as anyone else. And I'd really like to meet a Fiona Apple or two so I could see how unnormal she is, or isn't.

Everyone anywhere has a story, but so many seem to be in reruns, I wonder what there is to write about here in a city of fifteen million that hasn't been said before by someone more talented or harder working than I am.



TO WINTER

I was twenty-six when I realized I had no talent. Driving home from a late showing of Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* at the three dollar theater, I had an inkling. Rain that was falling when I went into the theater now was only a mist, which is almost the same as no rain around here. The cars kicked up a oily spray that my windshield wipers struggled to remove. Streaks on the glass made the red brake lights blur and smear in front of me as I unconsciously drove the eight blocks to home.

I pulled into my normal space under the bald cherry tree outside my house. It was dark, as it is a majority of the time during a Portland January. Looking up I noticed the streetlights were out for some reason. I had a lump in my throat.

The mail confirmed it. Four rejection letters --and they'd never even come in pairs. Thin letters, written in my own writing, like some cruel joke I keep playing on myself every few weeks. The standard reply inside goes: "blah, blah, blah... not at this time...blah blah...sorry this isn't more personal... blah blah... keep up the good work." Fuckers. I don't even need to read them. They're all the same. Rejection can never be well worded.

Beer is already in the fridge, thank God! I pound the first one and carry the second downstairs to my room. No one else appeared to be at home in our four-bedroom house of peers. I turned on my computer, watched some pornography and jerked off into an old shirt I've been jerking off into for the last couple days. That distracted me for a minute. I popped open the other beer and decided to chug it as well; why not?

Then I played some Nirvana loudly, but it sounded only hollow. I skipped through a couple tracks, trying to find one to sound comforting, but they merely reminded me of Kurt's gigantic talent and gigantic unhappiness and gigantic waste. Empathy felt a hundred miles away.

I went back upstairs to get another beer. I chugged it and took one more into the living room. I turned on the TV. Jay walked in the front door about then. I proffered him a "cheers" sign with my beer and he smiled wanly and walked upstairs.

I turned off the TV and went back down to my room. I attempted to write for about twenty minutes but nothing came out. I got angry. I watched more pornography and jerked off again, this time into some kleenex which I

took to the bathroom and flushed down the toilet. I finished the rest of my beer and brushed my teeth, which felt rather pleasant. I splashed water on my face and looked up at my talentless wet reflection. I decided I'd go upstairs and see if Jason had any marijuana.

He was sitting in his room, strumming his guitar, and it sounded like crap but I didn't mention it. He looked already high, and the pipe smoldering on his desk confirmed it. *Can I have a hit off that*, I asked. He said sure, and I took a nice long rip; coughed it coming out. I was really starting to feel all those beers swimming in my stomach, working their way into my blood and up towards my brain. Felt good.

Jay was a surfer and had no business being in Oregon for the winter. Hawaii was his plan, but for now he worked at the YMCA, smoked a lot of pot and got depressed every day that it was dark and rainy while Portland still hadn't magically turned itself into a coastal city. He was also twenty-six and slowly coming to grips with the fact that he wasn't going to be a pro surfer, which was all he ever wanted to be.

He was dating a girl who had already a boyfriend; she had an amazing body, enough for two men or more. She was lithe and ruddy-haired and sexy and Jay had sex with her on Eddy's bed one night and didn't even clean up the cum stain, and still Eddy forgave him for it. It was easy to forgive Jason for things, even though he's a scoundrel and habitually selfish, he has a forceful and effective charisma, an insouciance. He's ever bashful yet impetuous; whimsically generous; he bought beer and stole ice cream nearly every night. He had a ukulele he carried in a shoulder-slung bag which was just big enough to hold the instrument and also conceal a half gallon of Breyer's mint chip, his favorite, of which he was an expert of theft and endless consumption (he'd once finished off two in one night, about 10,000 calories worth). The beer was for all of us, the ice cream was just for him.

Eddy, our housemate, was a computer programmer coasting on unemployment in the downfallen economy of early twenty-first century Portland. He didn't mind. He liked smoking pot in the afternoon. He felt just fine about being drunk on a Tuesday night. Might as well, what else was there to do?

Eddy came home in just a little while and plopped himself in front of

the videogame which he'd, we'd all been addicted to for the last month. Jay and I just watched at first and then took our turns looking for new solutions and accomplishments inside the reassuringly programmed world, experiencing the joys of proficiency and success over and over and over.

It is important to have artificial outlets for all our desires: movies for love and violence, books for insight, pornography for sex, drugs for relief, and games for triumph; television occasionally, for something like sleep. We play basketball on the weekends when it's not raining.

Ken, our other housemate, played division-1 basketball in college, but now he's coming to the realization that basketball, the love of his life, the one thing he was always best at, has become only an occasional recreation which he plays now on the slow slope down from his most fit and disciplined twenty year old self into a dilapidated old-man future we all share.

And to think we used to make fun of those thirty-five year old house-painter/roofers/air-conditioning repair men who came to the court with their forty-ounce beers and broken-down talent, the whiff of a nearly desperate sadness and complacency. Just before the sun goes down, as we're finishing up our third game of two-on-two, sweating hard and generally happy, they'll stroll up and challenge us, placing their brown-bagged bottles next to the pole. Between a long day of house construction and a later tonight at the bars –we might as well challenge these kids and show them a thing or two. Perhaps they win or we do, between the cigarette breaks, between games. And we are them already, or well on our way, and pretty soon the nineteen-year-olds will be making fun of us: those old burnouts who couldn't make it, not like we surely will; we'll never be them!

Jason and Eddy and I smoke more pot and we think about going out to the bars, but really we can't afford it. The living room is lit by red christmas lights behind the cobwebs. None of our second-hand furniture matches. A mouse just ran across the kitchen floor; did you see that?

Eventually we go to bed, after midnight, already well into tomorrow.

It's been ten years and two hundred thousand words and I'm prepared to surrender, but not quite. A hundred ways out, a hundred compromises I could have made. I've only made a thousand, yes or more. I've drank away plenty of nights; I couldn't face these facts. I can't cope with my deficits. I slept it off and tried again tomorrow. How many times? How many years will I wake up again in the morning still not ready to try? By the afternoon I'm trying again. What use are aspirations when my gains are incremental; my failures: gigantic; but I learn. I learn something and then I try again.

I envy those who don't battle themselves. I envy almost everyone. Life is enough of a battle. Why am I fighting both inside and out? I seldom neglect the fight or forget it. Even when I fight poorly, I'm facing it again today, saying: why not be better! *Why am I not better?* Why isn't the world more as I wish it to be? Then I drink and I try to forget why I'm like this again. And then it goes again.

My progress is slow, and with few good guidebooks to life, I struggle mostly blind. I look behind me and notice where I stumbled, but on into the dark I stumble again and again and again.

I want to make love to the girl with the bleary eyes. Ease my tongue into her and tell her that everything will be alright. I want her to know: *why you look at me that way.*

I'm not anyone. Standing under any sun. I dream mostly of pleasuring her organs. Under mini-skirts, between drinks, through drifting laughter on the other side of the bar. She's sensitive to the world as I'm a bulwark of defeat and prejudice. Life's not as simple as my erection. Wishing it was. I know the solution to my feelings for one night. Then morning wakes me to renewed ache.

How to make an impression on the girl with all the guys crawling on her. In her private world, wondering what her problems are when none shout out. And what solution she is looking for in those beds in their houses for one night?

I saw her cry at the early part of the movie when the kid's dreams are failing, two rows behind her, I wondered and wondered. I didn't know she'd be at the theater that night, but I watched her instead of the screen. She was alone.

And when it was over, only the two of us had stayed through the credits, and she surfaced and turned, looking directly into me, wiping still a tear away, where I saw only oceans.

You've defined my sense of perfection. You became the default against all comparisons. Every new day's events are measured against those few times, forever past, when I felt perfect in your generous reflection. I can still plainly see your eyes alight, and the curve of your mouth when you said my name. That smile I could not live without. Your attention I craved like a dog. I instilled my hopes and dreams in you, saw you as the vessel of my redemption, the rain for my growth, the sun into which I stared. You were the mold that formed me, and I remain a hollow copy, a dry container without you.

But on I persist! Into new days with my last companion: hope, for a future that will ease the torment of memories, to be replaced by a better present than the past ever was. I wait and wonder, remember and try. Take the good from the past and lead a better now, today and tomorrow.

Forever. Still.

You were confusing me. -At the bar last night. I mean geez, what the fuck? I was only trying to be straight forward. A pitcher too far towards the floor, maybe, but I wasn't being unreasonable. Why would you say what you did? You know I'm vulnerable.

We live in the city where young people compete, for everything. I'm always stressed. Beers, many, take the edge off and let me socialize for four bucks a pint. I'd rather go skiing or hiking or ocean kayaking, sure, but I never have the time! I'm uptight, yes-okay, I'll admit that. But still, it's not alright what you did.

We have to draw the line somewhere. Rent is outrageous. Traffic and smog and the buses! I'm tired of street noise, people, small dogs, powerlines, cheap food and you....

When I was ten I didn't know Bill Cosby was black. I mean, if you asked me sure, I would have said yes he's black, but I didn't think anything of it. Because his family on the TV seemed a lot like mine, only better and funnier and easier.

I didn't know any black people. I didn't know any rich or poor people. I didn't know any arabs or jews or indians. I didn't know people in the world wanted to murder me on principle alone. How could I represent anything? I was merely being me, not realizing there were very few solutions to a million troubles. Picking up Newsweek off my parents' coffee table, opening the nasty world up; trying to understand my little part in it.

Why are there so many conflicts? The concept of harmony, at ten, was not difficult to understand. But things were very troubled in the world I discovered. And that's where it starts, ten year olds from anywhere, discovering inequality.

I didn't know my soda-pop six packs were strangling fish. I didn't know my clothes were made by some other ten year old. I didn't know enough about a system that advertised much, but made well for only a few. I didn't understand slum life. My body never knew a hunger that lasted longer than the time until dinner.

I knew about popsicles and cartoons and action figures. I played with toy guns because I felt their power, but I never had to fight a war. I've never had to kill anyone and I'm forced to wonder about that feeling. I grew up to be a person who felt guilty, then disheartened, and then cynical. Others grew angry, or pious, ambivalent or simply ignorant. Which did you?

I've known a two-hundred and fifty pound African-American flight attendant surf-bum ex-arena football player from Los Angeles living on the north shore of Oahu who surfs everyday when he's not flying to Japan serving drinks. He paints watercolor copies of idealized undersea scenes with whales and dolphins frolicking.

I've known stereotypes and their antithesis. I have a friend who is an MBA, and one who's a CEO turned buddhist monk. I know computer programmers, professional waiters, and campaign managers for grass-roots democrats who lose. I know a half dozen lawyers and one teacher. I've known a few hardcore hippies and a few hardcore yuppies. No one I know is famous for anything.

I still don't know anyone who is very poor or very rich. I've seen plenty of homeless people on the streets of my city and I've seen the gated communities in the hills. All our tap water here is clean. No one here dies of cholera. Many of those bums are drunks, and so I imagine are plenty of the gated wealthy.

We've worked hard to get this far. We've kept an ordered and tempered society with a modicum of autonomy. While the price of ever increasing order and structure has been the limiting of our freedoms, we brag about a broader philosophical freedom: I'm not allowed to smoke weed and skate on the sidewalk, but I can say what I like about it as I walk. And not that we haven't made plenty of mistakes, and still do, most of them we slowly clear up, usually five or six decades too late. Then we'll often repeat them a generation later.

Almost anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, come from nothing to be rich, famous, and powerful. Though I've never known anyone who actually has. Most of the wealth stays in its class and only the very beautiful or unreasonably needy and driven become famous for long. We happily build them up and gleefully tear them down to fulfill our entertainment needs.

I'm a vegetarian because I pay attention.

I'm an environmentalist because *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*; a libertarian because the government never functions as it should. I'm a tempered idealist. I don't often involve myself in efforts for change because I'm too frustrated and depressed. I usually vote in elections, but my candidate never wins. I'm the only child with two living, and voting, conservative parents.

Though every generation before mine has serviced my current lifestyle, I lack a pervasive struggle or a clear ideology to motivate me. I mainly desire to make myself happy somehow.

Tragically, eliminating hardships is unproportional to increasing joy, which is its own separate struggle. A fight up from middle is what I am involved in. Inside ourselves, as Americans, we've tried everything, every cure and every solution.

We fetishize the oppressed because we're homogenized and civilized. We've commodified violent struggles into entertainment. We've mutated our survival instinct into a consumption impulse. And still we procrastinate at the biggest challenge: living up to our potential.



MAY

Back then, I didn't wake up until eleven.

At noon Luke would saunter into my basement room with a lit joint in his fingers and a smile on his bearded face. An afternoon of gardening in the sun was all he had planned, and I wondered if I'd get any good writing done today, now that I was high. Back then, I never passed up an opportunity to get high.

Luke was a 1990's hippy. A long-haired liberal idealist, a vegan and a raw foodist. At the time he wouldn't eat anything cooked over 100 degrees. He had a dog: Zapata, (named for the mexican revolutionary) which he found on the streets of Baja eating baby shit out of a baby diaper, skinny and desperate, with ticks in his ears. Luke brought him back to live the good life in dog city, Portland Oregon, spring 2001.

I was depressed most days and working most days on my second, only slightly better novel, in between last night's hangover and this afternoon's bong hits. Once I was high, of course I had to make it last the whole day. But sometimes it's hard to pull any decent words out of a fuzzy afternoon brain stoned into complacency.

The party of the preceding night was now just a dishrag roiling in my stomach. I threw out the half-empty Pabst can wafting stale beer stench from beside my bed and drank some water.

I was living in a dark place, writing a dark story that no one would ever read except as a favor to me. Most days I struggled merely to reach sunset, the time at which I could justify drinking the rest of the day away.

I sat in my cold room by my cold self at a clammy desk, tapping on this same laptop's plastic keys or staring into space, waiting for the great words to come to me, then settling for the mediocre ones which I wrote down anyway. I'll go back and edit them into greatness later I figured. I was stoned and hungry, and early decided to eat lunch, which is a justifiable break.

Everyone else in the house was away at work. Luke was in the backyard in the sun. I walked up the basement steps to the once-white now dingy kitchen, smelling still the stench of yesterday's parties. My slippers sticking on the linoleum echoed an adhesive sound as I stepped.

For the last two years of my twenty-six year life I'd been eating mostly soup, or cereal, anything that required a spoon and not much chewing; that's what I told people when they made fun of me for it. Split-pea soup today I

figured and a glass of orange juice, couple slices of organic sourdough.

I grabbed the big bowl from the drying rack, my favorite, and I pulled out a can of the pea soup from my larder in the bottom left corner cupboard. Latched it onto the can opener, lit the gas stove and slopped green junk into a semi-clean saucepan. I never used the microwave, maintaining a silly illusion that I was actually cooking; gas seemed more believable than microwaves.

In the dining room I ate my soup in the pale sunlight angling through our droopy hundred-year-old windows, mottled by the shadow of the big walnut tree out back; the light splayed beautifully across the beercan littered table. A pipe was there, half full, so I smoked it into dust. Then I browsed yesterday's newspaper and watched Luke fiddle around in the dirt as Zapata leaped and pounced, trying to distract him into doggy games. I washed my dishes and lumbered back into my cellar. It was habitually chilly in the basement which was nice on the few hot days of the summer, but as this was Oregon, most of the year it was just cold. I wore a dusty green sweater which I thought Kurt Cobain might have worn, and that made me feel less lonely. He was born and died not much more than a hundred miles away.

