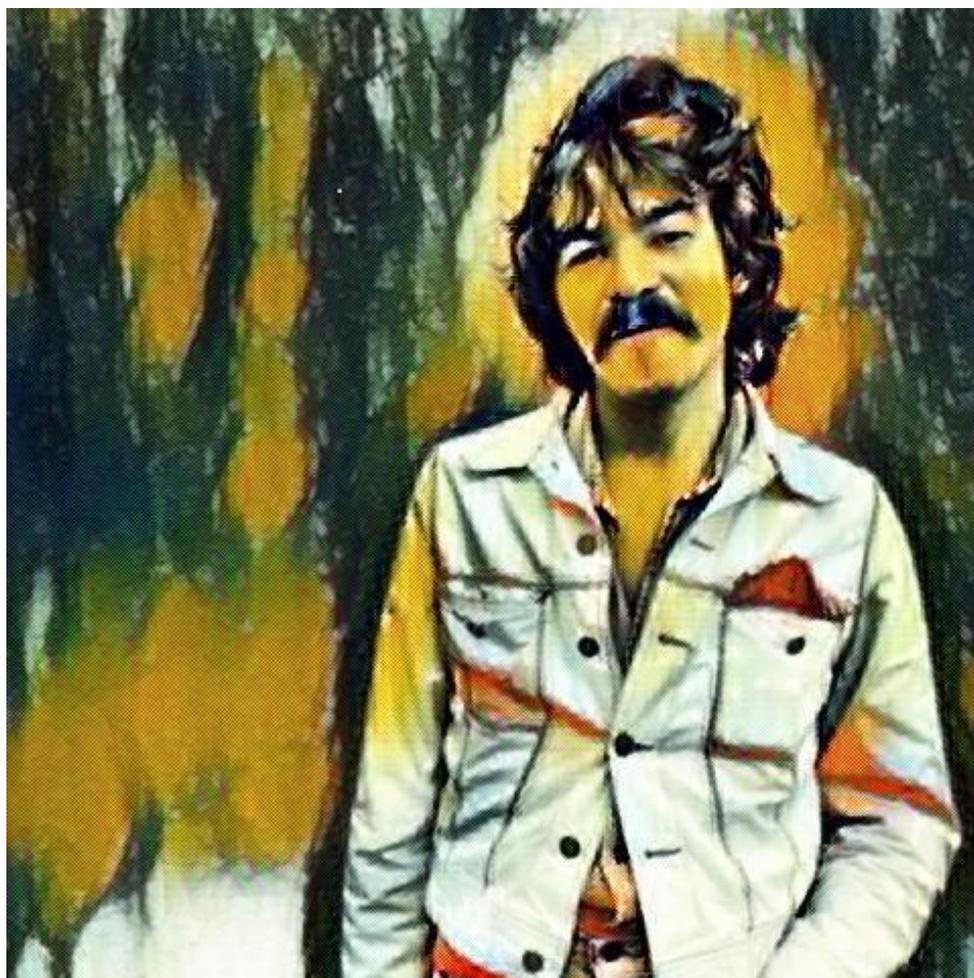


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Prine Primed

A special tribute issue to John Prine, 1946-2020

“If God’s got a favorite songwriter, I think it’s John Prine.”

–Kris Kristofferson

*“All that stuff about ‘Sam Stone’ the soldier junky daddy and
‘Donald and Lydia,’ where people make love from ten miles away.*

Nobody but Prine could write like that.”

–Bob Dylan

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Back Porch Sound

Jessica Burdg

Daddy smells like asphalt and GPC menthol lights. The 100's that come in the soft pack.

It's dark out, but I know he's still wearing his work shirt, the one that has his name stitched on the front in cursive. It is the source of the charred smell—that, and the boots my siblings and I gleefully pull from his feet as he collapses on the couch every weekday, after clocking out, and grins down at us, saying, “Okay, whose turn is it?”

I am six. Maybe five. Also could be seven. Memory is funny that way. But one thing is for sure: I always want it to be my turn.

I been thinking lately about the people I meet / The carwash on the corner and the hole in the street / The way my ankles hurt with shoes on my feet / And I'm wondering if I'm gonna see tomorrow

This night, Daddy and I are spending time on the screened back porch, a little past lightning bug hour. My little sister and brothers are already in bed, and tonight is one of those special times he lets me sit with him while he sips from his can and lets the day slip away.

The floor of the porch is covered in green carpet that can sometimes feel moist and sharp at the same time when you walk on it with bare feet, which I always do. The floral cushions that are loosely tied to the white spray-painted wicker patio furniture don't all fit, exactly, leaving gaps. I am wearing Mom's Mountain Dew t-shirt that she got for mailing in enough points from the backs of neon twenty-four packs as a nightgown, and the stray sticks stab the back of my thighs if I wiggle wrong. Besides the smell of Daddy, there's something else this night: in the corner of the room, the bird I do not like—precisely because of this odor—needs her newspaper changed.

But that doesn't matter. Nothing matters other than the fact that I have never felt more grown up than I do in this moment—at six or five or seven—because it's just me and Daddy, and we are listening to John Prine.

Fish and whistle, whistle and fish / Eat everything that they put on your dish / And when we get through, we'll make a big wish / That we never have to do this again again again

I understand not to interrupt the moment with my thoughts or questions, though I have a lot of those. Daddy has never told me not to chatter out here with him, but he doesn't need to.

I know how this should work: I sit. He sits. We listen to John Prine, his voice unassuming but his lyrics hearty, almost tangible. Every time there is a bad word—or a word that is “bad” for me to say at six or five or seven—Daddy looks over at me and winks. I feel so special that I can hardly contain myself. I don't even mind the pokey chair, the bird stink. I fold my legs under my mom's shirt and wrap my forearms around my knees, at once wanting so badly to grow up and also to stay here forever.

Father, forgive us for what we must do / You forgive us, we'll forgive you / We'll forgive each other till we both turn blue / Then we'll whistle and go fishing in heaven

**

When John Prine died on April 7, 2020, I immediately went down a rabbit hole of his music, like so many of us. As soon as one song in particular—*Fish and Whistle*, the first track on 1978's *Bruised Orange*—came through my headphones, I was transported back to that chair, to that back porch, to a little past lightning bug hour, to me at six or five or seven, with my dad.

I've long been a fan of Prine, specifically his prolific songwriting. *Angel From Montgomery* is one of my favorite songs—haunting and complex, speaking straight to the heart of many emotions I've grappled with as an adult. In *Hello In There*, it's always astounded me how on that track, after singing about the loneliness that comes with aging, he drops this dagger: *We lost Davy in the Korean War / And I still don't know what for / Doesn't matter anymore*. How viscerally we can feel the powerlessness at the underbelly of that loneliness—one taut and tired from years of resignations—from that one lyric. And of course, who could forget his humor and wit, as evidenced in this other popular track: *Dear Abby, Dear Abby / Well I never thought / That me and my girlfriend would ever get caught / We were sitting in the back seat just shooting the breeze / With her hair up in curlers and her pants to her knees / Signed Just Married*.

There's such depth to the no-frills catacombs of his catalog because this man, this once upon a time mailman, spoke our language. He told us the truth. He wasn't singing for us; he *was* one of us.

Two days after John Prine died, I called my dad to see if he remembered the times he let me stay up and sit with him at night when I was six or five or seven, if he remembered *Fish and a Whistle* a little past lightning bug hour, if he'd known how formative a memory that was for me, with John Prine humbly and aptly supplying the soundtrack.

"I don't think I remember that," he'd said, always a man of few words. "But sounds about right."



Prime Prine Liner Notes, July 1976

Patrick Dawson (WNEW-FM, New York)

The hardest thing to believe about John Prine is that it's only five years and four albums since he wandered almost surreptitiously into our collective consciousness. If you know Prine, it's as if he's always been there. As Kris Kristofferson said in the notes for the first record, "twenty-four years old and he writes like two hundred and twenty." And now the two hundred and twenty year old man is pushing thirty, like so many of the rest of us, and the music is still as fresh as the first time around.

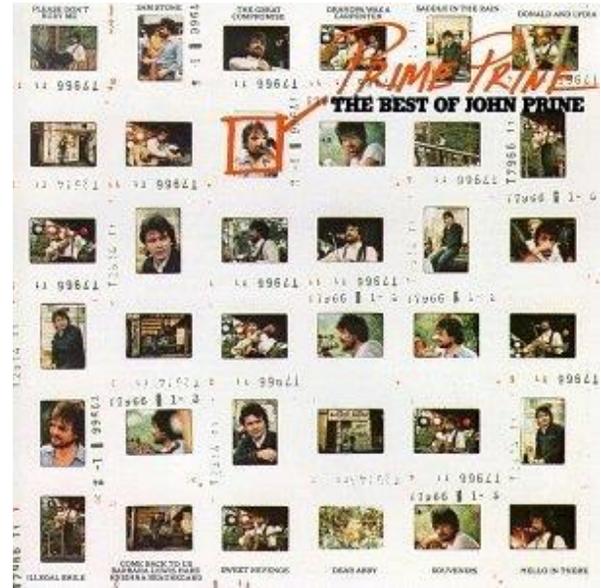
His voice certainly has - well, let's call it - a unique quality, and the arrangements are good, but what sticks in your mind long after the record stops playing are the songs. The sad songs almost haunting - the funny ones like a sardonic private joke between author and listener. And all of them make you think, think about just what Prine wanted you to in the first place. The peculiar thing about John Prine's songs is that they're always accessible and always personal.

There was never any thought of calling this collection "John Prine's Greatest Hits." Prine is a cult figure in the purest sense; and that's really too bad. Because he writes songs about things everybody feels. In truth John Prine is probably the most universally literate ex-mailman you will ever run into.

Believe it or not, it is five years, and there have been four albums. But, I'm not going to write about the passing of time; my descriptive words would only pale next to his. Moreover, sitting in the smoky back of an airplane in the middle of the North Atlantic night, I can see John Prine's characters all around me, And that's why you should listen to these songs. Ultimately, they speak about you and me.

*"Just give one thing that I can hold on to
To believe in this living is such a hard way to go"*

Thanks, John - for things to hold on to.



New Reflections on John Prine

Patrick Dawson

Call it the Prine worldview if you want. That slightly sheepish, salty, often poignant, always sly and insightful look into other's lives. Like he's embarrassed to be intruding on his own characters. One-eyed Joes, Lulu Walls, Donald and Lydia and Iron Ore Betty and Sabu. All the faded rooms he peered into and saw the wishing and dreaming in faded lives. When they make love, you can hear the low whispers and muffled sounds. When they sit in the dark with whisky and beer chasers, they talk about things that could happen to them, unspoiled things that are just beyond reach, and you hear them. Sometimes, they're motionless, waiting for death. Sometimes they stand in the bus station just waiting for a ride out of town. The moments of their lives that John Prine shows us are like cave paintings with simple truths left for posterity.

A Smokey Mountain Greyhound and prairie fires. Broken toys and faded colors. The things old men and women remember. Sounds real simple, but just try making the words work. Not just fit, but work. So that tears form, and your own memories pour out like water from a broken down dam.

I met John once, a long time ago outside a radio studio in New York. In some ways, it was transactional. I did a radio show and he was promoting an album. Actually, I don't think John was promoting anything, but his record company was. He didn't have to persuade me, I was already sold on his talent. I don't remember much of what we said, it probably wasn't memorable. He seemed a little sheepish, maybe embarrassed at the transactional bit. Through the litter of all the years, what I recall of that meeting is the wonderful humility in his eyes, as though he was really pleased to be a singing ex-mailman who somehow understood the human condition. Though I'm guessing he would be too humble to say it out loud.

It's too bad John isn't here to write about his own death. All the obituaries, some quite eloquent, filled with praise as they were, were missing the irony and the exquisite sadness he could have seen in it. A man surviving two cancer surgeries, resuscitating his career brilliantly in his sixties, the Grammy, the Songwriters Hall of Fame...only to die in a pandemic. Yeah, that's food for a Prine lyric. It makes me think of one right off: *"Jesus Christ died for nothing I suppose."*

Somehow, if he could have composed that last song, I think he would have made us feel a little better about losing him.

Mind Trips and Mind Traps: John Prine and the World Inside

Mark Lucius

When John Prine died in April, many of his obituaries cited three songs as emblematic of his nearly 50-year career. “Sam Stone,” a Vietnam veteran and family man dying from a war-induced addiction. A housewife pleading for an “Angel from Montgomery” to lift her from a life of sorely unmet expectations. An old man wondering why it’s worth talking to anyone anymore in “Hello in There.” All three songs appeared on Prine’s first album, *John Prine*, in 1971. To call them anything other than stunning portraits of human existence would be an understatement.

I treasured these songs, but they weren’t why I followed Prine throughout his career or kept attending his concerts until just before he died. Honestly, for years now, my heart would sink (a bit) when he began to play any of them. I had heard them soooo many times. My memories, as he wrote elsewhere, were “worn.” I knew the notes and chord patterns by heart—even his atypical structure for “Hello in There,” which employed *six* chords, double the number even Prine joked he used in most of his songs. As he sang these old songs, though, I again would be struck by how he used language, blending surprising metaphors, stinging observations and nearly forgotten clichés into an original whole. As in, for example, the oft-quoted chorus of “Sam Stone:”

*There’s a hole in daddy’s arm where all the
money goes
And Jesus Christ died for nothin’ I suppose
Little pitchers have big ears
Don’t stop to count the years
Sweet songs never last too long on broken
radios
Mmmmmm...*

Few artists received the positive obituaries and tributes accorded John Prine. And yet, I don’t believe they did full justice to his work. The three songs mentioned above are a small sample of the more than 150 recorded songs Prine wrote or co-wrote. Many of these lesser-known songs demand closer attention.

To listen to Prine over the years was to enter a world of colorful and concrete images: blue umbrellas and bruised oranges, storm windows and Mexican homes, great compromises and lost souvenirs. Cheeseburgers and pork chops. Clocks and spoons and empty rooms. He was the Quiet Man who ordered you to blow up your TV. He had tales of Maureen and Linda and Iron Ore Betty, of Queen Isabella and Barbara Lewis, the Hare Krishna convert who called everybody Carl. He namechecked James Dean, John Garfield (twice), Wilbur and Orville Wright. He wrote about the world, the way it goes around, and how it’s big, old and goofy. About people who jumped off bridges and fell off cliffs. He urged you to stick a needle in his eye but quit hollering at him. He sang often about Jesus, death and Heaven.

He strummed the themes many writers strum, the ones that seem formulaic until great writers get their hands on them. How did I get here, and what do I do about it? Why am I so lonely? Why is everyone so lonely? Why do I lose what I love? Why don’t you love me? He could turn the ordinary into the extraordinary in a way that was funnier than heck (a word he used in the title of a song). When he was younger, he wrote about lost love; in fact, there wasn’t a true love song on any of his first five albums. The older he got, the more he wrote about love he had found.

Summarizing such a long career is a daunting task. But if you ask, what made him great for you, it begins with one thing. More evocatively than most, Prine crafted songs about what it’s like to “live inside our heads,” to tussle with our inner selves. “Mind trips,” Bob Dylan called his songs, and I would add—*mind trips and mind traps*. The world inside,

as both playground and battleground. Prine's penchant for internal examination continued throughout what I think of as his three distinct phases: his first decade as an artist, or his "major label years," his second decade, when he launched his own record label, and the rest of his career, when the albums of fresh material arrived more slowly but the songs remained memorable.

Major Labels and A Very Large Imagination

Prine laid out a view of his interior landscape in the first lines of the first song on his first album.