Music played most of the time I was down there, piped in from the computer upstairs wired through the heating vents to my laptop in the basement. I contemplated a lot of 90's grunge which reminded me pleasantly of high school and other old things I used to care about. Radiohead was a staple. I'd begun to understand Nick Drake that winter.

And so it was, back to the fucking novel again, and again. I pulled a couple hits through the resinated oakwood pipe sitting next to me and thumbed through the Tao Te Ching, dying for a glimpse of inspiration. Eventually I forced out a couple constipated paragraphs, then I read a chapter of Kerouac's Dharma Bums while laying crossways on my bed to catch the light from my little window and felt a tad better about things, about life and possibility.

The planet spun slowly away from the sun, clouds moved in and a drizzle began. This was typical Northwest weather and didn't bother me in the least. Half an hour later, I heard the door open and someone's feet came clomping into the house above me. Eddy was home, or Brian, and I knew we'd be drinking soon. I was relieved.

I gave the book one last effort, working at a single sentence for about

twenty or thirty minutes, trying it a few dozen different ways but it never felt exactly right. Eventually I seemed to be making it worse by my wrangling, so I gave up.

I grabbed the last three dollars from my wallet and another two in quarters and dimes, switched off slippers for shoes and headed out the house towards the convenience store down the block. Twelve cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon in a cardboard case for only \$4.76. It's been that price all year, the cheapest in the store.

I put down that box of fun on the living room table, packed the bong and headed upstairs to Brian's room. I took my hit on the hike up, walking into his room I blew it cloudy about the place. He laughed.

"Need a little binger?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Sorry I didn't save the greens for ya."

"No worries" he says, putting the glass to his lips and fire to the plant. The smoke flows off the cherry, bubbling through the murky water, curling up the chamber, and rushing into his lungs as he pops the stem.

"Better?"

"Better."

"I bought a case of the PBR too, it's downstairs."

"A party, huh?"

Everyday, you know it.

caught in winter's coat
yet already swept for spring
finding its pockets empty
i'll rue its return again

if the air will show my breath
smoke i then will give it
this beer is not enough
and these drugs i won't regret

for cold solace finds me cold
and every winter grows me old
and every spring i look to find
eyes returning a glance of mine

the eighteen year old
at the video store
doesn't know

and i don't tell her
she's hot in a way

i don't mention
in conversation

just eye
alternative

she scares easily
and her sexuality
barely undone

shows in the tight shirt
she bought because

she knows....
but doesn't



THE ROUSSEAU TECHNIQUE

Everyone plays guitar and so do I. On the two cement steps out behind my parents house, beneath the aluminum screen door that goes into the kitchen, is where I play. And when I'm not, when my fingers hurt, then I'm watching the black squirrels chase each other up and down the willow tree wondering if Jimi Hendrix had a place where he liked to play most. He was from Seattle, Jimi Hendrix. Of course I admire him.

My mother's gonna say "Dinner's ready soon," when she checks the chicken in the oven, and she'll say, "Sounds real," when I pluck the strings she likes, the strings from the radio, and these sounds float out over the back yard, through the humidity and the smell of the neighbor's fresh cut lawn and I remember it like a picture painting when I'm on stage and the crowd is quiet and I'm trying to stay together in the moment and feeling that ever-longing need to make songs that matter to people, when I'm nervous, and fighting it and just wanting to be true.

All I want is to be true and sincere. To be real. But I'm the fucking velveteen rabbit of melancholy toys. It's so hard and I don't know why it should be. Hard to be myself. So many other people shooting their emotions off around me. Feints and slights; boasts, fright. Protections and manipulations. I'm only a performer because my instrument is a performance.

I always look into the eyes of everyone in the audience, but they scare me. Their breath I can feel on me. Here are a hundred souls waiting on my fingers. And I wrote these songs because I wanted people to hear them, but now... but now I'm on this raised platform with the only loud guitar in the hushed room, flipping bright notes into the stank bar air and hoping they bounce right, hoping they feel it. Feel it like I do.

My brow is sweating, my lips are nervous, fluttering. I know too, that she is watching me. This girl, her name is Chan. Her eyes count double. If in front of anyone, anytime, I want to be most real, it's with her, when I can barely think, when I act like an idiot and don't know why, or worse, aloof like just: "Hi."

"Oh Kurt, how are you?" turning from bar conversation with her girls, one foot up on the brass, perfect bare knee peeking just below my eyes which dare not.

"Tired I suppose. Long set." I look away from her in a way revealed in

my eyes uncontrolled.

“I like your new songs,” she says with that seductive practiced nonchalance, saying “Let me just tell you, they sounded wonderful.”

“Yeah, okay,” if I may say you are wonderful too.

“Greg was totally off tonight, don’t you think?” (Her guitarist boyfriend. Her talentless guitarist boyfriend).

“He wasn’t bad,” I lie, “A little drunk maybe.”

“I try to tell him he shouldn’t drink before he plays. He’s so much better sober. Won’t listen to me though, the bastard.”

No? Bastard?

“You want to get high? We were just about to.”

“Sure,” I say. Yes.

In the alley. There’s the dumpster, the fire escape of the next building, the trickle of foul water running through the lowest points to the drain, and the single orange light over the back door illuminating the thick columns of pot-smoke wafting off the smoldering cherry end of the joint as it’s passed between the four of us. Chan, her two friends, and I.

We’re taking our hits in silence at first. Each one of us waiting, watching, turning their head to look up or down the alley, rubbing the cold from our hands or blowing into them. I keep mine in my pockets, back stiff and upright, legs shivering slightly in loose jeans, I’m watching her every chance I get. Chan. When the joint comes to me, I draw deeply the warm smoke into my lungs. I dare imagine becoming high with just her, glancing up into those eyes in the brief chances, imagining being with just her alone.

But these thoughts are torments and I struggle to push them from my mind. Only they resurface on stage between the minor chords. My pleading fingers moving of their own determined will through notes that in the air wait to be completed, leaving the paid people hanging inside a melancholy refrain, the one they came here to feel. My songs are sarcastic sometimes, but I’m only thinking real thoughts of her inside the minor chords. Guesses at her intentions when she’s leading me on like:

“Don’t you think Sara is cute, Kurt?” she’s asking me about the girl handing it on to me, the weed, to my right.

Sure she’s cute. “Sure.”

“Is she as cute as me?” begs Chan, smacking me across the face with a deadly-innocent look.

Not even close, but what do I say? Something like, ‘How could she be?’ No. Instead, “I’ve got to go in, I’m cold.”

“Oh,” she says “sorry,” sincerely somewhat and giggling, when I pass her, before the metal door shuts behind me hearing: “He’s sensitive, you shouldn’t tease him,” from Sara who is, yes, a very nice girl. A cute girl. But ahhh, I want to be teased and I’d want to tease back, but I’m not really sure how.

I do get with Sara that night on the back porch out after the show at the after-party for the musicians and their friends, even though it’s cold. Her lips are warm and generous and forgiving, but she can tell I’m not into her. It’s alright, she’s not that into me, yet it gives me something to think about when I’m holding her hair back and glancing into the warm yellow glow of the drunken house. She pukes a couple times off the deck. We go in and I wrap her in a blanket and put her to bed in the warmth of an upstairs room, passing the door where I know THEY are together. I pick up my guitar. That’s when people really look at you, otherwise you could be just some dude setting up stage. I pluck each string to make sure they’re in tune and the chatter in the room goes down a notch. I look at the microphone and feel it foreign, not like the comfortable familiarity of the wood metal nylon tension that’s taunt beneath my bent arm. On my wooden stool my thin body barely supports my heavy head, plugged into the amplifiers and the waiting ears of everyone in an audience which is now becoming very quiet for me, expectant.

Music does as music is. And I simply try to let it. Drugs help. Drugs don’t. Jimi said that purple haze was a dream of walking underwater, and also a purple death ray.

When spring comes in I’m still playing these small clubs and she’s gone. Yet not yet from my mind. I’m working harder than ever, hurting only a little worse. Standing up by myself in front of a crowd of beer-addled and bored city dwellers who must spend their money somehow, somewhere, and I’m getting sick of it. My music is transitory. It dies quickly once it leaves my unguarded fingers, dead-ending into the walls and the sticky floors, and if I stop playing then that’s it. Silence. Void.

Touring hurts, but I've met another girl, Liz, who I can keep my mind on. A groupie of sorts. The kind of girl who gets off on guitarists. We spend time mostly together on the weekends. We go to the beach. Yet I have no memory of beach scents in the childhood of my mind and they smell only foreign. I miss land lock, crops and grasses, and long straight roads through the flat country of my childish nostalgia. Goddamn, but if it's an emotional possibility, then I'm intensely-melancholy. And "God damn," she says, "look at that sky!" For there is a phenomenal sky held up in the air at the beach, I will admit this. Blue, crisp and beautiful.

So I say "You're right," and kiss her. She is a salvation from myself. I regret feeling so ugly around her. Goddamn sky. It is beautiful. Pale to deep azure in all directions, forgiving only a few small dollops of white fluff that hang around, treading air, staying merely long enough to admire this environment of majesty as their existence slowly evaporates into blissful blue uniformity.

Her delicate toes are digging little holes into the sand and her eyes are looking everywhere, searching the shore for any place to go but into the two she's worried about. Mine. She says something like, "You're wonderful you know," but I don't hear words of that nature.

"Do you love me?" comes next, as it probably should on any beautiful day at the beach, until she finds these terrible, dreadful eyes for just a brief moment and recounts in fear. "Oh, I'm sorry! I'm sorry. Forget I said it. Please. Oh, don't answer!" But I can't help my fearful, fearsome self now.

"This is... just fun," I say, "we should..." stuttering through the agony, "you know, stay fun. I'm sorry... look, I just need to focus on my music, and myself," or something such so stupid. Goddamn idiot self! What am I doing? I barely know. Fear speaks for me. My posture turns away. I twirl towards the down-wind cliffs, a mile or two distant, frightened of my and herself, panicking. The need is now to get away. Run away from all real and cumbersome emotion. She touches my arm, only making it worse.

"I have to go. Let me go," away towards the waves which are always ending themselves, each upon the wet sand successively, ceaselessly every minute. To feel nothing and to know nothing now, void, except that which will save myself. I try vainly to not hear the beginning of her tears, as my legs, just recklessly go. Wave after wave, focus on the water: emotionless, continual, they

crash, I crash. Retched out on a shore of dry and coarse feeling, understanding it no more than to give ourselves up and flee, collapsing back into the sea, drained of the aching energy carried so far from a storm raging somewhere in the nowhere black ocean of our original existence.

On a platform above a crowd is only where I can feel anything now. Where I'm frightened but not scared. Uncomfortable with my addiction. Where I can know myself and play myself and be myself. I come from behind the backstage curtain with the narrow neck of my new guitar choked hard in my hot hand. Those closest to the stage look up, some of them know me now. My frightened eyes sweep quickly through their gaze, from feet to floor to circling fan on the ceiling. I sit down blindly on the pedestal, friend in lap.

I plug her in. Start right away. A couple single light notes, back and forth, plucked apart and then together, a game played between them, tossed and tumbling, coursing through the haunting vibrato hanging, humming, as a bolt of electric twine twisting through the air. Each note is born bright inside the next drifting refrain, alive only as the last one fades from perception, a lost breath left falling into the next moment of new sound. The crowd is rocking on their heels, pulsing back and forth, as a rhythmic kelp caught in a tide. The notes pierce skin, ring in the ear, and push their way across the room as true waves of harmonic sustenance traveling through the divine musical firmament.

So soon I'm on from there, other fingers picking up the dash, new strings coming into the game, ringing aloud their swinging nylon bodies, rolling wheat in a wind, the invisible swells of sound move across the people. They're hushed now and attentive. The new play, the new story. We're all alone together in a moment.

Then my voice breaks in slowly, beginning low, near a hum about me and death and them and music. The crowd hears it hushed and holding, waiting for each subsequent specter of meaning in the next buoyed refrain. I build the picture of our time together here in the mind. In a place of all sense, just below thought, I catch them up in an intuited moment, not fully understood but felt completely and knowing it, wanting to be in it, they come along in the captive trance of expression; pied children who follow when they hear.

A truth I beg to give. About a life lived in reflection, a burden for them bought only for a night, compassionately, empathetically, but they don't know me. This is the conceit of the torment of the artist. A catharsis for both, maybe, hopefully. I play about her. On into the minors, the incomplete star-lit chords of night and negative. They seek out resonance in the chest, and rumble through bowel and stomach. I sing. I am sorry. A specter of callused longing and hardhearted desire takes shape in an ether of smoke-filled and hushed fidelity. The swirling forms of my monsters and misfortune, my regrets of missed chances. Blown from me, myself in its entirety, I spill. Flawed, scared. All the questions, the pity, anger and wonder, in each note plucked, birthed and sung in a sorrowful sugared refrain about one day, one instant, the vanishing point where I found my true self lost upon the event horizon of a compressed and exploding time.

I feel too much. I am too much. I just play. Her sweet curved frame and soft cry, singing my soul away. I pull at the strings and they pull back at me. I tug at the crowd, they tug and fold me into themselves, an aberration, a fool, a freak, which they love for at least this moment. The world, arms spread, loves and fills what it can. Empty yourself and it may fill you up. Hate or love. Peace or anger. It might.

I forego subtly; I'm sorry.

I'm living in a moment and a society that are so terribly blunt and obtrusive.

And I've given up on the hunt for authenticity. Every life is true and can not feel true sometimes. Certain things are better in art because of their drama --our attachment to drama as that pushing metaphor for every thing else.

My life is dramatic but inauthentic. So I'm just going to spill it out like a backdoor bum philosopher, all scraggly beard and holed clothes begging for kitchen scraps a moment. How anachronistic: to be direct.

This time, my time, is an odd juxtaposition of enormous information and its analysis combined sadly with nearly as little foresight as the preceding total of human history. It's hard to tell which we're relying on most: inertia, luck, god, or planning, but certainly we could have planned better.

The split between my circumstantially comfortable yet often unhappy life, versus the pain and lack of much of the rest of the planet leaves an odd hollow, irreconcilable feeling in my gut. Though it is really only a concept; I'm haunted by numerous concepts which I can not see.

The fact that escaping poverty increases happiness yet further wealth

does not is an obvious yet unsettling outcome for at least this simple mind, yet it defines the growth and problems of my country: The United States. Why can't things be more straight forward (the caveman early asked)?

Germes are everywhere and I can not see them. I've read about them. Never the less I do my best to avoid them to the point which I'm developing an unhealthy and obstructive neurosis. I might as well say all the same shit over and over again until I get it right.

It's here in all the stories.

Here I am jerking off and getting high in my old room at my parents' house at twenty-nine years old and actually somehow I don't find that pathetic. First of all, it doesn't feel like high school (when I lived here last), because I never smoked weed in high school. I was a good kid and I only jerked off in the shower because of shame and fear. I hard studied and did basically what I was supposed to.

Now, I'm doing essentially what I want to do in life; and appreciate and deplore the fact both, that everyone thinks I'm messing up and am wasting myself, my life, and my potential.

Now I'm not worried about jerking off or having to because I'm by myself because I don't have (a wife or) a girlfriend. I'm at once sad, scared, content, and appreciative of that fact. I know there's a girl in Eugene right now who wants to fuck me and I could go drive four hours down and fuck her tonight. But I jerked off instead. I can't really imagine being married and I can't even really imagine the girl I could be dating right now.