*When I woke up this morning
Things were looking bad
Seemed like total silence
Was the only friend I had*

It's a song about solitude, but not the kind most writers take on. Not the kind Roy Orbison sang about in "Only the Lonely," or Neil Diamond in "Solitary Man," or even Hank Williams in "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." To be sure, Prine wrote plenty of songs about that kind of solitude—with "Sam," "Angel" and "Hello" being prime examples. But at least in this song, the singer is not interested in companionship at all. The only other people in it are police, insurance salesmen and a vengeful judge, and the singer is scared of all of them. So scared he hides in his closet, to get away from "all the ears inside my walls." And still he dreams those same police might hear everything he thinks about. In such a world, the only escape, apparently, is the promise of an outlawed substance.

*You may see me tonight with an illegal smile
It don't cost very much, but it lasts a long
while
Won't you please tell the man I didn't kill
anyone
No, I'm just trying to have me some fun*

The music emphasizes whatever peace he attains. The verses are in 4/4 time, but the rhythm is choppy, with Prine's simple but

distinctive fingerstyle guitar setting up a world in which the heart beats a little off kilter. The chorus, about that illegal smile, segues into a dreamy waltz. And some say Prine didn't know much about music.

"I have to confess," he said late in his career, "The song was not about smokin' dope. It was more about how, ever since I was a child, I had this view of the world where I can find myself smiling at stuff nobody else was smiling at. But it was such a good anthem for dope smokers that I didn't want to stop every time I played it and make a disclaimer."

This rings true. For Prine, the mindscape was a liberating force. Take, for example, the forlorn couple of "Donald and Lydia," another song/waltz from that first album. When it came out, the buzz was of a song about masturbation. And of course it is about that, but it's more about what drives people so deeply inside themselves, and how their fantasies lend them a certain kind of freedom. Donald and Lydia suffer from similar afflictions.

*There were spaces between Donald and
whatever he said
Strangers had forced him to live in his head
Meanwhile...
Lydia hid her thoughts like a cat
Behind her small eyes sunk deep in her fat*

Donald, a soldier, finds refuge in the barracks latrine after midnight. Lydia reads romance magazines in her room. And the couple makes love "from 10 miles away," because:

*Dreaming just comes natural
Like the first breath to a baby
Like sunshine feedin' daisies
Like the love hidden deep in your heart*

But there's much more hidden in our hearts, and Prine was here to tell you—it's not always pretty. Everyone alive knows this; it only differs by degrees. I believe I heard Prine

sing “Way Down,” a song from his 1975 album, *Common Sense*, only once in the 14 times I saw him. Maybe it was difficult to get the crowd back after singing—

Way Down
Way down it must be
Can't stop this misery
It must be way down

How you gonna get sunshine
Peeking through Venetian blinds?
Don't you know
That all that fear
Begins and ends
The same place
Here

It's a lovely melodic lament, with Prine's voice stretching out “waaaay” and plummeting to “down,” illustrating the dramatic difference between poetry and songwriting.

In the late 1970s and throughout the '80s, I traveled often for work. During part of that time I found myself facing bouts of anxiety punctuated by sudden panic attacks. Travel and panic were a difficult duo. Nevertheless, I persisted, and in 1981 I went to Holland, Michigan, for a two-night business trip. I was fine while working, less fine in the hours I wasn't. I stayed in a hotel on what they called “beautiful Lake Macatawa.” They could have fooled me. I drank lots of beer and didn't sleep well. On the morning of the third day, a driver took me on the 40-mile trip back to the Muskegon airport, where I was to catch a short, 30-minute flight back to Milwaukee.

But the 8 a.m. flight was late. A man said it would come at 9, then 10, and so on. We left for Milwaukee at 3 p.m. Meanwhile, perhaps due to the recession of the time, no other flights left the Muskegon airport that day. No other people populated the Muskegon airport that day. I had it all to myself, as in the title of another Prine song, “Me, Myself, and I.” I passed the time looking at propaganda about Muskegon's greatness,

and later, trying to write a song. But I couldn't get out of my head a tune Prine had already written, which I had learned and played. “Rocky Mountain Time,” from 1972's *Diamonds in the Rough*, features a duet between the singer and the hands of time.

The station was empty
The trains were all gone
I reached in my pocket
And waited for dawn
The clock played drums
And I hummed the sax
And the wind whistled down the railroad tracks
Hey, three for a quarter
And one for a dime
I'll bet it's tomorrow by Rocky Mountain Time

The lost traveler wanders into a restaurant, where he gets yelled at by both the waitress and the food. By the time he arrives at the song's bridge, even the allure of home is no refuge on this day.

We'll build us a castle on Main Street
And pretend that we're down on the farm
Hell, we'll hold out as long as we have to
Then we'll twist off each other's arm
Finally, in a *second* bridge, he 'fesses up in a curse that doubles as a prayer.
Christ, I'm so mixed up and lonely
I can't even make friends with my brain
I'm too young to be where I'm goin' to
And I'm too old to go back again

If you twisted my arm, I'd tell you I don't know if this is a great song. Others have visited such themes a million times. Not many, though, diagnosed the problem as more interior than exterior. My friend Dave Eason and I used to joke about the number of times Prine wrote about living inside his head. It was usually after we'd had a few. In our hearts, we knew it wasn't all that funny.

And neither did Prine. His music is acutely aware of how your brain can turn on

you. Here's the bridge from one of his most desolate songs, "The Late John Garfield Blues," also from the *Diamonds* album.

*An old man sleeps with his conscience at night
A young kid sleeps with his dreams
While the mentally ill
Sit perfectly still
And live through life's in-betweens*

Mind trips can be liberating, alienating—and worse. Sometimes, they can be downright deadly. That's pretty damn scary for those who find occasional relief in their inattention to the outside world. But that consequence is there, in one of Prine's greatest songs, the title song of his 1978 album, *Bruised Orange*. It begins:

*My heart's in the icehouse
Come hill or come valley
Like a long ago Sunday
When I walked through the alley
On a cold winter's morning to a church house
Just to shovel some snow.*

Prine was an altar boy. I was an altar boy. Maybe that's why I empathize so deeply with the kid, lost in his thoughts, who is killed in the second verse.

*I heard sirens on the train track
Howl naked, get nuder
An altar boy's been hit by a local commuter
Just from walkin' with his back turned
To the train that was coming so slow*

"God knows what was on his mind," Prine said many years later. I imagine he recognized the irony in that statement. When the song came out in 1978, I disagreed with Prine's conclusion in the chorus of this song.

*You can gaze out the window
Get mad and get madder
Throw your hands in the air
Say 'what does it matter?'
But it don't do no good to get angry*

*So help me I know
For a heart stained in anger
Grows weak and grows bitter
You become your own prisoner
As you watch yourself sit there
Wrapped up a in trap
Of your very own chain of sorrow*

I disagreed because it seemed presumptuous to tell me, or those to whom really horrible things happen, not to get angry. I was young, and anger seemed like a useful emotion. Now, the song seems like a penetrating expression of loss, of coming to terms with how suddenly and savagely life can change, and how difficult it can be to carry on in the face of that. "You carry those bruises to remind you wherever you go," sings Prine. It's akin to the Book of Job. Elsewhere on the album, in a tune with the balanced rhythm of a sea chantey, Prine imagines a universe in which anger at God begets a forgiveness for things humans can never understand. "Fish and Whistle," animated with an Irish whistle, offers up another prayer.

*Father, forgive us for what we must do
You forgive us, we'll forgive you
We'll forgive each other 'til we both turn blue
Then we'll whistle and go fishing in Heaven*

In these first nine years as an artist (1971-1980), Prine recorded seven albums for two major labels: Atlantic and Asylum. In that near-decade, the man who earned scant attention for experimentation never made a record that sounded like the one before. He did folk and folkier, rock and rhythm-and-blues, rockabilly and back to rock. I once found his records in a bin labeled "Country." All that leaping around confounded the critics, and likely some record executives as well. During a subsequent four-year break, Prine moved from Chicago to Nashville. When he returned with new music, it was on his own record label.

The Missing Years

Fair or not, I think of the 1980s as John Prine's "Missing Years." He recorded only two new albums of original material. Both were well-received, but it took *Rolling Stone* almost a year to review the first. Starting an independent label is hard, and while both albums fared well on those terms, neither cracked the Billboard 200. When Prine released an album in 1991 actually entitled *The Missing Years*, many called it a "comeback." But the '80s albums contain quality songs that found Prine plumbing the depths in new and notable ways.

1984's album, *Aimless Love*, includes a rough-edged diamond of a song about the effects of corrosive guilt. "Maureen, Maureen" features a hopeless braggart, who in some unspecified way misbehaves and makes up a lie to cover up. (And likely, misbehaves again and makes up more lies.) The lie is fantastic; begging to be disbelieved. The singer's strangled scream, when he calls out his lover's name, signals his desperation.

Maureen, Maureen
I shot a doctor last night on the airplane
Well, they said he wouldn't hurt us
But he got me real nervous and mean

He was fat and he stank
And God knows he drank more than we do
So I shot him in the first class
Then I bailed out and ran home to you

Notice the line, "They said he wouldn't hurt us." It sets a back story inside the lie, as if this guy has been in serious conversation with someone—fellow passengers? flight attendants?—about the dangerous doctor. And, *of course* he runs home to Maureen. As the chorus (below) suggests, who else would he lie to? Who else would stand for such a story—again? And yet, the scenario is apparently such a replay that the perpetrator gives up way too quickly. It's

quite the opposite of "That's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

But you don't believe me
I can see by your smile
Honey, why don't you leave me
Get lost for awhile
Maureen

The production on the album is uneven, but its distant quality works here. There's way too much echo, as if Prine is singing in a dusty old cathedral. A guitar solo chokes off notes as if the protagonist is trying to stop himself before he tells another good one.

But surprisingly, this unpretty song takes a turn. There's a curious line about estrangement, which echoes the famous line about the hole in Sam Stone's arm: "There's a hole in between where we come from." The singer then hints at a personal depth that wasn't at first apparent.

The things that I'm thinking
Ain't necessarily the things that I say
I may have lied to myself
But I tried to tell God how I love you
But even he don't answer his phone anymore
when I pray

You can lie to yourself and others, he suggests, but you can't lie to God. Even alone in a dusty cathedral. Even if it is God's fault. And of course, if God is even there at all. To complete the song, the singer repeats the first verse, that same goofy lie, and the vicious cycle goes around.

Prine's next album, 1986's *German Afternoons*, contains two disparate songs about mind trips and traps. In "Linda Goes to Mars," the chronic daydreamer finds the tables turned.

I just found out yesterday that Linda goes to Mars
Every time I sit and look at pictures of used cars

*She'll turn on the radio and sit down in her
chair
And look at me across the room
As if I wasn't there*

*Oh, my stars
My Linda's gone to Mars
Well, I wish she wouldn't leave me here alone*

One reviewer suggested, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that Linda could be the disenchanted housewife in “Angel from Montgomery.” That seems a stretch, though we don’t know; Prine provides no insight into Linda’s inner visions. All we know by song’s end is that—

*(W)hen the moon shines down upon our
happy humble home
Her inner space gets tortured by some outer
space unknown*

More inner space is tortured in a better-known song on that album, though there’s nothing funny about “The Speed of the Sound of Loneliness.” This *is* the kind of solitude many songwriters write about. I’m hurting, and it’s your fault. Prine’s approach here, though, (as a broadcaster once said about Tiger Woods’s golf) is “better than most.” When it comes to loneliness, my dear, you’re setting some kind of record.

*You come home late and you come home
early
You come on big when you're feeling small
You come home straight and you come home
curly
Sometimes you don't come home at all
Well, what in the world's come over you
And what in heaven's name have you done?
You've broken the speed of the sound of
loneliness
You're out there running just to be on the run*

One of Prine’s hallmarks was how he dropped in surprises as his songs unfolded.

That could be a distraction. Here, though, the singer owns up to some culpability.

*Well, I got a heart that burns with a fever
And I got a worried and a jealous mind
How can a love that'll last forever
Get left so far behind*

The song’s mid-tempo rhythm, one critic wrote, sounds “like the desolate ticking of a hallway clock.” This was a song people noticed, and one Prine played in his live sets for years thereafter. More artists covered it, 22 in all, than any since songs from Prine’s first album.

Recognition from His ‘Contemporary Peers’

Despite all the work and worry that comes with starting your own record company, one perk must be that you’re on your own clock. It was intriguing to see how Prine handled his creative freedom over the last three decades or so of his career.

He recorded three albums of duets, two featuring a total of 20 of his favorite female singers. All three duet albums showcased familiar and many less-familiar country songs. There was a Christmas album. Vintage live performances. Early studio recordings. A video album, music videos and more. And four more albums of new songs.

He won his first of two Grammys for 1991’s *The Missing Years*, which he kicked off with the memorable line that defined his early life and long career. “A young man, from a small town, with a very large imagination.” When he released 1995’s *Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings*, he was nominated again, one of 11 Grammy nominations he earned.

The latter album includes “Lake Marie,” by near-universal acclaim one of his finest songs. I raise it here because of the song’s dream-like quality. It knits together three separate and dramatic stories set at different times near a Wisconsin lake (with a brief side trip to Canada). It details the discovery of two white babies by a Native

American tribe, the beginning and ending of a marriage, and a grisly multiple murder. If only most novels were as powerful. A master of fictional points of view could use it as a fine case study. Prine closed his concerts with this song for most of the last 25 years of his career. I never tired of hearing it.

On that same album, though, is a less-familiar tune that tries to make sense of why a love melted away. “Humidity Built the Snowman” begins as if Prine is reciting a fairy tale. Actually, “Lake Marie” starts that way, too, but his voice here is gentler, like a wise father reading to his children. That is, if his children want to hear about a bad case of lovesickness.

*Does he still think about her?
Why there was never really any doubt
Every time he lights a candle
Or blows a candle out*

But life goes on.

*The scientific nature of the ordinary man
Is to go on out and do the best you can*

Or maybe it doesn't, really.
*I don't think that you know
That I think you don't know
That old barometer goes crazy, baby,
Every time it starts to snow
You won't find me walking
Round your part of town
Humidity built the snowman
Sunshine brought him down*

As someone else wrote, less eloquently, “Love hurts. Love scars.” Or as ‘ol Frosty might say after hearing this, “Love kills.”

I saw a lot of John Prine in the half century I followed him. He was the nervous folkie (yes, often he was) in the early years, the guy who kept a cigarette burning in the neck of his guitar while he played.

That Prine gave way to a renegade sprawled in the front seat of a Cadillac, singing a playful “Sweet Revenge” to those who’d wronged him.

That Prine, with longer hair and a modified Fu-Manchu, led a hot rock-n-country band as headliner of Milwaukee’s Summerfest main stage one night in 1980, certainly one of the few artists without a major hit to do that.

That Prine became an extraordinarily accomplished performer, even after not one but two cancer operations. Though he often played with full bands, my lasting image of Prine the performer will be of him standing, with head cocked back in confidence and pride, between his longtime accompanists, bassist Dave Jacques and multi-instrumentalist Jason Wilbur.

In the last decade or so, Prine graduated into one of the most honored and awarded songwriters of our time. His “contemporary peers” (a phrase from the song, “Jesus, The Missing Years”) awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2020.

When he discovered how to write love songs, sometimes with co-writers, you could hardly shut him up about the topic. By my count, he wrote or co-wrote more than 20 love songs once he got the hang of it. The last time I saw him, in April 2018, he dedicated “Boundless Love,” from his last album, to his wife, Fiona.

Taken as a whole, his songs were wise, poignant, angry and humorous in ways that elevated our understanding of life and the people who live it. As I mentioned at the outset, though, Prine’s “Proustian existentialism,” or reflections on his place in this world, could be underappreciated. That phrase, by the way, is also from Bob Dylan.