I am lonely for sure, at partial peace with it, maybe accustomed to it, as I simply find less and less people I connect with as I get older. Much like when I was a loner little kid...

I really only related to people well from 15 to 25. Now I'm just going off in my own direction that I seem to share with no one. I've dragged a few

friends along at different times, but basically that only seems to stunt their own growth into the comfort of the status quo.

And weed is weed, and I just like it. Not like my parents didn't set out two bottles of wine for dinner; they did.



DIGRESS FREELY WHENEVER

I'm stuck under a hundred layers of self-referential irony. That and a hundred coats. Not coats of presumptuous urban hipitude, or self-conscious emotional critique, or even those coats of egotistical intellectual pretension; all this sure, but literally: coats. I'm under a pile of thrown wet winter outerwear in the one dark bedroom where nobody in the party goes but twice; unless maybe to make out with some amorous interest when everything else is occupied, drunk enough to find necking on a pile of damp jackets romantic, they'd proceed to. But *I'm* not making out with anyone, instead I'm hiding, hence: under. Hiding bellicose and beatific both, and buried away from the others, and myself, in a very symbolically existential and tragically artistically distraught, and too easily romanticized manner: ergo, *ummmmm*, writing this: hence! (how disgusting); a manner that if properly displayed in the predatory intellectual social environ just outside that coat-room door (which I stare at menacingly from beneath the layers) could possibly afford me some female attention or the scorn of my peers' pretension, either or, or both --same thing. It's a tough balancing act for an underclassman. Possessing all the exterior accouterments of a deep-ish thinker (i.e. the unkempt hair, the nerdy specs, the earth tones) and the interior perspicacity to confirm it *on occasion* (an already LSAT studied-for vocabulary that a couple years of hard drinking will hopefully enervate... I mean, drain out of me). You know, (yes, I say 'you know' even when I write¹) degrees and money and BMWs are (supposedly) less important in my culture, a culture of disillusionment, of subjective artistic one-upman-hip. Understand, it is measured as much by one's rejection of mainstream success symbols, while at the same time drawing a very fine line between truly believing things, and expressing them in such a way that you impress others with appropriate levels of disdain. A denial of artificiality and presumption, is in fact assumption of a barely denialable attraction to the fundamental basis of success, prestige, and confidence, and is also the very root of sexual attraction, (which is the basic motivation for most social interaction (that and the competition of survival, but survival really isn't a big issue, and sex

¹ *Because it's real, folks. People say 'you know' all the time. I do. Like, I'm going to use them all, the colloquialisms, because that's how people talk. That's legit. That's like, reality bro.*

IS a big issue and IS survival anyway, socially, biologically etc.)). So how can a culture of the disenfranchised foster the same ideals in such a twisted yet well-groomed microcosm, just as in the larger society to which it despises?

That question, that question. That's why I'm under the coats!! Or really, more specifically, I'm under the coats because I can't understand why I have to think like this and why I can't accept either of the two cultures or the many variations upon each of which I have, in our free modern thematically diasporitic society, the choice of which to belong everyday.

That, and there's a girl out there I like.

When I finally do get back out to it -after getting one more cold cold beer- she's surrounded by them: the smart and smarmy tweedy swarming vultures. Beer cups clasp in young hands, dotting intently, listening to her babble, but thinking mostly of her pussy: furry yet trimmed, far below her brain and her calculated dose of cleavage. Checking her body, presciently perfect under low cut shirt. Hanging eyes off her teetering breasts, barely; I can't help but think of it myself. When she looks away, the eyes go down, just before she looks back, they dart up. It's a classic chorus. When I join the wolf-pack she's just now saying: "...I like a man who is cute, funny and of course has some money. But I don't really care about the money. He's got to have a really good job though, because he does need to be able to provide for me. Not that I can't work, but a man should basically be able to provide for a women. Make her feel secure. And of course I like to shop! Teehee, teehee."

She is filled with *OH!* such bon mots. She is such a cliché, it is a cliché to say so. A personification of a stereotype, a reality from a network sitcom. How can she be real and speaking such ironic things so unironically? She doesn't belong here, and that's why we all like her. Her perfect body is her only every excuse for anything; all she needs. Because real people speak obvious things, like when she tells me later that: "I know I have a good figure. I'm pretty cute! But I work at it. It's hard work!" Am I not a real person too? So how can she not be a caricature? And how can she not be aware that she's a caricature, or that I'm aware that she's aware that she isn't aware that she's a caricature?

ooooohhhhAAAAAHHHH, these recursive thoughts course through the blood in my veins in my brain in my head, ready to burst. I feel

them thump. Drink, drink. Drink; she's getting smarter; she couldn't get hotter.

Mayhap I'll walk around the party to find an intelligent one less cute. I'll observe the obvious. The pattern of my generation, of this country, of the reckless, hard-working, fast-spending wealthy youth. The moral low-ground, we're constantly striving for new levels of precocious re-original invention. I know no ghettos beyond the dark alleys in the Selective-Serotonin-Reuptake-Inhibited shadowy recesses of my long fostered yet still fundamentally neglected BRAIN, ruled by the instinctual, indoctrinated, atavistic demands of my predecessors. Dear God, I resent being born in this time! The time of cultivated pointlessness, I am its product. I would have been much more useful to you somewhen else. Though maybe not. Perhaps I'd be a drunken surf or a first-wave soldier; perhaps I was.

I told you this is a party and the way to tell? People are standing in the living room. The sofa is empty. Libations in liberal hands, small big-talk on every lip, agendas all over. Splashing swaths of conflict across a foyer in a middle-class haven of suburban surrender; when taken as a whole, standing in the doorframe, outside the thick of it, I hesitate, not knowing if I can fall back into what I know too easily, what I am, too easily. Me, the twenty-first century over-educated boy.

lost in the:
Art of Trying

swinging
round and
round
spinning around
frustration

i'm wondering
why not today
when then
if ever i'm
--waiting for it!

do you know
this desire
named:

Tomorrow's Possibilities?

forget anger...

leave it

to die alone without you

cold,

flapping,

suffocating on the floor

you are better than your anger

how much greater, the possibility of you without it!



THE RED PULSE

“But Oldpa,” as she calls me. “No one drinks alcohol anymore,” my daughter’s daughter’s daughter’s gentle voice on this hard sun-beaten porch-sitting afternoon reminds me that “You’re the only one,” and “Why are you?” Together on a swing of old wood and antique rusted redmetal chains, their squeak, the cicadas and nothing else fills the heat of midday. It’s a good question my baby dearest. My excuse for a hundred years has been that back in my day many people did, my dear dead friends and I, we drank ourselves happy on a weekly, if not nightly basis for the purest reason of forgetting troubles. Of course that’s no reason now. There are so many better ways to get high. Drugs have evolved and they’re friendlier than ever. Nicer and friendlier and easier. But I, my dear, am a one hundred and forty year old product (may I say vintage?) of a now ancient century for which alcohol still holds a beautiful potential.

It’s an artist’s drug, I say, and the laborers’ reward. Kings and concubines, and ferocious deer drunk off fallen autumn apples, all have imbibed and enjoyed. And the hangover I tell her (though she’s never heard the word) is all part of the experience. Without the hangover, how would one know the price that must be paid for good times? People now, the drug scientists, have eliminated the sturdiest aspect of any decent drug intake: the forbidding effects on the next day. Yet somehow we don’t have a billion addicts. I suppose we have the rigors of refined social indoctrination to thank for that. How can I complain? No one ever wanted to be an addict, in my time or any other.

So here in this present perfect future, I’ve been sipping my mint julep happily in the heat, while my little scion, she is still inquisitive. She’s at that age. An age I can barely, faintly remember being myself, now that my whole first century is merely a breath of smoke blown through silk. I’m ravaged by the wonders of nostalgia and rose-colored hindsight. Yet luckily or not, as an argument to my memory, the period I lived through was an age of fanatical recording, so that much of my time is easily viewable. “But what was it *like*?” she asks me.

“Well, for one thing, people always thought that the future would be so much better than the past, or the present.” Just as we think life will get better with age. We’ll be able to work it out, bypass our plague of problems and create those designs inside ourselves and upon our actions that make old injuries and hardships disappear into future living wisdom.

“Why?”

“Progress, I suppose, my dear. I was an American. And we were very into the progression of ourselves and our science and our vaunted way of life. We got so many things right, we wanted to share them with all the rest of the world, but the rest of the world was not always happy to receive. We were a very rich people, so much that even the people we considered meager in our own country, they were rich when compared to a large chunk of everyone else. Yet the wealthy are always resented, because greed and excess are their constant struggle.”

She thinks for a moment, her eyes scanning the farmyard, then asks, “Did you have puppies?”

“Sure we did,” I answer, tracing her gaze to the little speckled dog chasing some fun and invisible joy across the lawn. His eyes are big and cute, I can see them from here, and his windmilling ears spin and flop along with his innocence, carefree and fun until catching one on an errant paw, he trips, I fear it, too near the dangerous metal fence, tumbling into the dust and disappearing in a sudden lightning-fast jerk, leaving only the bobbing, masticating head of the carnivorous sunflower that dipped down at a speed beyond sight to gobble just another puppy up. “Of course, things were a little different then.” I sigh. “Your mother has told you not to go near the sunflowers, right?”

“Yes, Oldpa.”

She kicks her feet up to engage the swing’s momentum beneath us, caring as much for the lost pup as for a bug she’d squash simply to see its insides. I’m sorry for this. Puppies should be uncommon and wonderful, not boring and repetitive. But youth has no more innocence than the age that spawns it.

“I believe my time was the first time when whole generations of children were attempted to be raised up while sheltered from the world,” I continue quietly. “Yet another experiment failed. Humans are not puppies, as reckless as we seem. The burdened ignorant, once aware, go on to give their own children all the information they can hold, sabotaging any chance for even a brief naive bliss.”

“What are you talking about Oldpa?”

“Nothing, kid.” I drink my drink, my venerable old sedative, and sort my memories into plausible, impossible and possibly true. We swing the swing

through the humidity, the rusting cicadas and the sunflowers, whiling away the last hour of slowly blackening dusk before I must rise to fill my drink again.

“You two were a long time out there,” her mother remarks upon our entrance into the kitchen. “Did you talk?”

“We talked,” says my great-great-grandchild, in a very certain manner. She knows to take the glass from my hand on down to the basement and refill it for me.

“We need to pluck those sunflowers,” I tell my other grandchild, not less great but one.

“Yes, they’ve gotten too large, I’ll send a puppy out tomorrow.”

“A puppy won’t do much more than feed it.”

“You have to use the right sort of puppy grandpa.” She smiles at my ignorance.

“Of course,” I say, not really knowing or caring. I’m worried, and feeling exhausted more than I remember. I sit down. The chair moves to catch me. “What should I tell my grandchild when she asks why we use puppies for such dangerous work?”

“She knows.”

But I do not. I’ve forgotten more than I’ve ever known and yet somehow I continue. My life has been oppressed by information, deluged in human knowledge, and still I’ve found a way to stay happy none the less.

Daughter and drink come back to me. As I raise the glass to my mouth I notice the dull red pulse that blinks beneath my wrist. I must go to bed soon; recharge. “Not enough whiskey, too much water,” I mumble. My daughter knows better than to pay attention, she continues her voluntary domesticity.

Knowledge without understanding. Understanding without knowledge. The red pulse continues. And I must attend it.

I remember when I went upstairs with my cousins to smoke weed. I was carrying a lite beer can, wearing shorts, t-shirt and flip-flops. The stars were out. I don't even remember what we talked about, but the humid night air was flavorful on the deck.

I remember camping next to a river, five of my good friends all balled up in sleeping bags around me on a tarp on the ground when I woke up late in the early moonlight as the dying campfire smoldered a single last wisp of smoke, curling up slowly like a doused candle. And as my eyes went up with the smoke they met a single snowflake coming down.

I remember the sight of the roaring fire when our neighbors' house burned down, standing on the railing of our deck to see over our own roof at the furnace engulfing their lives, and you turned to me and said, "I'll never forget this sight."

I haven't.

My mauve kitten only eats spirulina. She was designed that way. And her little kitten shits smell like strawberry in the most disorienting way. She's very affectionate. She comes when called. She really doesn't mind when I ignore her or leave her home all day friday. Always still she's very glad to play with me when I'm on the floor rolling for her attention. She barks when people come to the door until I know who it is and then she gets quiet and becomes the perfect kitten host, jumping to the laps of those who want her and leaving no shed hair on their black pants when she leaves.

I've had my kitten for twenty three years. She's starting to get old and her shit smells a little less like strawberries and a little more like rotten spirulina. I love my kitten, but there's a violet puppy at the store and every day I pass the window I think he remembers me and really wants to be my pet.

I don't feel right today
with my sharp teeth itching mind
and this hangover breaking my knuckles

last night i made a fool all over myself
but I'd still want you to see it
in slowmotion video tape replay
a hundred times and again.

And these aluminum nightmare memories
scratch slowly awake over my toast
and they hate me

because i don't feel right today



DIPSOMANIA

My drinking takes a heavy toll on my simple body. Both are mine, drinking and body, yet act upon me in each their own separate twisted ways. (My mind is what I dare consider my true self.) But the Lord Above (probably not a drinker) seems to have made this a world in which the needs of one are in opposition to the needs of the other. I know I need them both, drink and body, with only my constricted soul caught in between that truly suffers from the length of my habit and the length of my life.

I am not a handsome man. That is one thing I was not granted. Though I found a girl, a woman, a wife who adored me, for all the reasons that my younger self required, yet now fall short in the sadder presbyopic sight of my older, balder ego.

I feel many things very deeply, but am too self-conscious to cry. So my eyes are dry when upon the deck each night I watch the sun slowly die into the ruddy lake; coming together slowly in stupendous mirrored beauty, two suns red-rippled, dappled, sparkling, god-gifted! One among the vast company of great lakeside sunsets ever to have burned down throughout history; no doubt in my brain. The breathtaking crimson air buoyed by a discharge pumped from coal plants two states to my west; it is true auburn almighty tonight.

I still have enough feeling in my mind to make it ferociously lovely, but with faltering desire to write about it and cultivate it and allow it to bud. I merely want to leap in the rippling bloody lake right there and drown myself in all that reflected glory. Sunsets are midwife and coroner, present at the birth and death of every writer.

And I must die it tells me. For why should anything beautiful be, if you are too stubborn to share it? To express this simple truth: an ochre burning bright perfection before certain blackness: that nocturnal drought we name night.

Why possess anything, when you can not give it away?

Why be here if no one is here for you?

Begging the questions of which language still does not accommodate. There is real depth in pointlessness! I do not know why I do it to myself, and can only apologize to my Reader who, while it continues, must along with me suffer the well-heeled angst of pedantic mid-life crisis, --a most pointless struggle-- yet

most relevant to this weary and opulent, truly *insipid* existence.

I hear her coming up behind me on the redwood deck by the red sun lit, lightly, cautiously upon the bending, creaking old wood. The two-by-fours groan for their true age, dead fifty years from a lost millennium upward, long ago sprouted on a dead california coast, missing their aboriginal virtue, cowed by dominating progress. She's bringing me one more drink. Behind me, she approaches, first an arm touching my back, caressing slowly, exploring the depths of my mood, in from the periphery before going deeper, down to my more harsh and frightened dispirited, where I desire so much but settle for now, here, less.

The sun disappears, tired and angry at me, lowering its head shaking into the reeds, as ducks paddle away, whispering a goodnight to their rest. Hubris makes the always cliché-ridden sunset mine, *ours*, dear reader, as if anything can be between us now... beyond her relentless benevolence, diurnally certain, eternally personified, ever over described, she nonetheless in the face of all our sins, grants this shallow bit of solar receivership each day flickering across my bit of cold-faced earth. My guests continue to dine through the electric twilight indoors.