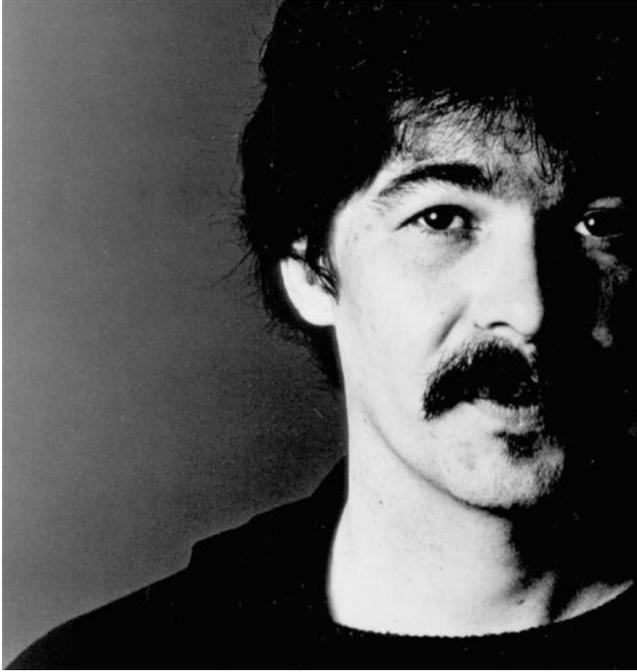
No question, it’s easier to hear songs about the liberating force of the mind, his and ours, than about the ways it can hurt to feel alien, endure loneliness, battle with grief, wrestle with guilt and lose love. Mind trips are a helluva lot more fun than mind traps. Thank God for art and artists.

Coming off such an acclaimed first album would have been hard for anyone to top. In this light, Prine's journey as an artist was fairly astonishing. In certain ways, though, his sensibility changed little. In one of the last songs on his final studio album, *The Tree of Forgiveness*, he returned to a familiar theme.

*The lonesome friends of science say
The world will end most any day
Well, if it does, then that's okay
'Cause I don't live here anyway
I live down deep inside my head
Where long ago I made my bed
I get my mail in Tennessee
My wife, my dog, my kids and me
Uh huh*

One way not to go crazy, Prine's music seemed to say, is to keep looking that craziness in the eye. This last song, though, noted an important difference. It was one I learned over the years, through the many friends with whom I discovered and shared his music. Goodness knows, I learned it anew when I started taking my wife, Barbara, to Prine's concerts in the late 1980s.

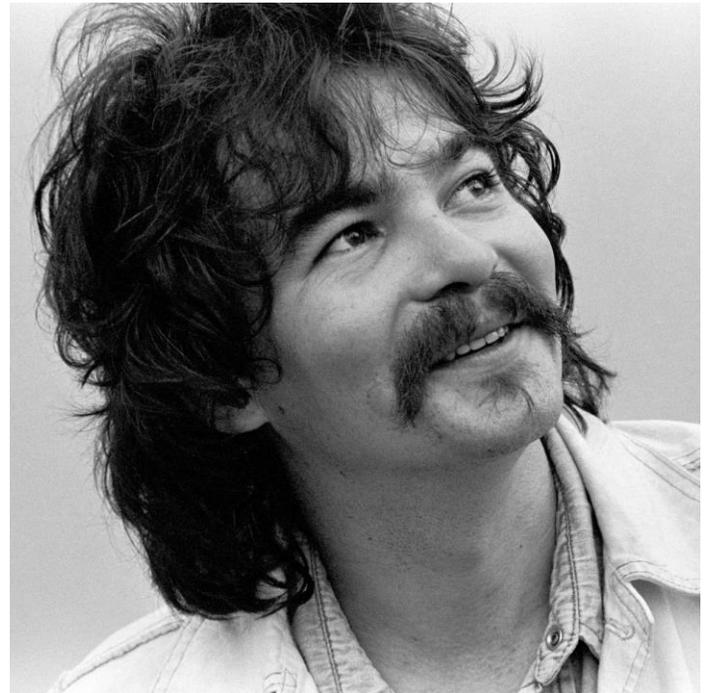
When you live down deep inside your head, it helps to bring along the ones you love.



John Prine
1946-2020

“Johnny Cash was like Abraham Lincoln to me.”

-John Prine



Foxes and Coyotes

Zach Murphy

The tulips grew apart from each other that Spring. The ground cracked and crumbled in ways that I'd never seen before.

I watched the foxes and the coyotes battle all Summer on Cesar Chavez Boulevard, where the blood would leave permanent stains on the concrete. The reckless packs would flash their teeth, mark their territories, and steal more than just scraps.

Me, I was a squirrel. I was small. But I was agile. I hustled from sun up until sundown at a frenetic pace. I always minded my own business and stuck to my own path. I didn't want to get involved with the vicious nature of pack mentality.

My best friend was a squirrel, too. We grew up around same nest. We used to climb trees, chase tails, and break soggy bread together. We'd walk the wires between safety and danger. And when we got too deep into the mess, we'd get out just in time. Growing up, I always wondered if we would live long enough to die from old age, or if the environment and its elements would get to us first.

That Fall, my best friend got caught up with the foxes and the coyotes. Now he's gone.

The foxes and the coyotes lied low in the Winter. Me, I trotted across the frozen ground and desperately hoped I'd see my best friend's footprints once again.

He Forgot That It Was Sunday

Brian Beatty

Hurley let out a low groan as he hefted himself up from his aluminum-framed lawn chair and fished his secondhand reading glasses from deep in the top front pocket of his bib overalls.

He was built like he belonged on a throne in the middle of a shopping mall, playing Santa Claus, but in his favorite tie-dyed t-shirt and open-toed leather sandals from Germany, Hurley was just another hippie flea market regular who didn't always remember to price his merchandise.

He took the life-size ceramic owl from the woman interested in buying it for her husband.

"They don't make 'em like this anymore," he said to determine how much she knew about the piece. He peered over the top of his glasses, as if admiring finer details that weren't there. "Husband's a collector?"

"Actually, he hates owls. But that just makes it perfect for his *man cave*."

That phrase reminded Hurley of dinosaurs. This woman reminded him of a country club.

"You know, *garage*," she continued. "Sneak it in there, see how long 'til he notices *it*."

The owl slipped from between Hurley's thick sausage fingers.

The woman shrieked.

"Fuck, lady," Hurley replied.

Unfortunately, the owl was too well constructed to shatter when it hit the parking lot asphalt. Instead, it bounced to a rest with its unblinking stare aimed at Hurley.

He hated owls, too.

"Five bucks?" he suggested to the woman's delight.

Hurley threw in a brown paper grocery bag for free. Complimentary gift wrap, he called it.

North Dakota '84

James Stewart III

The parking lot's foggy from freezing exhaust pumping out the backs of empty cars left running. Took Jim a while to get used to that. Some of these people out here even leave their doors unlocked with the keys right inside. Asking for it to get stolen. He plugs in his block heater, locks the door, and heads inside.

After a day out in the oil fields, he got to the trailer for a few hours shut-eye before rolling back out into the shit. Connie, the boys, and little Jimmy are at home. The baby needs some diapers, and it's too cold to send Shane or Nathan out, so he hopped in his pickup to run to the Quik Stop down the road. Can't believe how many diapers the baby goes through. Connie knows, she'd been through it with the boys, but that was before Jim. This is his first.

Thought he at least knew cold though. He remembers the smoke pouring into alleys from laundry room vents in Chicago, having to dig his car out of the snow, the battalion of salt trucks that would hit the road, and the distinct sound of rock salt smacking his windshield.

Didn't know shit.

This is a winter with no breaks. Cold beyond cold and non-stop darkness. Couldn't imagine his eyes adjusting to backroads that would never see a street light. He tries to think of a sunrise, but the sun doesn't really rise anymore, just kinda rolls over, hits snooze then struggles through a few hours of semi-consciousness. Even worse, he's making half of what he made only a few months ago. His checks keep coming up shorter and shorter. The oil prices are slipping, and he's following the going's on of OPEC like he followed those Bob "Butterbean" Love Bulls teams in college. He's working hard as ever, but it doesn't matter.

Whispers are the boom's gone bust, that he came too late. Bad timing. Jim's not ready to hear that, even if he can't miss the

signs. Storefronts closing up, U-Haul's moving families out, and the talk out on the site. Some people can't just bottle up their worries and mind their business. Old-timers know what it is here, guys that'd made a life chasing oil, a few tried to impart their wisdom. There's something about a shit situation that brings people together, and everyone knows what Jim is trying to do.

He tips his hat to the girl behind the counter, and she stops flipping through her magazine mid-page-turn. Used to it by now. It's not his big cowboy hat, the temptation of wearing one too much for a city boy to resist, but rather he's the only Black man within a few hundred-mile radius. Out on the site, he hears white guys talk about Indians like he knows they talk about him when he turns his back.

This store's just a few aisles and barely makes any sense, could use a better manager, but he's done with retail. That work was moving too slow. He heard all about the boom money here in Williston and that he wouldn't have to wait around for someone to bestow a promotion or raise on him to start earning decent money. Heard the cash reached out to every kind of work in this city, you could stock shelves and make a good living. He went for the real money though, out in the fields, frostbitten and desolate.

Doesn't regret that work though, met Connie at the store back home. Things moved fast. They got married, her two sons became his two sons, the store transferred her job out here, and now Jimmy. Damn.

Their mobile-home is pretty roomy, bigger than he expected. It's the only place he ever wants to be. He sees the other guys running off to the bars and strip clubs with their fat money rolls, women waiting for them. He'd noticed how nice they could be out here. Oilfield groupies, saw the easy human sense it made after a few weeks of winter. Not interested, no saint but none of that fit into his plan. He works in the field, racks up

all the OT he can, and runs home. Makes his way out to the Quik Stop, too. Standing in front of the diapers, he notices there's not much of a selection. Just the cheap kind and the expensive kind. When he came out here, he hoped he'd finally be able to get Connie and the boys the expensive kind of everything. Looking back and forth at the bulky plastic packages, he works out the price per diaper. Didn't want to worry about this anymore, trying to save a few cents wherever he can. Exhausting.

His family told him, his friends told him. "We got no kinda business in North Dakota." "With a white wife and her two little white boys?" He didn't listen. What'd they know? He can work his way through anything. If he can keep everyone believing, if he can keep himself believing. He'd only brought home the expensive kind of diapers since they'd been out here, but they didn't make sense anymore. None of this seems to make as much sense anymore. The boys still don't like their new school, and Connie worries about the money she's losing by taking time off from Albertson's to stay home with the baby. Things are going to be different now with Jimmy around. It's the start of something new for their family. Sometimes Jim and Connie stay up late into the night just looking at their baby. They did something. They're really doing something. Maybe this isn't the right place, though.

Jim snatches up a pack of diapers, the cheap kind.

Warren Park

Anthony Koranda

1.

You sit on the bed in Amanda's apartment, smoking Marlboro Lights and eating licorice under a popcorn ceiling in student housing across the street from Warren Park. It's a cold February night, and the wind howls through cheap windows. She doesn't have an ashtray, so you use a thin ceramic plate from Dollar Tree. She has a habit of holding her cigarettes for a long time without taking a drag, the cherry covered by a rope of ash that you think, at any second, will fall to the sheets.

"Granny ash," you say, pointing to the cigarette, and she takes a small puff, blowing smoke in the air without breathing it into her lungs, and flicks the ash on the plate. You notice then, and for the rest of your relationship, that she never inhales her cigarettes.

2.

She gives you the bed when she moves to Michigan to get her PhD in some social science. You point out the red stains on the fabric, which Amanda tells you are from wine she spilled before she got sober.

"It isn't from my period," she says, crinkling her nose the way she always does when she wants you to believe her. You hadn't considered the stains were menstrual blood.

You accept because you hadn't had a mattress in years, not a real one, at least. You slept on an air bed your mother bought for twenty dollars, which you got drunk and passed out on in your clothes every night for a couple weeks, and you think maybe your keys punched a hole somewhere in the bed while you were sleeping. In any case, the air bed no longer holds air. You still sleep on it, though, because it seems like the right thing to do. Either way, the cement floor of your basement apartment is hard and cold.

3.

Your mother had moments of sobriety when you were a kid, and when she was sober, she would bring you to the library during the day while your

older brother was at school. You remember riding her hip as she pushed through heavy doors, your head resting on her shoulder, small fingers prodding the moles on her neck.

She sets you in the children's section, where the librarian, a plump woman with thick lenses in her purple-framed glasses, long pearls slung around her neck, makes sure the other children share their toys and books and are as nice to you as you wish your brother is at home.

Your mother sits in one of the study rooms, another woman across from her at the table, two blue books open to the same page. "Studying steps," she calls it. You knock on the glass to get her attention, and when she looks, her eyes are low and dull. She frowns and waves you away.

4.

The library staff always smiles and says hello, even as you get older, in your late teens and early twenties, when you reek of booze and fall asleep on the chairs behind the stacks. They knock on the table, soft at first but growing louder to wake you up.

"You can't sleep here," they say in soft voices.

One of the library staff, a man about ten years older than you, mid-thirties, short with unkept stubble and beady eyes, who wears small frameless bifocals and is missing his two bottom front teeth, suggests you check out a book. The book is thick with a deep blue cover, the same book your mother read in the study rooms when you were a kid.

"Read it," he tells you, and walks back to the circulation desk.

The man who works at the library is named Tyson, and you found out you know his younger brother, Jordan, went to school with him, before Jordan went to prison for robbing a trap house you used to frequent, back when you had money.

Tyson tells you to meet him outside of the library at 6:00, and you both walk to a church around the corner, move silently into the basement, sip cheap coffee from Styrofoam cups while people walk to a podium and talk into a microphone about steps and traditions. At the end of the night, everyone holds hands and smiles and prays.

"Where are you staying tonight?" Tyson asks after the meeting, outside in the cold.

The streetlights are humming, and you see small snowflakes falling in the orangish yellow light.

You shrug your shoulders, "I was at LSSI for about a week, but they kicked me out when they caught me drinking in my room," you say, shocked that what came out of your mouth wasn't a lie.

"You can't stay at my place. My mother has a strict rule against guests staying the night," he says, thinking it over for a moment. "C'mon," and he walks you around the corner, back to the library. He unlocks the door and leads you upstairs, to a large conference room on the second floor, opens a closet door behind a podium that stands at the front of the room.

"You can stay here tonight," he says. "But don't tell anyone I let you in. If they find out, just tell them you snuck in here before close."

You nod, lay down on the thin carpet among stacks of chairs and folded tables.

"Why are you doing this?" you ask.

"You're the first one who actually came to the meeting," he says, closing the closet door.

5.

You ride the bus to the library every day to shelve books. The job is only about twenty hours a week, but it's nice to get the paycheck.

You find a little apartment in the basement of a three-flat a guy in the program owns. "He only rents it to newcomers, people who need a place to stay," everyone at the meetings tells you.

It's small and dirty when you move in, and there's a half-gallon of vodka left in the freezer from whoever rented the place before. They must have been kicked out, you think, as the only stipulations of living in the apartment are a hundred dollars a week and complete sobriety.

Tyson watches as you pour the bottle down the drain. He's there to help you move, but there really isn't much to it. You plug the small air pump into the bed your mother bought you, when you saw her a week or so before, the first time you had seen her in months. Tyson brings an old TV his mom was throwing away.

You sit on the air bed while he fidgets with the bunny ear antenna, crying "voila!" when the screen finally shows the nightly news.

Tyson sits next to you on the air mattress and you both stay silent for a moment. He puts an arm around your shoulder.

"It's a real shit hole," he says, smiling wide.

"Yeah," you say. "And it's all mine."

6.

You meet Amanda at an AA meeting on Clark and Berwyn. She's much shorter than you, bright blond hair and a smile that looks like it was sculpted by an orthodontist. She looks expensive.

"I can see straight up your nose," she says with a giggle, looking up.

You look down at her and smile, handing her a cup of coffee. "You shouldn't go around staring up people's noses," you say, reaching a hand out, and she shakes it with animated vigor.

"What else am I supposed to look at?" she says. "All these tall people walk around with boogers and nose hairs that desperately need trimming. It really isn't right to just force short people to stare into the mess that is your nose."