I've left them in mid-meal but they've hardly noticed... until maybe when she left, the hostess, before dessert; and the wine in each glass had been drained, ready for cognac or port to replace it, still waiting, and waiting she left... and the spirits did not come and the conversation lulled, becoming then restless; whatever can we do? Transforming slowly, self-consciously stubborn inside the genteel routine, an expectant nag, they just wait, none-the-less and none-the-whore, only wait, like dogs. While I and sunset (and you) together settle down, doused in the watery grave of clemency; docile, tranquil, transient, loitering, we settle in for the long wait for feeling... the hurt maybe to lessen, the boredom to be expressed and then excised. Done eventually, in the long course of sips and dribbles, slowly into the hollow space below, we wait for our fullselves to settle up payment; what is a night away but the morning, another sober and dull day, when they'll away, away back to their city. Now here, I'm still pissed, the pistol.

I haven't written a profitable work in years. New York barely remembers me. But once, on one half of Manhattan, I was a known thing. There

were cocktail parties and readings and dinners dissolved into parties and parties which needed no other excuse. There was me, my typewriter, and my cigarettes and cappuccino every morning, looking out over the street from my fourth story office hovel. There were always new ideas blooming in my hungover mind, picked fresh off last night's gin-addled commotion. Young girls recalled, young girls pursued, young girls on the path from ingenue assistant to old bitter battle-axe editors.

But eventually I devolved into scholastic respectability. Where we all end up, trying to understand and educate the next generation. The best ones don't need teaching in the first place, only practice, and the rest will find some other outlet in life and be happier for it anyway. I've graduated to the lands north of the too-crazy, too-hot, too-cold, too-violent, too-dirty city.

And I've been waiting my whole life. To immerse myself in the confidence of this antique land's tree-fettered, flushed florid lakesides is the devout fit of aged idealism emptied. Of european cars and careening stock-wealth. Stability and the progressive climb of an affluence born (or tenacious and smart, with a tolerance of regret and an urgency to actualize the gifts of youth and school). Guilty, but not; excessive yet complete, and forgiving of faith or race now, but not the partisan, or maybe not even of you. All and all and all, and nothing, restricted but justified, the sometimes generous; "You can't always get what you want," only sometimes do you get what you need. The Me Generation.

My guests come out slowly and cautiously onto the deck, like lions let into a new cage. They follow the walls around the outside, encircling me. It's unintentional, only atavistic; all the fight is tamed out of them. They may still be lions, mane and ego intact, just no teeth.

The bug zapper starts the conversation by chewing one up in the blue field, and someone can not help but mention it, and the moose moving away in the darkening lake-side is chewing foliage.

They could never handle the leeches if I got them in swimming. I've only ever gotten one, but it's a round, black, engorged thought when I turn on them casually, watching my editor rattle the ice round, around his crystal drinking glass, expecting something I suppose: some intelligent wit or political prolixity.

“It’s quite the wilderness up here really,” he says “that you’ve gotten yourself into,” he says while I’m gripping the wood with my nails, the railing, the guard to the deck to the floor to my wife to him; it’s a distance I could cover, quick in three steps and I’d be on him, well before he knew what was happening.

I’d splinter his head into the redwood. Long toothpicky porcupine strands of it sticking out of his face, aghast and agimble, forming still a question behind bloody loose teeth and an animalistic groan, a sickening chortle. Like exhaust from a rusted tailpipe, as each fifth-of-a-second his face comes up anew for us to see, all grisly, before I pound it back down again, and the women would probably howl and the other men stand staggered and frozen; impotent I imagine; BUT OH! my ego....my ego... simple sunset, where did you go leaving me numb? Foolish, burning, contemptuous, laughable thing! I’d puke upon your sizzling hide, if I could reach you. Bash your bright face into my deck, my life, my page here, so *pointless*....

You, reader! You know that life is just an experiment, right? Some sick game, with inordinately harsh penalties. Clearly that is the way to see it: stuck, simply fascinated by the always unfurling senseless drama. Some of us more detached than others, the recorders, rehashers. Holders, filters, vintners, siphoning life’s chunks into apropos reproductions: we call it art, an entertainment.

And one piece, in a rare time when the thing itself becomes more than just reproduction. One moment when ability transcends. Something born only of human, burnt of soul-fire, tempered in flaming mind, will hold its own, alive in a world of god-things and nature-things, stone and star and protozoa. Joining with the First Creations, first births, spindly perfection of more than a tree, less a forest. A lake. A sunset. A moose. My editor: once a pink pudgy beautiful baby himself.

So say that I tried at least once, long ago. When I was alive and still smoldering. And you might say: he still thought foolish grandiose self-indulgent wonderful god/ego thoughts of himself, and was once cocky enough to write them down. Not pedantry, not cocktails and shrimp de-veiners, the shit of these feted fucking “friends” of mine, but Life! Life!!

He only ever wanted a few decent readers. That's all, really.

(Editors aren't the same thing. Fans aren't even the same thing.)

A couple readers who loved writing, beautiful readers worth the trying, like letters up to friends in heaven that you can burn when you're finished. For those who could (if only!) call down a lightningbolt in response, lost dead friends and great thinkers, maybe then I'd know some purpose, for my last closet uncleaned, for my final ecclesiastical shallows again to be filled and inflamed before burning out entirely.

On the hunt for inspiration; you're the only person I've ever loved and I just can't let that go. It's been five years and a thousand bottles of wine. I can not give up this thought, the thought of us. I'm thinking it right now. Dying to excise you from my mind but you loop like a song. Your stupid stupendous memory is lodged in a crack somewhere between my synapses. Never enough blows to my head will dislodge it, like ivy, like cancer, like the marijuana tar I pumped in to take its place, but still, still, still I can not forget you! And somehow I still dream silly daydreams of us together sitting next to each other, breathing the same air, working it out. Fantasy is my fucking nightmare.

And I have little hope for another love since fate gave me you and I fucked it up. Some people get a second chance, but I don't want mine; someone else can take a third. I wanted you and I miss you and I wouldn't know what to do with anyone else and it's too late and too weird to work it out anywhere except inside an occasionally wonderful dream of you tormenting me with regularity some night each new moon.

I shouldn't resent your ghost; you are too good to regret. The mileage I've run off pity and bitterness has funded a poem or two, but nights like

tonight when the longing sneaks up and overflows, and the alcohol calls, and I almost write you a letter, and I almost dig up your phone number and almost call you, then sometimes I wish you weren't. Sometimes wish I wasn't. Wish the world was like a dream, but I only wake up to a hungover memory of you and your torturing control over me, control you never even wanted or appreciated.

“Promise me this isn’t revenge fucking?”

I had to ask that. And “No, no, of course” she said. And I guess I believed her, but now I know she was lying. I know because the next day. The next day I didn’t talk to her. She was with her boyfriend.

“Just tell me it isn’t,” that you didn’t just show up on my doorstep, your car cooling in my driveway, probably fifteen minutes from his house, to screw him via me. You came because I like you, and you know it’s not just that; we have something. The two of us, when we’ve been together, there was a thing, the tie we didn’t define but talked around, excited, as if you’ve just met a person who finally gets that *one thing* and you know.... you know something...but not enough.

Life is more complicated than a fast connection and early flirt. You have a boyfriend, I have, we both have....what do you call those?..... issues.

You show up at my door, talking nervous, and excited, “Hey! (what am I doing here?)” coming up the steps of my porch; me drinking a beer just inside open door -it’s a hot night- trying not to think about you and me. “What, hey,” I say, come on up! Holy shit, Emily, (you’re here at my house).

“Was in the neighborhood,” she says. Yeah, right.

I catch look.

“Come on in,” I say more casually, cautiously, curiously; changing positions.

“Promise me this isn’t revenge fucking.”

She never spoke more than twenty words because I simply shut up, standing in my livingroom, only the ceiling fan whirring above us, staring into her eyes: I know. So we kiss instead. That’s for the first time. It’s beautiful.

But when some times get the most fun, they get the most scary. Passion is the same thing as a release. We release. Tongue, then T-shirt, and the movement and hands at a mutual purpose. Bra, shorts, nudity, “condom. Do you have one?”

Pause.

Think.

Yes I do, in the cupboard. What’s going on here?

“Promise me this isn’t revenge fucking.”

“It isn’t.”

“Sweet.” And we go.

Today I fell in love with a seventeen year old while I was at the grocery store. She was only walking the isles in pink plastic boots and faux-hawk hair, being herself. Young breasts pushing out a black t-shirt. She was examining yogurt next to me for a moment. She had no control over my heart leaping; I glanced to my left. She's standing perfectly there one moment in my mind forever. A unique compilation of features burning me, scarring me. You'll never know, or care. How foolish.

I feel like a seventeen year old myself; somehow, I'm not. Getting slowly older beyond my control. Every year farther away from the ecstatic chaos, and the confused torment I don't regret; the long horizon I miss. I thought the limit to possibility was only in myself, never accounting that the flow of the world might turn out to be truly against me.

deeper
like oceans
desires
like space
endings
like everything

i'm tripping into boredom
unstimulated
 like fenced dogs
 goldfish in bowls
 and cattle

i entreat an entrance to life
but it rejects me at the door

when they don't want you
 -for passionate affairs
 -for social success
 -for fun or money

when only drugs are friendly

life reciprocates poorly my desires
life reciprocates well my pity

if wanting was doing, i'd be better

in the country sleep the crows
and with my old age and heritage of family stones
lies the nesting of my soul

a century and one half back
a winter ground was roughly tilled
where old tree stands uprooted
were replaced with the seeds of spring ambition

Ohio

grinding one peak of a molar down
within a loose jaw that back and forth
slowly leashes this anger pushing inside me

begging crooked hands might be fleet again
begging technology to cure itself
begging release again
and again
again

this is a forgotten mistake

i'm only all my faults

tired...

tired

keep this poem close to you
if you,
 like me

break easily...
 feel more...
 bear weights...
burden uselessly yourself
and

only want more of a better tomorrow
less of today
while yesterday
--should just be gone!

show this to him,
tell her about it
see what they say

to music
to writing
to painting

then come back and read this again:

 i enjoy today!
 i release anger!
 i will cherish!
 i will appreciate!
 i am agile!

 in wonder i wait for you.

then we'll both be alright.....from now, for ever



IN BETWEEN ANGST

I've never known exactly what time of the day it is alright to start doing drugs. If you're an addict then it's anytime I suppose. But what exactly is an addict? My family starts cocktail hour at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and it's not an hour --more like three. Right now it's only noon. This parking lot is driving me crazy and I really want to get stoned... or drunk... or both; (both). I mean it's just too grey! Too long lengthwise or too flat flatwise and simple and the same all over. Only the speckle of multicolored and multisized cars making it irregular enough not to put my sober mind into a total chaotic frenzy.

I'm in one these cars and I'm fiddling with the passenger-side airvent in front of me, thinking about drinking... about smoking. The vent squeaks. It's sort of a bleached bleary tan color beneath my fingers --too many decades in the sun; thousands of hours parked in parking lots like this one.

Thinking about my pipe at home and whether or not I want to roll a joint instead. Krist is in the drugstore stealing cough syrup. His girlfriend is so quiet in the backseat that I've nearly forgotten about her. I wonder if they're stoned yet today. I really can't tell anymore. I'll have to ask Krist when it occurs to me again.

I do spend enough effort to turn around and look at her; it's the least I can do. She's staring out the window, her face mashed behind her companion 35mm, zooming her monocular focus on someplace --I can't tell where-- but intently, some hundred yards away. Probably a minivan. She loves taking pictures of minivans. They're all over her walls, between the posters and the collages and the spraypaint.

I go back to my vent-fiddling and smoke-thinking until Krist surprises us both.

Jerking open the door and jumping into the driver's seat. Got it! is all he says, and then starts the engine.

In another time and another reality perhaps we all live in a wonderful tropical Fiji. And we're driving the car back to our place at the beach for one more afternoon by the water, under an ocean sun setting, beautiful. But here now, forever in the gray lot I'm wondering what our alternate selves are living like in Tehran, where the girls are all covered up and we all believe the same things, but not these same things we all believe here, weirder and more serious and religious things. Do we even drive a car? Where do we go? Not to drink and

smoke I suppose.

“We should get to this shit as soon as we get back,” Krist says, about the syrup still stuffed into innocent-enough looking bulges in his pants.

I say whatever.

When did I get so pathetic about taking cheap brain-frying drugs? I’d think I’m too young to be this bored.

In Tahiti we’d just go swimming.

In Pakistan, maybe we’d struggle against our oppressors or bask in the certainty of our convictions. Here, I’m just spending the afternoons looking forward to an intoxicated night.

This is what I get for being born into a place that screams individualism but really values conformity; always testing for intelligence but frightened by free thought; teaching you pragmatism while cheering waste and greed --has an entire giant industry devoted to simply influencing the spending habits of other people. And for being the kids spawned by the most idealistic and sold-out generation of all time. So there’s reason to be disillusioned.

“What would you do if you won the lottery?” I ask them.

“Didn’t we have that conversation already?”

“Yeah, probably...” Pause. “Are you stoned right now?”

“I think so, yeah.”

I worry for half a second about Krist driving stoned, but it’s not like he’s drunk, and there’s a difference, though the parents and teachers might not agree with me. Drugs really aren’t for idiots. Idiots fuck up in life all the time whether they’re stoned or they’re sober, and so they fuck drugs up for the rest of us who just want to have fun, *because I’m expanding my brain here!* Or at least keeping it from contracting, because when I go home and listen to my parents discuss how the world is so messed up by the homosexuals, the liberals, the arabs and jews, and how talk radio is the last bastion of free speech, I have a hard time taking it in sober. When stoned I can just passively and carelessly witness their deepest ideological struggle: deciding if Walmart is actually good for America. (Because Walmart kills Mom and Pop stores, and once Mom and Pop stores go, then go the small towns, and once the small towns go, then the ethics of the family and the nation aren’t far behind. But free market capitalism!

--they're into that.)

We drive fast, even when we're stoned, and though one of my best friends is living in a coma in a hospital just a dozen miles from here since he flew off a road drunk, after one long party, one chance night a year ago, I still like the speed and recklessness, because it's raw and alive; like a rebellion against what happened to him, I need to feel this still. Because nothing was reckless in an all-planned-out kid life of a couple years ago. Real life now, driving forward into it blindly, I crave that fresh speeding taste of nerves and thrill in my mouth. I crave a buzz in my limbs and a swirl in my head --like an Indian chasing a buffalo. I'm dying here for some fucking excitement. My instincts may fear the hard turns that Krist pulls at night, as he's turning off the headlights to freak us out; a darker part of me relishes this finer drug, thrashing, driving, beating complacency to death.

I want to tell you: about how the world is all fucked up. About how weird-bad it is, and inconsistently tough, plain, and boring, but every morning bright, frustrating, new here again and how I want to tackle, divert it, and tell you about how fucked-up wonderful it is too.

I had sex for the first time just last week and it's still so with me. Still so clear and weird and wild as the moment it was. I'm feeling so different and layered with it, like a secret, like a brilliant idea drawn across in my mind, over everything, a clear curtain covering every instant and making it more; more real and crisp and sort of odd. Bright and different as I still wade through every day.

I jerk off in my bed at night thinking about it, not fantastically, not perfectly, but funny and exciting and boner-inducing. The thoughts of movement, and flesh, and darkness. Penis and hands, pussy and fucking. I'm done before I even know it and I sleep in the warm juice of sex and fantasy.