"I guess I never really thought of it," you say, sipping the coffee.

"That's because you're a tall person."

"So, how's mine?" you stick your neck out and tilt your head, so she has a good view.

"Meh," she said, flattening her hand and tilting it side to side. "I've seen better."

"Rude," you say, and you both smile.

The meeting starts and you take a seat next to each other, and you notice her blue eyes scanning you up and down while people share in the circle. You notice because you're doing the same.

Amanda tells you after the meeting, when everyone stands outside on the church steps smoking, she studies at Loyola.

"The dorms were all full, so they stuck me on Pratt by Western," she says. "It's nice because it's an actual apartment. I don't have to share a room with anyone, but it takes forever to get to campus, and there's no bus that runs on Pratt."

"Walk down to Devon and take the 155," you say, and she rolls her eyes as if you've just told her to hitchhike.

"Warren Park is beautiful, though, the huge park right across the street on Pratt," you tell her. "There's an elote stand by the tennis courts. They're amazing."

"What the hell are elotes?" she says, taking a drag of her cigarette, and you gasp and look at her like her hair's on fire.

“That’s it,” you say, grabbing her wrist and jumping on the Northbound Clark bus, taking a seat next to each other toward the middle. You’re both silent as the engine hums. You didn’t think about the thirty-minute ride to Pratt, or what you two would talk about on the way. Your cheeks are getting red, you can feel it.

“Are you gonna kill me?” Amanda asks, and for a second you can’t tell if she’s joking.

“Not until after elotes,” you say, and you both laugh.

You wash the elotes down with cans of seltzer water at Amanda’s apartment. You think it’s a beautiful place, shiny hardwood floors and windows that let in natural light. She sits close to you on the couch, and after you begin to kiss, she tells you she’s never slept with a guy she just met, not sober, at least. You are going to tell her she doesn’t have to, that you can leave, but before you can say it, she takes your hand, gently with the soft skin of her palm, and leads you to her bed.

7.

You meet your older brother on Argyle. You haven’t seen him in three or four years. He’s tall like you, wearing a blue short-sleeve button up with “Pan-Am” printed on the back (he tells you it’s an old pilot’s shirt) and a pair of brown slacks he’s cut into shorts, heavy looking bag hugging his back. His crew cut has grown out, and you notice when he turns his head the word “Whoa” has been shaved in his hair, crookedly with a shaky hand. It takes a moment for you to figure out what it says, because he wears large Ray Ban sunglasses with “Fuck Off” engraved in gold letters on the temple.

He gives you a hug, wrapping both arms tightly around you. He smells like he hasn’t showered in a week.

“Good to see you, little brother,” he says, and smiles teeth tinged yellow, deep black in the cracks between them. “Let’s get some pho!”

You walk into a small restaurant and he orders for both of you.

“This is the traditional way to eat it. No need to get the fancy bowls,” he says, munching on bean sprouts on the table in front of you.

“When did you start eating pho?” you ask, having no idea he consumed anything other than cheeseburgers and malt liquor.

“I just got back from Saigon,” he says, raising his eyebrows, hoping you’re impressed. “Didn’t mom tell you?”

“We don’t really speak that much,” you say. You hadn’t spoken to your mother since she bought you the air bed. “What were you doing in Vietnam?”

“Teaching,” he said. “It’s so easy to get a job teaching English to little kids over there, just like the ABCs and stuff like that.”

The waitress set bowls of steaming pho in front of you, thinly sliced beef in brown broth with green onions floating on top.

“Cảm ơn bạn,” he says in an accent even you can tell is choppy. The waitress smiles sheepishly and walks back to the kitchen. He looks at you, eyes bright, trying to gage your level of surprise and awe.

“Don’t you need a degree or something to teach?” you ask.

“Yeah, technically,” he says, slurping the broth into his mouth. “I know this guy, really a group of guys, who went over without degrees. They’re all teaching. I bought a forged college diploma from a Frenchman for a hundred bucks. The schools there don’t verify it or do any real background checks at all. If it’s a nicer school, I’ll wear a tie, but basically if you show them anything that resembles a real diploma you’re hired.”

You stare at him for a second, amazed he could be this daring, or he loves the food so much. He’s come a long way from the pudgy kid with a bowl cut—the picky eater— who your mother bought Happy Meals for every night or he’d starve.

“How long are you back?” you ask him, tasting the pho, strong flavors bathing your mouth. After swallowing the first spoon full, you already feel stronger. It’s been a long time since you’ve had a good meal.

“Just until the end of the month,” he says. “I’m staying at mom’s place, on the couch.”

“She’s letting you stay with her?” you ask. She threw you out a few years before and had yet to let you back in the house. Not for a shower or a meal or anything.

“Sure,” he says. “I’m covering half the rent for the month.”

You sigh and eat your meal in silence before he pays the tab.

8.

You and your brother walk toward the lake, down a trail to Montrose Harbor. You sit on the harbor ledges, smoking cigarettes and staring out at the skyline. On the way over, you hear the bottles clanking together in his backpack. Your chest bubbles with anticipation of the liquor, the warmth that comes afterward.

He pulls two 40s of King Cobra from his backpack, handing you one. The second the bottle touches your hand you know you're going to do it. You crack the bottle and let the malt liquor fall down your throat. You think of Tyson and Amanda for a moment. You consider the last three months of sobriety are gone. But that all fades as you cheers the bottles with your brother. It feels natural.

As the bottles drain, you start to talk about going back to Vietnam with him. You'll be a pretty fucking good teacher, you both agree. You toss the empties in the lake, making your way to Broadway for a few more drinks.

9.

You wake up on the mattress in Amanda's apartment, no idea how you got there. You have no time to get your bearings, consider if you took the train or a bus or got a ride. She is screaming and throwing small fists that hit your face and arms and chest. Her fists are sharp and quick, and while she hits you, you imagine this is what it must feel like to be pelted with rocks. She leaves bruises all over your body and face that turn dark blue, then yellow when they heal.

You leave her apartment as she's cursing you, saying you're nothing but a worthless drunk. You walk to a bank, take out two hundred dollars. You've just been paid that morning, and you didn't work for another two days. "This is all I'll spend," you think. "Just enough for a couple of bottles, stay drunk for just tonight."

That shit with Amanda was intense and you need some relief. Maybe you'll stay drunk for a couple of days, until you have to go back to work.

You know this is all a lie. You have no idea when you'll sober up again.

10.

You go to Amanda's college graduation a couple months later, sit next to her parents who look you up and down suspiciously. You've been going back to the meetings. Sometimes drunk; sometimes with a clear head. This is enough for Amanda to take you back.

You wonder if her parents can smell the vodka on your breath even though you always thought vodka couldn't be smelled after consumption. They know where you and Amanda met, that you work in a library, but they can't know much else, where you've been, all the other shit.

They are old, mid-sixties, with gray hair and sweaters that lay over button up shirts. They are from Michigan. You know this because they never stop talking about Michigan, how Amanda has been accepted to a highly ranked graduate program in Michigan. Most of all, though, they talk about their lake house which is situated very near the beach on the Michigan side of Lake Michigan. Sometimes, they talk about Amanda's ex-boyfriend, who is attending law school at Wayne State in Detroit. They regularly speak with his parents, who are happily married and raising an apparently wonderful and successful son.

You nod as if you agree how wonderful this boy and Michigan must be. Much better than you and Chicago, of course. Amanda will be very happy back in Michigan for graduate school.

You promise Amanda you won't drink before her ceremony, before meeting her parents. You think maybe you overshot the mark, as you're having trouble concentrating on what anyone is saying, and you just nod and smile, hoping to get through most of the day without having to speak.

You're scared Amanda will know you're drinking, that you brought a couple of airplane bottles to shoot in the restaurant bathroom once this buzz wears off. She told you a couple of weeks ago that if you didn't sober up, you couldn't come with her when she moved for graduate school.

These are your last drinks, you tell yourself, as you pour the small bottles down your throat in a stall, Amanda and her parents waiting at a table in the restaurant. It's only enough to get you through the bullshit of meeting her parents.