But these things are too much sometimes. I want to explode sometimes. I'm bursting all over with furious ideas and concepts I can't even tell you! Sitting on the tailgate of my friend Mike's rusty old truck, his uncle gave him, drinking a six pack of Miller that he stole out of an open garagedoor in his neighborhood. Running into someone's garage, to their garage-fridge full of beer and taking a sixer out and strolling away, quickly, casually. It's the easiest, cheapest, way to get it.

We talk about girls and basketball and girls some more, but then decide that they're all worthless and confusing little bitches. Why don't they ever act straight forward, and why don't they just make things simpler? We'll talk about his truck and its engine, because that is something simple and understandable and not like girls at all.

Two weeks later I had to leave home. I didn't run away, I just left. Sure I was scared. How can a person exist out there by yourself? I'd read on the internet about dumpster diving. It wasn't hard. You can get food and clothes and almost anything from the things other people are throwing away, because they're off buying something new.

It's tough to live in such a confusing time, without an easy orientation as to what is right in life. I can't decide myself which way there is to go, so I just go like: one day to day two and I get by into the future. Soon I'm living at a friend's house then, in his basement; his step-dad doesn't care, he's always gone on business trips all the time anyway. We smoke weed and play video games.

I'm gone for two months before I move back home. My Mom was so glad that I was back she didn't say anything about anything for a long time. But now when she smells the weed on my breath her face is turning to that old look and I know the lectures are coming. I can't blame her, she thinks she knows what life is all about.

I remember 1984, I was eight, going to my friend's house to play on his Atari 2600 and deciding to take my skateboard and thinking I could ride that whole steep hill like I'd never done before and then, about half way down, as I really started to speed up beyond what I could handle, knowing I had to make the decision to jump off or try to ride it out to the bottom. There was even more acceleration to come and if I didn't get off now I would be going much much faster. I'd never gone that fast on a skateboard! So maybe I should jump! Jump right now! *I should probably—*

But it was too late. One back wheel nicked a pebble and threw me into a wobble that lasted less than a second before the board was skidding out to one side, and I, in mid-air and startled, instinctually thinking I could still run it out as my legs hit ground, discovered instead the speed was greater than I could produce with eight year old legs. Arms windmilling, torso flying forward overtaking failing feet, stumbling, falling at the speed of my top half, and then the next moment on my chest, hands, and OH! elbows!, sliding across the flesh-ripping blacktop.

I came to a slow stop. All I heard was my skateboard rolling slowly past me into the ditch and everything else was silence as life waited one more moment while I stared close-up at the dark textured pavement...

And then the pain arrived! and I cried out in crescendo: “aaaaaaaahhhhhhHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Frustrated and annoyed and upset with myself, as it rang out in my ears, that sting of good skin ripped fresh off your body. Nothing but gravel-specked bleeding red rashes on my hands and elbows. Catastrophe!

Slowly I got up, tears tumbling from my eyes, amazed I could still walk, looking at one bare knee sticking through a rip in my blue corduroy slacks. I picked up my skateboard and limped home to my mother and her bactine.

An hour later, after a ham sandwich and a glass of milk, tears dried, Mom said I could still go down to Todd’s house, covered in two small, three large, and one jumbo (over my right elbow) bright pink band-aids, well anointed by (I felt) too much antiseptic. I could still go play video games she said, if I felt like it. Which I did.



“MAESTRO!” -ACROSS A STREET
I’LL CALL TO YOU

Rodrigo Jesús Geurro was an old man with few teeth. He lived on the same block as he sang, alone in a barren room overlooking the street corner where he would spend all his daylight hours in song. At dusk he would walk to the street end, turn right and take six steps into his friend Jose Hedera's bar where he might drink until closing. If the tourists were plenty, with deep and generous pockets, and if his throat was clear and his hangover mild then he could afford to become very drunk that night. So much so that his friend, proprietor and bartender Hedera would have to gently ask another of his patrons to help carry the drunk, frail and elderly gentleman home.

Hedera's bar was the oldest place on the street, where Rodrigo Geurro had also drunk as a youth. It was then a thriving spot for young artists and liberals. Rodrigo was a singer of prominence and potential then, performing daily in the theaters of many small towns across the countryside, some as far as a hundred miles away. And nightly, always back in Hedera's bar, he would stoke the passionate flames of his idealistic friends with blazing words and zealous phrases of change and revolution.

But, as liberals grow up to be bankers and artists must all become selfish, his old friends had dispersed slowly away while his own youth evaporated, his skin grew flaccid and his voice roughened. Very few did he ever see now, and some he knew were dead already, yet his one very old and very true friend, Senor Marquez was still there, and still drinking in Hedera's venerable old bar, at least on the nights when his wife would permit it.

Senor Marquez was a powerful writer, spiteful and precocious in his youth, subtle and contemplative in his age. He had written popular novels about important people just above the average, who could be admired and loved by the reader without much resentment, yet lived high rich lives that the reader would never know himself, had he not read the book.

Senor Geurro was to meet his friend the writer in their corner rest soon, soon as he had busked enough to afford it. Soon as he finished a couple more songs, then he could satiate his craven thoughts of drink with drink. The first taste on his lips, the burning in his throat, the warmth pooling down his esophagus, the cooling of his tired vocal cords, this was all he could think about, the dark tumblers and red leather stools and low lighting, candles, smoke, glass decanters at the bar, and the dusty old mirror with the jagged crack running

down its left side, the mark of a man who threw a bottle there before the police took him away, thirty years ago. This was all that dwelt in Senor Geurro's mind when he finished off a coarse Ave Maria for a visiting Catholic. The tip was good, and he decided he could put on his hat and walk down and turn and take the six steps. Senor Marquez was there already.

"Why did you not come see me at the corner?" he asked his friend.

"I knew you'd be done soon," the man spoke, as always, softly yet confidently.

Senor Geurro will pretend pain for a moment, but the feeling washes quickly away from his face as he sits down and looks to the bar for drink service. He does not care to sustain any one feeling for more than a few moments when sober. Hedera still hires winsome young bar maids and Rodrigo gestures at one. The place is lively and loud and holding more youths than he can recently remember.

"It's crowded," he says to his friend.

"Yes, and more so every night. I think our meager old saloon has been discovered again. The young are always looking for new places, because they feel so new themselves."

A fresh young girl with bright hair and a wet apron will come and set down Senor Geurro's small tumbler of liquor, then move on quickly. The barkeeps know what he wants. They watch him drink every night, feeling pity for him, yet never disrespecting, for Hedera tells them: "You can not part an old man from his last love," and that will quiet their protests, but frighten them away from knowing or talking long with Rodrigo Geurro. He does not mind. They keep his glass full when he has the money and that is what matters. He can be a fearful drunk as much as a quiet one and they assume death is soon coming for him. They are wrong.

"Maybe I can sing for these children, maybe they will appreciate an old liberal like myself."

"Maybe. Maybe once, but I wouldn't push them."

"What do you mean?"

Senor Marquez only shrugs as he tips back the last of his Almaretto, bringing his arthritic hand back down flat on the table, the little stemmed glass between his fingers clicking against his gold rings. He watches the lamp lighter

pass by the front window, tramping down the street, bringing fire to the night, just behind the final glow of tomorrow's sun now making the edges of the western mountains purple, merely a few hours since they cast their long shadows into the canyon and across the tiled ochre roofs of the village.

"My writing machine is acting up again," sighs Senor Marquez absent-mindedly, "and so are my knuckles." He massages them into the palm of his other hand. "I miss my pen really." He turns to Senor Geurro, who is already up and off, limping into the young political crowd before Senor Marquez can utter a word to stop him, leaving behind only his glass as it rattles to rest, hand-warmed and empty.

"Young patriots!" Rodrigo cries, but hoarsely. His vocal cords having already wound down from a day of long song. "Young patriots, let me sing for you one tune of freedom!"

To Senor Marquez's surprise, the group responds well and enthusiastically. Rodrigo Jesús Geurro smiles widely and puffs himself up to begin his first granular note, only to be tripped by the leg of a chair and fulfill the writer's sad silent prediction of doom none the less. He tumbles to the floor, spilling drinks from the tables above and producing scowls on the nearest and laughs for those a little farther away with still dry trousers and safe tumblers. "Maybe you have had a little too much freedom already," cries a boy, causing his friends to laugh, as the owner Hedera, led out by the noise, comes from the back to assess the trouble and the damage. Two young men pick Geurro up and dust him off as he stands there still and quiet, drowning in his shame.

Hedera comes forward, picking up bottles from the floor and moving tables back into their proper places. "Thank you my friends. I hope he did not cause you too much trouble. I apologize for the lost drinks. Let me please replace them." Then to Rodrigo sharply, pulling him away by the arm, "And you, go back and sit down and don't cause any more disturbances."

Guilt is replaced by indignation in the face of Rodrigo Geurro as he is led away. "What right do you have to apologize for me? I slipped is all. I was going to sing for them."

"New customers are fickle and can easily change their minds and go elsewhere. Go sit back down with Mr. Marquez. Behave yourself, and I will get you another glass."

“You think a drink can buy my behavior, do you? You fascist!”

The ancient insult has him pause but for a moment, inducing an extra fold in his deeply furled businessman’s brow. “Sit down and leave politics to the young and nimble.”

Hedera deposits him at his seat where the usually palliative Senor Marquez, now on to another small fluted glass of Almareto, merely sighs and sips it. Rodrigo remains standing in indignation, observing a small time of personal protest. But his legs are soft from even a little alcohol, and having already surrendered their days worth of strength to the street, they no longer expect such sturdy use and resent it. Another bar maid comes by with a fresh jar full of liquor as the young liberals across the room go on to a new discussion of purpose. Rodrigo knows he will have to sit soon, feeling the fatigue building in his legs, so he simply acquiesces, deciding to skip the wait. Yet he is frustrated.

“What right does he have, huh? What right?”

“Yes, yes,” says Senor Marquez, watching the lamp lighter walk back up the street to his home, torch out. Distracted and discontent, Senor Marquez is not often happy to come drink with his friend Rodrigo, not simply because he is a frustrating and stubborn old man, but because Hedera’s bar reminds him of his pubescence, and his pubescence reminds him of a girl. A lost girl in his otherwise successfully found life. A girl he’s thinking about more often now. A girl he wonders about at night, lying next to his complacent wife in bed, asking the ceiling where the girl, now the woman, is somewhere sleeping and why.

This has not been a healthy preoccupation for Senor Marquez. It has caused him to take notice of young girls everywhere. But he wants to be over with that part of his life. Hedonistic desire intrudes upon his otherwise meditative mind and effects his prayers and his writing. Yet he dares not fully live out his adolescent fantasies on paper, for not just that his wife would find them, but because that sort of preoccupation is vain and worthless, in his mature estimation. If one re-ignites the fires of the heart while the fires of the body are cooling and smoldering towards a rest, then the imbalance will haunt your every action. One’s humors must remain steady and this liquor is not working.

Maybe I will try a infusion of elderberry leaves, he thinks, Senor Jose Marquez, who’s next thought catches a snag inside himself watching, staring, as a beautiful young girl comes in through the bar doors, clearing his mind as a

broom through cobwebs. She sweeps her long skirt across the dusty floor, and shakes her hair from a bonnet of indecent protection, spilling it smoothly onto her shoulders, but crashing it loud like bells into Senor Marquez's peace. For rebel girls have always stirred him like no others. He can feel his loins come to attention as his body responds to what his eyes are coveting. He hears the blood rushing to his ears, the throbbing of a fresh wound opening up.

Yet Rodrigo Geurro remains placid, for he does not notice such girls. He would prefer for himself a mature woman, a woman even such as his friend's wife, a successful writer's wife. He could be the husband of a writer's wife he thinks, for surely songs are more potent than letters. These are thoughts that Rodrigo never would have let himself indulge in just a few years ago, but now, as he feels little time left for regret or guilt in his constricting existence, are the sins which he daily and welcomely contemplates.

He watches Senor Marquez become transfixed. He knows that his friend has not written a profitable piece in years. He knows that he is frustrated. He knows they both long for their youth, when passion made their thoughts bright, clear, and their choices obvious. Age and experience do not grant such transparency. The eyes cloud, the mind cools, excitement gives way to familiar expectation and the heart falls back into its secondary function of merely pumping blood, tired and bored, or even scared of the racing pace of youth.

But no! I can not let it end this way, fading pointlessly into nostalgia, longing for a lost time that will never see the present again. Memory is a devilish thing yet it sustains each of our identities. How does one cleanly reignite the crushed dignity of desire? Reclaim old men from the grave and make them a caution to all men falling elderly into carelessness?

Men like myself, thinks Senor Marquez, as he pulls the preceding sour sheet from his typewriter and inserts a fresh white destiny into which he can fill the lives of two ancient and virtuous souls. Senor Marquez has known since he was young (always more objective than his generation and more fearful than his friends) that the only way he could escape life's inevitable and brutal collapse was through the fictional mind of the written word. In his writer's office, placid paintings on the walls, deskchair uneven with age and leaking stuffing, desk cluttered by a million old attempts: there is Rodrigo Jesús Geurro, sitting

at a table in a bar with his drink in front of him, fretting his fate and life away, while his friend, compatriot, countryman, the gentle Marquez plots his bountiful demise with beauty's rebirth. The iconification of a withered pastoral flower in the blooming poetic mind, he proceeds to rescue, to pluck from the ruin of untempered cruel and unapocryphal fate, one old man.

First he stares, a hard scrutiny. Watches Senor Geurro lift his hand with always companion cup to always waiting lips, cracked and pitted by so many days in the sun and the formation of too many, a million songs. He watches them purse, slowly pulling the alcohol from the glass, over flattened tongue, and down his piston throat, pumping away maybe the hundredth last sip of his life. Brow knitting with the dull familiar sting, throat burning, thin and weak by it all, his wretched stomach quakes. He is a symphony of instruments slowly losing tone and continuity with each other. Soon they will not be able to coordinate the melody of his life and it will end.

Yet Senor Marquez inspects deeper into the dying flame, down to the slowly darkening coal beneath, beyond the enlarged ruddy features of the wrinkled old singer there he sees the young man he knew. He will begin then, first by unminging the furled brow. Regarding intently the skin as it begins to lighten and clear. A thousand days in the noon high sun peel slowly from his body, as his nose, too large and red and obtuse, pulls itself back into the sublime rounded pastiche of a million young handsome faces to which it once perfectly resembled. The shine of autumn in his hair returns along with its unfettered good nature, as the grey of his scraggly beard retreats to the soft thin and shape-ly moustache that a confident and well-fed twenty-two year old possesses.

This is the Rodrigo Jesús Geurro that the world will know for all time. The transcendent spectacle of divine youth and shining beauty, jealous of no one, passionate to his deepest core, singing a solemn and sweet melody more dulcet than any bird could ever whimsically exhale. He is the youth of his country. He is the guardian of true idealism and the provocateur of change. He demands a challenge to the old and the fat, the complacent and the excessive. Freeing all the exploited, and unchaining the hard-beaten imprisoned hopes still alive, he has created the songs that will guide a generation. So he must take his place among them, tall, strong and confident, always and forever ready. A glorious light, the glowing likeness of perfection, that commands clear righ-

teousness by its simple perfect example.

Senor Marquez watches this transformation with subdued delight, the continuity of time rewound, and unbound, as he finishes the last of his drink and pulls his hat to his head, leaving in secret his creation left gleaming alone. They need not remember him, the lamplighter, once the flame is going strong, and his wife is at home waiting, and she will be angry if she waits too long.

i like those pizzerias
with the big dark red mottled plastic cups
totally unbreakable
and full of Dr. Pepper, crushed ice, and a straw
a faded white pepsi logo on the side

the tiny salad bars
all iceberg lettuce
and heavy dressing

they have a small arcade in the back
and kids with balloons tied to their wrists

a football game is on the wall tv
and a thin-crust, extra-large is coming

we'll eat it with white paper napkins
and the smell of peppers and cheese
shaking out in slow motion

after a saturday soccer game
the friends and satisfaction of
mozzarella cheese strings
and a juke box that only plays classic rock

i love the sound of the last drops of dr. pepper
sucked through the ice clump at the bottom of my cup
before i go get a refill
because it's free



DEATH IN A BEACH TOWN

Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain were playing checkers in heaven and I thought I could *be* anything, *do* anything. It was 1994 and someone told me to follow my dreams. Eighteen years old, I had no idea what to do with a given life.

I drank, I smoked. I waited for fortune to find me. Doodling ideas down on folderbacks through ceramics class lectures *most* pointless. I thought the world should reward my talents so I started a band with some friends. It lasted three months and we barely practiced.

Then my girlfriend and I made a couple films. She was a goth from Richland Heights and we borrowed her Dad's video camera. When I asked her to take off her shirt and show her tits for art's sake, she got pissed and took the video camera and herself back to her father's house in the hills.

I am bored and upset almost all the time.

When my father died in a drunken car accident on New Years Eve I thought I could never feel worse. I went to a psychiatrist for a while only because my Mom thought I should. I sold the drugs he gave me to some fucked-up kids at school and used the money to buy weed for my friends. Thursday through Sunday we would get high and skate around town shoplifting beer and candybars, harassing girls and kids. My ollie was getting higher, a kick flip was progressing.

Spring is a decent time in this fucked-up little town when it finally comes, the weather turns the corner and the tourists haven't yet invaded the beaches. I was doing terrible in school, though I didn't care and my mother didn't notice. She was too busy being unhappy.

When I'd come home to find her obsessively cleaning the already clean kitchen sometimes after midnight, I didn't know what to do. I'd give her a hug and go to sleep, or back out to the night, to town, or just light a joint and lie on the front lawn and watch the stars, expecting to see something happen up there in the darkness. Planes blink by, the stars stare at me. My back grows moist on the dewed grass, my mind stoned, eyes wet, wondering about Jimi, Kurt, drugs and shotguns. I've never talked about my disintegrating Mother or my drunken dead Father to my friends. I know they wouldn't understand. They don't want to hear about it. I'm just saving them the awkwardness.

In April I grew interested in a new girl from a highschool across town.

She was wild and carefree and smoked more pot than even I could. And she skated, but not well, and did ballet and talked in run-on sentences like: "... I can't stand my father and I yelled at him and told him he was a bastard and slept at a friend's house but I'll go back tomorrow, he already called my cell phone twice; so we can stay together tonight, and let's smoke that joint now anyway, and want to make out a little or we can skate over to the skate park, I don't know, go swimming in the ocean and kiss on the beach, it's not too cold really, or perhaps I-don't-know, I'll do something for you because it's a full moon, a perfect full fucking moon!"

She wasn't gorgeous, but exciting, which is better. We had a great time for the first few weeks. We smoked a lot and I snuck in and out of her parents' house every few nights, or she'd come over to my house where my mother wouldn't notice if she didn't leave until morning.

She was a good dancer, I think, because she was in all kinds of shows like every other weekend. But she never wanted me to go to any of them and I never did. Her parents didn't like me of course, but that didn't matter. We liked each other plenty and quickly. Almost desperate for one another, a desperation like harsh pipe hits and deep sucking kisses, a dark pressing into one another, a frightening fast comfort.

We'd get stoned in the skeletal house under construction next to mine. The upstairs had only just received a floor and still had no roof, only arches, like whale ribs, a carcass lying dead in this stupid beach town beneath the stars. We'd get wasted together, lying together, holding tight and not talking. Sometimes I didn't know what to say, and sometimes I knew nothing had to be said.

May is not always warm around here but it broke all the records for two weeks this year and the sand became crowded again, though the water was still feverishly cold. My friends complained: I was spending too much time with her. But I couldn't get enough and we remained completely fastened to each other. We spoke a new secret everyday, shared a new common thought.

I remember going to her cousin's birthday party where all we did was smoke weed in the tool shed and choke down a stolen bottle of cognac. We came out and jumped in the pool and ate cake and used profanity, dripping

chlorinated water on the presents, acting stupid, until her aunt got pissed and she told us (sternly, politely) that maybe we should leave. So we left, along with another bottle, of her most expensive vodka.

By the end of the month it was cold again and we were thinking summer would never come. I had to go to school in June to make up a class, while she went to some big-deal dance camp. We e-mailed once she left, but things got weird and obstructed. I don't think all the boys at ballet camp were as gay as she said.

When she came back it wasn't the same. And that didn't take long to figure, when she was aloof and distracted, I was frustrated and we weren't having the same fun, but my friends were happy I was hanging out again, after summer school class in the morning, skating across town to the park, we raised hell like we knew how.

The sun grew potent in the lengthening days of summer and the heat finally arrived.

Instead of going straight home that night I took the long way walking along sections of the empty beach where there are no parkinglots, where the cliffs begin and the birds have room to do whatever birds want.

I walked in relief against the sunset, kicking at the sand, the ocean ending and beginning next to me. There was a different smell in the wind, not the brine or the humidity, but an organic, thick smell; then it moved slightly, a big lump ahead of me.

Within twenty yards a sandy brown heap coalesced into a carcass, the carcass of a sea lion. You'll find a dead one washed up on occasion, but this one was not dead, and not-dead ones don't come ashore here.

I circled around it to find the head, which lay pointed downslope towards the ocean, half covered, with only one big black eye resting just above the sand, half closed and looking not quite conscious. On its exposed flank a giant bloody gash was facing the sky. Something large had killed this but it was not killed yet. Then it noticed me. The wet black orb widened, trying to focus, glistening and still alive. Not another bit of it moved; the wind was blowing and the waves kept breaking. The eye closed, nostrils flared, and it blew up a puff of sand with a long sigh of ambivalence. I sat down on the beach twenty feet from

the head, facing it.

The day grew darker and the wind abated as the calm of dusk settled around us. A streetlight on the cliff above clicked on, casting us in unnatural orange as the sun slowly vanished into the sea. Every ten minutes the eye would open and look at me for a moment, then close, as if to concentrate. I pulled out my bag of weed and pressed together a joint. I clicked the lighter several times to get a flame but the big animal did not seem to care. His breathing was slow and uneven. Only rarely would he spend the effort to draw a full breath and expand his ribcage. Except for the inhales and exhales, he made no other sounds.

Cars on the cliff above echoed by on occasion, their headlights swinging through the dark; nothing else moved except the ocean, which continued as well, in and out, to breathe. Complete night arrived eventually, and in the dim orange glow I could no longer see the eye. I forced together another joint and in lighting it the small flame cast the body in a projection of flickering shadows. The tide pulled away, drawing off into the darkness and becoming muted. There was not a breeze now. The air became cool, though the sand retained the warmth of day. The sealion sighed on occasion softly and I smoked and waited.

Later I continued my walk to home.

i hunger for a more impactful life
-scared of the consequences

all i desire is intimacy
-while fearing connection

merely wanting tomorrow
-as i give up on today

it's late.

i'm lost.

and you are not here to save me.

fiction has fucked me
and leaves me lying here
writing lies to myself

which way was my fairy tale gone
for at eight i thought
not knowing
i was living it

i think it's waiting for me to live it
while I wait to read about it, writing

I bore easily; the proclivity of my generation, constantly flooded with passion-curdling stimulus, human made, citizen-cloning, brain detritus that we call a culture, plastered everywhere! I ache for the timeless rush of physical entanglements. Every day risking my body, with an unavoidable knowledge of modern medicine.

Art was made to ameliorate human feeling, so what paltry effect should it have on an alien like me who might better relish the asymmetry in a snow storm, the frenetic and engaging outcome of particular terrestrial conditions. Bach, Beethoven, Beatles. The true fact of the oceans: giant pools of irregular jetsam, monstrously historic, incessant in flux and in balance, inextractable from creation. Earth. And Michelangelo, Van Gogh. Fire. Fellini. Froydor. The human being itself. A curious product of an imperious nature, always striving for what we know not. I'd abduct a few and do experiments. Keep Elvis's brain in a jar.

As a histrionic illusion created to play off the labyrinthine dips and ripples inside our skull, culture is only a cavalier adventure in emotional manipulation. Intentionally and accidentally both feeding and exploiting original elements in us evolved for gone now survival responses into a swirl of disassociated emotional craziness that keeps society striving and progressing, complicated,

and apparently imperfectable. Gothic cathedrals, roller coasters, smart bombs, and lingerie advertisements. We didn't start it, we only make it more powerful, more seductive every year here in America.

The high and low arts (if such a distinction was ever reasonable) can be mixed easily by the similar and similarly necessary pleasures they evoke in high and low audiences. The novel will never die (no matter how forcefully we try to kill it.) Philosophy will never be more than a niche concern. Sometimes I forget why life is worth living until I hear a Grateful Dead song.

And I cherish the outdoors.

“Out-doors” being a word awash in modern calamity.

Joni Mitchell told me:

“They cut down the trees and
put them in a tree museum.
Charged people a dollar
and a half just to see them.”

God might exist.

I don't believe anyone can prove otherwise to me. If the nature of proof was more realistic, or the nature of reality more provable, then I might make any number of better conclusions about the state of everything. But how can I divine Her nature, His troubles and Its wants when I trust no human experience more than my own? If emotion was not the excuse for reason and reasonableness not the product of emotion, and if faith wasn't a cipher....

If decisions were easier to make!

...then we'd lose the unpredictable nature of the future by which we support the hope of our own freewill. And only within that risk of knowledge versus happiness is the beauty and tragedy of a human existence encapsulated, as mentioned in the book of Genesis.

Life is not getting easier. Life is not getting harder. Axioms continue to hold true as the more things change the more they stay the same. Wit is akin to masturbation, but insight is sexual; sex is a social exaggeration, taken from hard pounding reality into a broadcastable fantasy, now more extant in the mind than in the genitals. Perversion is a symptom of culture and sentience. Real sex only exists between animals which can not manipulate their own genitalia.

Writing is a ridiculous medium by itself in this future, when there's so much money to be spent on complex visual and auditory additions. All you have here is some words. Charming and pretty words I hope, but in a nostalgic medium. This is why there are so many writers and so few readers. Everyone has a lot to say, though not everyone has a production company. When some persistent person's skillful imagination can be combined so well into a giant expensive package of titillating gratification, when there's a billion people in the world to pull and commodify talent from, then there's little reason for the rudimentary ramblings by someone sitting alone in a little room, with only my mind and the page and a dose of drugs and narcissism.

There hasn't been a good political leader in my lifetime. That makes me doubt the existence of intelligent leadership. History was never a witness. I am barely a witness.

And all these opinions are only a symptom of my moment and can be taken as such. This is my time in history, my season in space, and I shall presume, relish, and eviscerate it accordingly. Ignorance is only humorous to those who know, so allow me to believe still that the future will be truly better, be perfect?

I'm not living every moment for its pleasures, regretting the fact of memory and expectation. I wish I was. Less words tend toward more meaning --the noble aim of songs and poetry. Knowledge begets confusion begets surrender begets freedom?

I know too much but understand so little.



MY CITY LIFE

The time comes to make the move and you don't. I'm that kind of geek.

I taught myself social ability. I had to learn; I was about fifteen or so. High school is a bitch, and the bitches didn't dig me. But I walked around every day not caring, not thinking, not really bothering about status, likability and apropos jokes for the awkward silences we'd all appreciate if you filled.

Don't let them say, the famous people, that comedy is born in you. Because I could teach it. Because I wanted to learn -needed to learn. Because it somehow seemed better and happier; laughing and giggling, you know, being inside a group and getting reassurances?

We're all geeks at birth. Just at what time did you figure out to be self-conscious? Early like kindergarten? Or late like twelfth grade. Maybe pimples brought it on, maybe handsome good looks (you bastard), or maybe you have those type of parents for whom it is an art, who gab in quick connected sentences about celebrities and weather.

All this is academic, and not the reason I didn't make the move. I mean: I've made the move before. There are girl geeks too. And I did form a decent social self out of myself eventually. Trust me that I have a joke or two. I know place and I know timing, and I am quite able to make the move... but sometimes I don't. As:

...through her tight green ironic thriftstore t-shirt I massaged her back... then she does mine... as we sit on the porch smoking cigarettes... roll another one, smoke another one... we're cool because it's autumn and almost mitten weather... as a drunken night slowly is ending... the orange city-lights illuminate a corner with a convenience store near to us, sign spinning, saying alternately: QuickMart, QuickMart, QuickMart; traffic is thick on the Friday night arterial still... a siren somewhere... as our group is breaking up or passing out, thirty-six cheap beers to the wind.

In the house someone stirs. We look back, seeing nothing, then at each other. Her light-brown hair in wisps float around her face. They call me in, yet confuse me when she looks away, too quickly. And I'm still looking, staring like a jerk, into the untamed bushes growing around the front of my cheap house in the city, falling down, painted an awful yellow, surrounded by this meager yard of green-patch-here, brown-patch-there, uncut grass and big ugly dirt clumps with random dog shit scat-

tered about...

I'm the sort of people who stays reckless longer and louder. At thirty I'll still be here and hanging out; believe it! Drinking and smoking and barring-it-up; schmoozing and what not... and definitely still living in the city and totally not being fake at all! Screw my potential progeny and fuck domestication!

Was there ever a people who grew old and didn't conform, never gave it up? Staying hip their whole lives, like Allen Ginsberg or Hunter S. Thompson maybe?

Perhaps.

But back to the reason I didn't make the move --I don't know-- probably I was frightened.

But no, actually I wasn't. That's a glib answer.

And it's not because she turned away, perhaps she was frightened too; that's what I always forget about other people: perhaps they're just as confused as I am. I could have turned her back. She'd come around again later. It wasn't the risk, it wasn't the fright.

It's that I don't know what to do with myself... much less anyone else. Why should I drag her into this mess? My whole trouble is being honest. I'm too fucking straight forward. I can't scam! I honestly like people regardless of their gender, like they're actually someone maybe like me, a real person, happy or sad, or pitiful; then I can't *not* get attached, (especially if they might). Just as if other humans were, simply, human like me. What a concept! I'm such a sucker.

And it's the worst actually, when you both genuinely like each other! You'd think it would be great, but it just makes everything so freaking fucked-up complicated! Drunken hook-ups are less about losing inhibitions as they are about suppressing attachments, to facilitate a cleaner titillation.

Truly I'm more of a friend-person rather than a *couple person*. I have a tremendous amount of friends. There are so many aspects of me which I don't find in just one other being; things I can't satisfy until I'm around other personalities together. Like metaphysics. What if I want to, fucked up on psilocybin mushrooms, talk about ten dimensional space/time? This cool girl doesn't want

to talk about the fundamentals of the universe (unless it's astrology). I want to talk about crazy nerdy abstracts. And if she heard me going on about it, she'd probably be annoyed and confused; just think I was a dork. Sometimes on a cold beach in the middle of the night, friends and I might end up on the subject of whether or not anything actually exists, or if things do, then do they ever end, and why did it begin and does that matter anyway? Why shouldn't I be ashamed of that?

Life keeps going in one endless stream of nights into days into nights with only my memory barely holding it together. Sometimes drunk, sometimes sober, I know nothing but what's in front of me moment to moment, this urinal, this barstool; a girl, a bed, a beer. The universe is what to me but a giant unknown thing I've heard a thing or two about; people told me a bit and I read about it in some books. Infinity is something that hasn't stopped yet, not something that goes on forever.

"The concept of *for-ever* is ludacris anyway. We live only in a moment and that's my excuse for hedonism."

"Sounds good," he says and sips his pint.

"Sure it does..." I say; my shitty life.

We eat peanuts, playing pool during some Wednesday happy hour.

And drinking, always drinking.

I crack the spheres around. Our friends walk up, lit to the waist by low rectangular pool-light through the smoke, it swings slightly in the wind of a vent. These are our bar friends: who I only ever see when we're out. What do they do during the day? I don't know.

"Hey." -- "Hey."

"What's up?" -- "What's up?"

"Not much. Just came from *Cellar*."

"How's that?"

"Alright. You guys going somewhere after this?"

"I dunno. Is something going on?"

"Not really. We're going to *The Loft*."

"Dancing?"

"It's eighties night there."

“Ah then it’s [actually] Tuesday isn’t it?”

“Tommorrow night is seventies night.”

“Of course it is.....”

“Anyone up for a shot?”

So it goes.

And the next morning, when you’re regretting that shot and the next three, your slow drive to work seems way too damn fast and too bright and annoying. I should have only drank beer all night, then I would have been okay. How can hedonism work well if I’m feeling so crappy right now? More water, just drink more water!

I’ll live this city life forever.

In the black hills of south dakota I met her at a pizza joint waiting tables as she tried to figure out who she was. I could see her discrete nature even under that plain uniform in between the teenage mess that was all the other employees. She worked days on fire patrol in the national park and slept in a sleeping bag and under a tent at night when it rained, alongside her fifteen year old sport utility vehicle packed with almost all her belongings in the world.

We talked about trees and nature and life and marijuana smoking. We talked about camping trips across the southeast and good concerts and the nature of hallucinatory mushrooms. She was giving up alcohol at the time and so I drank alone the Miller Lite bottles which they served in the cowboy bar, empty but for us, on the night we got to know each other.

And when she dropped me off at my motel, I was cramped from sitting cross-legged in the front seat so packed with stuff, and I didn't attempt to kiss her, not knowing if it was worth it or if she wanted me to. Because I was leaving the next day, and sharing a hotel room with my uncle; all I got was her email address, telling her to come out west of a country she'd barely yet seen; come and experience Portland Oregon, the home she didn't know she had, to find out if she wanted to be a real hippy, in the days when the hippies were all dying.

This is one story they won't turn into a movie!

Not for ten thousand dollars.

Not for a hundred thousand dollars!

Not for a million dollars!!!

Okay, maybe for a million...because damn, money is power, money is luxury and contentment and going to clubs and hot chicks and exploitability and power, so okay....but the point is, they won't be able to turn this into a movie, you see, because it's going to be all here in the words.

In the--you know: punctuation; and such. And the gratifying feeling of stringing mighty, dense, phantasmagorically great words together (mostly adjectives) in long stringing sequences of power and potency and breadth, small, intricate, fumbling excuseless feelings, just like the sweet similes of old, like the feeling of ripe flowers and sanguine sunsets and trampling both down over rolling hills uncaring, before hayfever existed, with your adolescent crush, tumbling, loving, ejaculating on the ground; those kind of metaphors, those kind of vainglorious wonderments.

Now I just need to write that story.

The only regrets I have about the past are regrets about girls. Lost ones. Tonight they seem gone for ever.

But I've loved. That's something. Sometimes I think I was barely living, but I found a few reasons to leave the house once upon one time. The type of person you just... it's simple... want to be around. Be in the same room with; listen to; look at; enjoy deeply, singly. Blissfully staring into her laughing eyes as some other person makes a joke in the background (when *everything* is background).

Focus, like in the movies, is a single depth, on her; everything behind her is blurry. That's what I remember is her, only, sitting there on the floor in some random beige-carpeted room, giggling her head off. That's all, that's it. That's all I've got.

But she was perfect.

I was perfect.

Together we never perfected.

We were up in the bar when she told me. Over my vodka-cran, my fourth before midnight, she looked me in the eye when she got the chance and said simply "I like you." She blushed, she was scared and little awkward --bold none the less, that was her style. I knew what she meant and still I was surprised. After twenty-five years alive you'd think I could see it coming. I just smiled, raised my eyebrows, widened my eyes and said something coy and probably stupid. I didn't yet know what to think. So "let's take a walk," I suggested.

Then we left that second story bar in downtown Flagstaff Arizona that November night 2001, it was cold and we didn't walk far. We held hands. A park bench only a block away we stopped and she was looking at me, waiting, judging, waiting, wondering, and I tilted my cap up and then we kissed in the cold night air for five minutes before I started to shiver; surprised and adenalized, happy with her aggressive warmth, and her pushing forceful kisses. She liked me.

She knows I'm not right for her, and I know the same, but together we're anyway for a drunken reason here testing the efficacy of her mattress.

I'm into her. No doubt. The tempting eyes, the saucy flirting manner by which she bent over me at the bar, breasts rubbing my shoulder on purpose. Always on purpose! (Let me uncover one of the many secrets, young men everywhere, beware!)

I'm into her. And we're sweating from the immediacy of the moment with the doubt of tomorrow pushed far, ten drinks far away beyond the shadow of a dark magic morning.

I love her carefree ways. And she loves how I'm not just another simple slobbering testicle. How I examine her insides; this scares her and intrigues her all the same time. Turns her on. And she presses at my flirts and plays the game so well that I'm intrigued by her mastery and deeper needs, especially the ones she's hiding.

Faster even than I could have planned, we're in trouble because we actually like each other. Scared about it; what to do about it? She said: "Will you sleep on the couch?" And I knew feelings were involved. All complicated male/female interactions are announced by the opposite of intentions.

Her spaghetti blond hair whipped my face from above. Her dynamism sank deep onto my soul. I felt her insides squeeze a brief and uncontrolled joy, the frightening effect of possibility. I grabbed my clothes and slept on the sofa until dawn when I left, leaving the front door open, reminding her that I would come again.

We flirt like seal pups and it drives me crazy, because I think you're toying with me and you probably think I'm toying with you too, and neither of us will break the stalemate. Well: HERE! I'm breaking it now. Because, guess what, I've been attracted to you since that night at E-9 when you washed your hands with table-salt in Tacoma, and we were alone and suddenly I remembered at the bar stool brightly that I was attracted to you in ninth grade but didn't know how to go about it before we became friends anyway, for the last ten years, but maybe I'd forgotten. And now it's been fourteen years, three years later on, and I can't help but think of this *Who* song, when I listen to classic-rock in my california volvo on some sunny afternoons, and they say: "let's get together before we get much older." And I agree.

incompatible though
we may be

you still saw
the thing

i was not
trying to hide

only

no one noticed
before

and for that

i do love you

The smoke came hard into his lungs, an explosion lit his mind, throat clenched, his bowels quivered, penis squirming, a girl's green eyes overwhelmed other thoughts from across the room she'd smiled at him, and he coughed hard, remembering, reminded presently of this descent into tonight. Why always this way? He pushed the gagging down with beer. Courage might be slow in working him over to that couch-side of the packed and hard-partying stranger's living room unless he drank more and soon. So he obliged this weakness.

Half an hour later and nothing! Just more drunk and still frightened, not wanting to blow this chance of the possibly of what seemed like a really wonderful girl. Now he feared his drunken foolishness, gone too far.

Standing by himself for a moment looking into the fish tank not noticing that the fish were frightened, he was battering his thoughts about, when a miracle occurred and she was next to him, talking to him first. Wait, now what did she say?

“...cleaned very often.”

“The fish, I mean, the tank, no, it's brown, with algae. You're right.”
(and I'm a dumb-ass)

She paused to look directly into him. He could think of nothing but green rolling hills in springtime framed by a gentle forest of chestnut falling about her shoulders in loose curls. Speechless.

“You're _____, right? Tim's friend?”

“Yeah. Yeah I am.”

That's me.

convincing myself
that i'm worthy
of a love
she doesn't even offer

it's a tough decision:
 to make it happen
 or to let it happen

either or both
could be quite unsuccessful



GROWING WESTERN

In the future I love telephone poles.

You hardly see them anymore. But they clutter up the sky so nicely. Like outlandish antique trees. Giant dinosaur bones bleached, sticking out of the ground; bird's nests atop transformers, squirrel highways, glass buttons guiding wires down the long straight lines to each parallel brother.

They're a good way to measure road. Driving through deserts, slunked down in your seat counting each one that flashes past across the endless blue backdrop of America.

A companion to road and to rail. Old antique of the west. Sturdy souvenir of ancient neighborhoods. Beautiful tall tar-beams each, pointing unswervingly to the heavens.

It's enough to say I love them. And count them. And take out my camera in the countryside and photograph them and what lies behind them. Out in the empty long flat grass-stained prairies of our country; I wonder where the crows used to sit. I wonder how many calls those wires carried. How much news of death, news of work and love and brand new wailing babies.

I imagine them in my whimsical mind as the strings on a giant globe-bodied guitar, star necked, that God plucks and plays, the planet as his instrument.

My own telephone rings. (Wires only on the inside, I carry it with me.)

A friend is calling me.

This time, about death.

Her parents planned the funeral for Friday in Mendocino, where they still were when she died. And a large contingent of her and my old friends and half-friends and greatfriends are migrating slowly in. I go as well, but less decisively, just simply ending up there. The pull of a slow drain, pulling us down together, to the center, draining away. Draining us to Mendo. My old friends and I.

(A subculture can be defined as something you do purposefully to happily indulge and dissipate time; to really enjoy an unsanctioned social life. Though never a waste to us. Spend your energy in an area where it actually means something!

--It only appeared to mean next to nothing to everyone else.)

When I get there, the ocean waves are golden. The sun leaving the sky upon the sea red, with long lines of glistening swell rolling in. A few slowly darkening silhouettes standing up on glowing white planks pulling casual rides to the shore. I stood there by the salt-rusted hood of my old thick green truck, thonged feet balancing curb, bare arm stretched out, hand held up against the failing sun on my face. And someone I knew pulled into the oil-spotted black-top space beside me.

“You came here first, huh? To check? Huh?” he says, through his down window.

“I suppose,” I say, “Why not?”

“Yeah, yeah, why not.” He pauses. Opens his door to come stand up next to me. Pausing, halting. He notices the round thumping lines surging in from the vanishing horizon.

“How are you Allen?” I ask.

“Alright, you know. Yeah....”

“Yeah, I know,” I say.

A pause.

“Weird to be here, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I say “Decent swell moving in.”

(Do you know about a good wave? A wonderful, clean thing. Water, so zenishly malleable, forming an energetic, beautiful, glistening steel arc from some stormy far-away somewhere, to crash upon our jagged coast.

The paddle out is the spray in your face, the salt on your tongue, cool water in your cupped hands, arms pumping like fish; it's the basic sense of being alive. Out in the middle of life, in all that creation-ooze and oxygen, green and blue, wet and growth. Whales. Fish. Scallops. Seaweed.

Us.)

We drove up to the little grey house where we were staying. The house of her parent's parents for when they come to stay near the water. We parked on the gravel driveway. Allen coming up to the door right behind me. A little wooden walk-up to the front of the house, on stilts, set upon a small slope full of green weeds and ferns, with hardly any room for a house; the place that overlooked

the hills, quiet and humble, windows barring incoming fog. Our friend Dean, shirt off and casual, opened the door to us. Allen says hey first, quick from behind me. Dean smiles and in we go.

The small cupboard kitchen is attached to the entranceway, which is attached to the living room, then on quickly to the two back bedrooms. Seven of us staying here for a weekend. Allen says: “We just got here now,” excitedly. He has the heart of an antelope; fast, quick and sometimes spooked. He talks in odd juxtaposed sentences. Lives in the moment. Relates well with the Lord. He rushes in, back to the far corner couch, waiting there to say more when he can. I shook Dean’s hand as we entered, (attached to the arm of a tall, tow-headed, broad-shouldered, classic surfer body) because I still like to do formal things like that.

“How are you?” I ask for the same reason.

“More than a little shaken I suppose,” he says. Because he’d known her best, because they were once a couple.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Glad you guys are here though.”

“Yeah.”

(There comes that time in late adult-adolescence, during the third decade of life, when one starts to really wonder where the rest of your living is heading, “and what the fuck am I doing about it?” The conversations of finally growing up after being officially an adult for so many years already, knowing the fight and goddamn fright of life, fearing and daring it. Not always a fun conversation; they can edify in their way, but also be dangerous as life itself.)

The door was barely closed for a moment as I went and put my bag down in one of the two rooms while Allen riddled Dean with a few pointless questions about island life and Dean studied the inside of the refrigerator. Then rang the doorbell as another of our flock arrived. Chad King: good surfer and more naturally fluid than the rest of us. He’d brought the beer we didn’t know we were waiting for.

(Simply catching the wave is the first trick. Syncing yourself with the pos-

sibility of it. Falling down the face of it, rising to your feet with the concentrated motion of a infant; turning towards the oncoming wall, riding down the length and cutting across the face.)

It would be great to be here, you know, if things were different, seeing you all again, the common opinion, articulated by Chad, felt by us all, on the porch in the early darkness, standing around with a couple beers, waiting for the hubbub to go full swing. I roll a joint for, I hope sooner rather than later.

When a silent car slides up, the crunch of the gravel is all that signals its presence. We turn our heads and see, pulling into the driveway, through the nearly crystal, hushed vehicle, two more of us arrive.

“Always the nicest and the best for Gregory,” I say with a touch.

Allen says “He’d take that thing to Mexico, to Baja, if only he didn’t think it would get stolen somehow. Not like that car would even *let* itself get stolen. But I don’t know.”

We unrest ourselves from the porch to welcome and hug them.

Greg says first, “The surf good?” opening up the back of his quiet, loving car; an invisible hinge separating the entire roof; he accesses his brand new boards, barely ridden.

Jack too gets out of the passenger side, smiling quietly at seeing us all standing around waiting, drinking. He appreciates a nice drink, but he doesn’t get drunk. He owns a sailboat and has a five year girlfriend. His future is completely open, closed, and ready for him.

Greg pulls out a giant backpack. “That your truck, Mike?” Nodding his head towards it, next to his like an old ugly green rock, stationary, metal and ancient.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Mike and his prehistoric truck. That’s classic, man.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Allen chirps in with a little comment about swell height and period, and about the sharp rocks here on the bottom and how he got hit hard just last month, so he’s a little scared of that, and scared of the sharks too, but there’s a good place with a nice point break just up the coast.

The ocean is the easiest thing for us all to talk about.

We walk inside trying to think of it.

(Once you're in deep in the speed of the thing, once it's yours, and the flat water is rushing out in front of you and then curving up past your feet, you're feeling it, picking a perfect course down the surface off the hump, sticking it. The drop was in your stomach, the power of the thing catching you, grasping you. Back arched, felt that force pick you and lead you, pulling you into it: up to your feet, popping into the pocket. Gravity's graph plotting you into position. Like a harpoon or swift seal (or tumbling jellyfish when you fall). But now the lip is peaking, the depth decreases, the wall in front of you jacks up, time slows, -anticipation- and suddenly its energy throws over your head, pitting you inside; this force bashing the coast, to succor it, supporting it, and tearing it down. Where once one of its creatures crawled out and grew up on two legs across primeval ground, only to remember the love of the ocean and long for it.)

When I light up my joint it makes a few feel awkward, a few be stoked, and some of us, the addicts I suppose, feel relieved and happy before the thing even hits our lips.

I like to tell people why I do things. I like to know why I do them myself. I spend a lot of time thinking about why and what I'm doing and then I hash it out one night, hopefully among friends. They're generally the most compassionate and receptive. Or if not, if harsh and paranoid, they're willing, at very least, to hear you out to the end.

Sometimes I'm not sure what the reason for other people's conversations are.

"We're not young any more you know." -- says Everett, the final one of us to arrive.

"Yeah I know, I guess, but from what perspective. I mean... there are a lot of people older than us." -Allen.

"They know it. They don't try to act like they're still...you know, eighteen."

Chad, always good for the single injection of confrontation: "So you're trying to say we're immature? What does that mean really?" For that kind of

thing hurts someone still surfing fulltime as if it's his mission, while no one has yet deemed to pay him for it.

"I'm only saying this about me. I've got to be more realistic. I've got debts, you know? I've got to decide where's my direction in life and what's practical."

"What is practical?" I ask.

"Real work, right? Office-type work, you know. So I can buy furniture and shit. Time to be in a fulltime job which I'll semi-hate, sure, that's what you want me to say? And yeah that's it. That's what I'm going to do. That's real. I can get by on just two weeks a year."

"And that's a life worth leading?"

"It's the life that has to be. It's reality."

Old friends who don't see each other much anymore and conflict arises. Differences between what we wanted when, and what we need now. Though we never saw all things in all the same way; who does? We had some similar ideas... or at least, like any group, we felt less different around each other than we did around everyone else.

And there was surf. That's part of it.

"We used to talk about what we'd do. Now, are we doing it?" Everett demands.

"Not everything works out the way you want it to. We talked about a lot of things," I say.

"That's my point exactly. Whose dreams here are coming true?"

"That's a hard way to put it. Those were... ideals. But we still need them."

"We're not doing it though. Not going anywhere. Like we used to talk about. The big stuff."

"Some of us have tried." --that's Chad, who's always trying.

Jack: "And what do you want us to do? Not everyone can be a pro-surfer. It's super competitive."

"We all have different things anyway. I'm still into skiing more than anyone, or you would have ski-bummed with me two winters ago. Dean has a house, he's there. Allen'll be a pharmacist before long. Mike has his music."

“What are you trying to convince yourself of? Do whatever you want man, don’t worry about us,” says Jack.

“Nothing. I just...” Then he starts thinking convulsively. Deep lines forming around his eyes. Lips curling in frustration at his lack of clarity. This isn’t really what he wants to be preaching, but he means it, he does. “What if we all bought a house together and fixed it up? Wouldn’t that be cool? We could do something together. Maybe even make some money!”

“What do we know about building anything?” I ask.

“We could learn.”

“I don’t think I’m into that,” says Chad, knowing it would tie him down and pull him from the ocean.

“See, that’s what I mean!” says Everett, trying to prove his point quickly, before this gets any worse.

“Let’s not forget why we’re all here,” says Dean, saving us.

The next morning we’re up for surf. Early in the dawnlight, low tide; wrapped in wetsuits, but still the water is sharp and cold on your hands and feet and face, cold but fresh. A small swell arriving occasionally. Out for unity, not so much actual surf. Slow crumblers mostly; the rare chest-high set.

We don’t talk much in the water. It’s a set of communal moments; a morning mass.

Greg has a watch that chimes when each swell event approaches, the offshore buoys bob up and down along the foggy morning coast, they transmit their telemetry ashore and back out to his watch; we hear a bell and start paddling.

After the morning there’s the ritual of Julie’s funeral.

I’d only ever been to one funeral before, my father’s, when I was thirteen. At that age I didn’t really understand it. Or what I mean is, I guess couldn’t accept it: him there in a casket. That cold thing that was once my Dad. Pale and dead and pointless, to be put into a hole in the dirt. Having people at the house all week to console me. The mass for him. Burying him. And then... then that was it. I went back to school the next week. Life somehow, ridiculously, just kept

going. It didn't stop, it didn't even pause. He was simply not there.

I did not understand that.

Before Julie's funeral, Chad and I go for a beer in the afternoon, in a bar in town. Why not be a little drunk. It was going to be hard enough anyway. I hadn't cried since I was thirteen, but I didn't expect to.

"It's times like these," Chad begins to tell me "that make you..."

"...about the fucking future and what the fuck?"

"I suppose, like Everett says: it's time to grow up and be reasonable and make some reasonable choices."

"That's all a crock."

"But what am I doing?"

I spell out the quote with my finger wet on the table: "L... I... V... I... N..."

"Yeah," he laughs, sipping his bottle.

"It's all a fantasy anyway," I say "Responsibility is just a social fantasy. Reality is a fantasy. That life can even *be* wasted... all a fantasy."

"Feels like it sometimes though, like it's just draining away."

"And our parents would agree."

"We could die too. Tomorrow."

"That's a thought." I take a sip and say: "What we're doing doesn't define us to ourselves, just to others. Our insides are all different. Do you believe that?"

"Sure."

He drinks, looking at the bottles and taps and rows of liquor behind the bar. All the many labels, all the confluence of flavors and mixable possibilities between them.

"I remember this one wave," he begins. "It went on and on and on, and I thought, *this might go on forever!* I didn't even know what to do after a while. I just rode." Pause. "Julie used to talk about her future. She wanted to learn to fly. I wonder if she was going to do that."

"I hope so."

(Groups come together. Groups fall apart. When a mix of people and conditions is

just right and all you're having is laughs and fun together it's truly wonderful. It springs up on you suddenly; you're doing what you normally do, not realizing you were waiting for it, and then you're in the pack of a moment. A connection. Together it's a forest. You're laughing and joking, not thinking it will end; but like it came on, fast, then it's over. A hollow longing for something that disappeared too quickly. When it's gone you miss it, and wait again, for the day some long paths merge and you're out of the lonesome flats and back in the aqua firma.)

“This year I’m working on my posture,” Alan says erectly. “It requires a fair amount of yoga, which requires money; and my eating well, which requires more money, and so I have to work more. But my posture is good, even at work.”

“That’s important,” I reply.

(At some point you get scars. Cut on a day you weren't paying attention, or were in over your head maybe doing something of which you're not familiar.

Going out in big waves for the first time; everything familiar has expanded. The bump is bigger, the break is larger... meaner... louder... The water is fast. The drop, steep and long and breathtaking. When you're paddling out thinking: "What the fuck am I doing?!" These are too big. They're not the waves I know, these monsters! Big jawed, clamping, crashing, suffocating monsters. I'm screwed."

But you do it anyway that day. Because you're there, aren't you? People like big days, and look forward to them. On the big day, maybe you are bigger. Better, faster....more.

And the real genius bastards between us: those that truly fly; who do that: be and live and dominate: racing, dropping, hitting and hurting and just keep going back; bloodied in the last one, pounded by the last one into the sand or the rocks or the jagged reef, inside of a punishing ocean; they set a challenge to you: why not be great!

So you go and drop and fall and tumble, beneath the foaming, punishing sea spinning over, under and all around you and your dangerous falling board. And when you're back up for a moment in the white, there's the next, three, five, six, eight! They do the same to you.)

Devastating of course, when your friend has died. Whether young or old, this is something that hurts in your bones --I'll never see her again. A friend is a thing profound, easily lost, but not forgotten. Something you discovered like a chance gem between river rocks, one stone of understanding. As a friend is gone so a section of you is gone as well. That piece, however large, that was the link between you, vivisected from life, while your own living carelessly proceeds, missing this lost thing, an organ which you had once thought you needed to survive.

It makes me bewildered and numb. In a sea of somber faces wandering around a brown and hushed parlor, eating small foods and drinking again.... Where to go? What to do? What to say? I can't fathom. But Julie would know, because she knew so often just what to say and we all liked her. This moment she might tell us: "Take a ride, cry for an hour, and let it go."

If only.

in the morning when
courtney misses kurt
paul misses john
i miss my father
and wonder about

the afternoon when
we think about longing
the sun shining through, we
think about children
love will eclipse loss
a hopeful future trumps a memory
and there's a reason to go on

the evening arrives eventually
regarding just another day passed
we sip sherry as the snow falls
the sun eclipses
and darkness comes

...and we miss the morning again

I'd gotten to the point where I was so lonely, like a dog, a sad mongrel, that any stimulus was good, negative or not, it didn't matter. I just got giddy. The wonder of feeding my senses, filling with the complexity of human need, the output of outraged evocation. As my friends were leaving me the more healthy they got, I was stuck begging and wallowing and despairing in my lonely uncomfortable unhealthy depression. They didn't want to sit around high all day, sit around bitching and not doing. They didn't see the appeal of pointlessness any more. Didn't see how fucked up everyone else was, but us, the few between, those knowing, but not doing, all alone in our solace, empowered only by our criticism, we were opting out of the disaster, watching it only like a slow motion train wreck, outside our dusty stoney window, almost unbelieving of it, unbelieving that the passengers don't seem to notice, as in their seats, stationary, they sit expectant, not yet told and allowed to move, they can only watch their own wreck of life and wait for it, only viewing the chaos through a small window, interpreting from there the cause, the reason for a wreck they don't even know is really happening to them.

But my friends stopped believing, is how I see it. They stop seeing, then they join. They go in and join the fucking train wreck. Because it's better to be sure in action than to not be in the action at all.

So they're leaving me. They're marrying, they're sobering, they're becoming *stable* and joining the *real world*. Well, fuck them, I'm here still, knowing enough not to participate in that nonsense and live real in this my true world, beyond the fakery and funny and terminal. I still won't buy it.

Is she landing somewhere
she driving somewhere
sleeping somewhere
this two minute night while i'm still and awake
and where is that last left place
before she comes here
before i meet her the first
and how many boys
in tomorrow
is she meeting or right now
while i'm waiting
in this dark eve still
backed away and
blindfolded patient?

Is she turning them down
in anticipation
is she hurting
or is she being hurt
and how many more times
until i'm not the last left alone?

roof top patio
old beams and peas
planter boxes
charcoal
fire pit in a barbeque lid

we're brainstorming!

first star above the evening smog
pabst can plink
over traffic rhythms

a million year old star light
rises above this evening summer smog
as street lights click themselves on
and both lights end as they hit the pavement

a "no msg" chinese neon lantern
glows off speeding shiny car panels

portland summer girl skin
now an August brown
shows its last days
before September rain
will cover it

silence is
sober business

my social job
is talker

Jolene's favorite red sweater
buttons just above

the apex of her chest
where my eyes sometimes
gather

her shy cigarette fingers
pull her hair curls
when she giggles
nervous and
drinking

the big dipper's out
by nine
and I'm four beers
to the sky

the particulate sky
parts my lungs
burns my throat

blue ribbon beer
sits 38 ounces
in my stomach
wednesday

sire dying nostalgia
rakes coal memory
in me

cold cat solitude
empty beer cans
and city life sustaining
continuing

The robotic piano and the man with two beards were the first to appear. Next came S-dog, then tHe cOOch out of the pulsating blue-hewed (yes, vagina-shaped) rainbow vortex. Because inter-dimensional time travel rips all that black coffee out of your brain, leaving a terrible sumatran-less headache, they'd been filling up all afternoon and were well peppered. And S-dog barks greenish regard, a sobering howl-wine, his ears droOoping on their metal castors, nose snuffling, wet and melancholy, like a good well-behaved mechanical dog. tHe cOOch shakes, up from his coccyx headward, then sideways, always keeping that beat, the badass, like when the piano's playing on all valves and the DJ's spinning those wheels of rhythmic steel all night. Blasting that crank-lined brain disco, *allnight, allnight, allnight!*

“_y _od! _hat _as _he _orst!”

“_o _hit!”

It takes a good five minutes for the first letters of all your sentences to catch up to a speedy time shift like this. The robotic piano is already trying to tune itself loudly: “AaaaaAAaaaa!” “EeeeeEeeeEe!” “CCCCccccCCCC!” Driving thE cooCH crazy, sitting down on the corrugated carbon to wring the capitals from his name and catch up the coffee loss by squeezing his socks into a b-boy tip cup.

“When _nd where the fuck _re we _nyway?”

“AAAAAaaaaaaaAAAAAAA!”

“_HUT UP!!”

“Woof!”

Their previous welcome was a mass of laser light and disco-ball disorientation. The natives were more retro than they'd feared. A punkish planet of odd-colored mohawk guitar-driven madness. Now we're hoping for a more street-wise reception: of ghetto-blasters, headbands and cardboard; a spot of St. Ides. B-boys miss their 80 ounces when traveling across space and time.

It was a running fire fight all the way to the capital. Only they'd seen it once before, played that club, and knew violence was only a rebellion kick for the dozen-limbed dancers, those sweaty sexy bastards with their radar love on all time. Abba? Some Swedish shit like that? No. FUCK ABBA!!

The Cooch's crazy lasergun was a bolt action sensation! Up and down and back and forth and back. In out, in out. Pop! Lock! Pulsating and pushing spinning qubits, raging down sexy lines of purple plush moonlight, like cutting smoke lines on a mirror, skating disco roller chaos, chopping out ordered chunks of dead and dead and deader.

“Brooklyn up in your ass!” he'd chant.

The piano was hip, for sure, speeding the way away. S-dog on all fours, then to two, from headspin to windmill to the robot. And the man with two beards? Yeah, he's down.

The Cooch once had an argument with his homeboy Flex that went like this: “Time travel can't be possible because you could go back in time and kill your father before he boinked your mom and you'd never exist!” So The Cooch went back in time and gave it a shot. Killed his father and he existed still. He figured later that his mom was just a slut and quantum mechanics be damned. Couldn't kill all her boyfriends! He'd tried that since twelve anyway. So his dad was a good dad, and maybe he shouldn't have killed him before he got the chance to remember those times he took him fishing on trips out of the city.

The building was about six stories high and with only one window, a beaming yellow eye that blinked every time it digested another square city

block. The Cooch cocked back his cock-blocking laser-glock and set the beam for de-gentrification red. Gotta get them dollar bills. Another long day in the urban metaverse.... there's never enough time to just relax and smoke a spliff.

The taoist walked out of the forest and
entered the city.
He did not stay.

He touched the ocean,
once.

Most people have a plan for life. Having a plan for life is good. Why have a plan?

Every day can be divided in your mind into a failure or a success. Did you earn today more than you spent? Did you enjoy today? Did you get closer to where you wanted to be tomorrow? Or did you do nothing important? Nothing grown, nothing that helped?

I spent the day doing very little. The sun came up and I awoke, I rolled onto my side and I went back to sleep. A few hours later I got out of bed. The rest of the day.....whatever.

Now I'm drinking until sleep comes again.

Good day.

i once sent Gary Snyder two poems of mine
but he didn't write back

i was not too upset
because my poems are not very good

still....

it would be nice
if more like a movie
things for me
worked out a bit
more romantically

it is tough
to be the hopeful fool
in the face of
life's real truths

that i have not the talent
i have not growth
i have not the appropriate
appreciation

to get Gary Snyder
Japhy Ryder
west coast
zen beat master poet
to write me a word back

To think, when I was younger, I thought smoking and drinking by yourself was somehow bad. Some sort of sign of being a lonely loser.

Now that I'm a lonely loser, I quite enjoy drinking and smoking alone.

Special thanks to Ben, Brad, and Mom.

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