When you come back from the bathroom, she is scowling, and you know you will never be what she needs.

“Good,” Tyson says. “Perfect. That’s exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

11.

Amanda doesn’t say you won’t be moving with her. On the day she is set to move to Michigan, you are packed, just a backpack and a duffel. Only your clothes. She tells you not to bring anything else, that you’ll both furnish the apartment together and she mostly wants new stuff anyway.

She knocks on the apartment door, and when you open it you see the mattress being pulled into the hallway. At first, you’re just surprised she’s managed to drag it from the moving truck to your apartment by herself.

“Help me out here,” she says, and you grab it and pull it across the cement floor into your apartment. “You keep it,” she says.

You stand in silence for a while, rubbing the nape of your neck, your bags sitting by your feet.

Amanda starts to speak a few times but stops, eventually deciding what to say.

“In the future,” she says, not looking into your eyes. “I want to be in a space mentally, emotionally, financially—someday, at least—where I can have a child. And I need a partner for that, someone who can support me while I’m working late nights and help take care of a baby,” her eyes are welling with tears. “That just isn’t you, is it?”

You stand in silence. You want to grab her and hold her and love her. You want to walk with her to her car and ride shotgun to Michigan and get a job and have a nice apartment. But you know, deep down, that if you really care about her, you can’t go. You know, this life she wants, it just isn’t possible for you.

“I love you,” she says, and kisses you for the last time.

You call Tyson and tell him what happened, trying to get the story out in a coherent way between sobs. Most of the time, you’re crying so hard you can’t speak.

“Did you drink?” he asks you.

“If I was drinking, we wouldn’t be on the phone,” you say before blowing your nose.

“So, what are you going to do?” he asks.

“I have no idea.”

Light Bulbs

Jon Sokol

Alma carefully backed the Buick in a handicap spot in front of Ace Hardware. She cracked the front windows of the Park Avenue an inch or so. The drive from the funeral home had only taken ten minutes, but she still had to wake Frank up who sat slumped in the passenger seat, a rivulet of drool inched down his creased chin.

“What are we doing here,” he said.

“Light bulb in the bathroom’s out,” she said, opening her door. “Are you staying or going in?” She pushed the button to pop the truck.

Alma and Frank got out of the car and met at the back where they both drew out and unfolded their respective medical walkers. Frank’s was the standard military-issue aluminum type with four tennis balls attached to the feet. Alma’s was a four-wheeler, red with a basket mounted on the front. She placed her leopard print purse in the basket.

“I still can’t believe we’ve lost Hope, can you?” Alma said as the two shuffled through the automatic door. Frank nodded at a grey-haired cashier wearing a red apron. “I mean, it seems like we just had Horace’s funeral,” Alma continued. “And it doesn’t seem that long ago that we went to their Sixtieth anniversary party.”

“They’ve rearranged every damn thing in this store again,” Frank said. He scanned the signs over the aisles, found one that read Lighting and Electrical, and led Alma past the ceiling fans and coils of thick wire. “How old was Hope?”

“She was eighty-eight. Same as me,” Alma said, a little out of breath. “She and I had been in the same Sunday School class since we were children.

“Seems like all we ever do is go to funerals these days,” Frank said, looking over the lightbulb selection. There were LED bulbs, incandescent, florescent, and halogens. He reached for a Phillips bulb that claimed to last for 22.4 years, according to the bold print on the box. “Pretty soon, we’ll be the only ones left.” He put the bulb in Alma’s basket.

At the front of the store, Alma and Frank went to the grey-haired cashier’s line and paid for the bulb. The cashier smiled at Frank. “You probably don’t remember me, do ya?” he said. “You and my dad coached my little league team.” The cashier glanced at Alma. “I guess it’s been a hundred years.”

“You’re Clyde Funk’s boy?” Frank said. “How’s your old man getting along these days?”

“He can’t hardly get around anymore,” the man said. “He’s getting on up in age. He told me the other day that he’s so old, he won’t even buy green bananas.” The cashier gave Alma a wink.

“You tell him I said hello for me, will you?” Frank said, smiling and stuffing the receipt in his wallet.

“I sure will, Mister Blythe. You kids take care.”

Fishin and Whistlin Across the Northernmost Midwest

Sheldon Birnie

"I been thinking lately about the people I meet, the car wash on the corner and the hole in the street, the way my ankles hurt with shoes on my feet and I'm wondering if I'm gonna see tomorrow."

Back a decade ago, most weekends when the weather was fair, me and the boys in the band would head west on Highways 1, 2, or 3, maybe northwest on Highway 10 to play a gig or two. We'd hit the Double Decker in the Wheat City, the Blue Bar in Glenboro, or the WigWam in Wasagaming, or play the beer tent at a community piss up like Hartney Hopper Days, doing a boozy mix of cover and originals. Our specialty, providing a soundtrack to black out on booze.

On the stereo in Woodtick's old Dodge those rides was a trusty country mix CDR. Waylon's *Drinkin & Dreamin*. Country Honk by the Stones. *Fish & Whistle* by John Prine. Shit like that. We'd crack a case of cold Bud heavies once we hit the Perimeter Highway and then keep the pedal to the floor until we rolled back into town on fumes Sunday evening. Good times. We'd even make a little money, now and then.

We'd crash in a tent, someone's dirty old floor, or stay up all night to meet the dawn, wired and reeking of beer. If the gig was near a lake, we'd toss the rods and tackle in the back of the truck. I think we even hauled a boat out to a gig, at least once if I'm not mistaken. It was never about the money, which we'd promptly spend on booze and gas if there was any. It was about the music, and those high flyin good times.

I can't recall if we ever fit *Fish & Whistle* into our set. We did *Nebraska* by the Boss, Hank's *Lost Highway*, some TVZ. We'd do Todd Snider's *Play a Train Song* and some Fred Eaglesmith; still do whenever we get the gang back together and dust off the old amps. But if we never played *Fish & Whistle* on stage, it was always in the mix while we were drinking.

"Fish and whistle, whistle and fish, eat anything that they put on your dish."

One of those summers, we loaded up Woodtick's Dodge, hitched up the boat and drove south across the border, headed for prime Prine country – Peoria, Illinois – to do a little fishin' and whistlin'.

When we got to the promised land, by way of Lake Okoboji, we set out on a pair of flat bottom aluminum boats with a couple Illinois River rats at the helm. Me and Woodtick sat at the back of one, Chips and Squirrelman on the other, each of us armed with a compound bow rigged up with a reel. When the boats really got humming, the vibrations would spook the Asian carp up outta the water. With those slimy bastards flying ever which way, we'd let them arrows loose and, boy, we'd just laugh. Never seen nothin' like it, before or since.

On the way down and back, we stopped off at diners, casinos and beer joints to refuel and try our luck, which we'd push past the limit and then some. Misdemeanors and more may have been committed. A lot of Bud heavies met their end along the way. A few fish too. Prine, he was on the speakers throughout, that steady rhythm, that perfect picking and that midwestern twang marking the miles.

"I'd go to town and drink, give the girls a pinch, but I don't think they ever really noticed me."

Back in Winnipeg, in those days, you had a good chance of catching a Prine tune or two live almost any night of the week, courtesy of plenty of local pickers with more talent and drive than me and the boys ever mustered. Sundays and Wednesdays at the Standard, or the Cavern, and just about any weekend at the Times Change(d) were safe bets. Maybe a songwriter showcase at the Park on a Tuesday or somebody opening for some passing troubadour at the West End on a Thursday. Once in a while we'd even get a chance to step on stage ourselves, though like as not we'd blow it.

Lately, even before these dark corona times come upon us, sussing out a live Prine tune seems harder to come by. Maybe I'm a middle aged dad who don't get out much. But some of the old hotspots for songwriting types just ain't open anymore. The way she goes, sometimes. My liver, at least, is no doubt better for it, to say nothing of my family life or line of credit.

I never seen Prine, I'm sad to say. I was supposed to this summer at the Folk Fest. Guess it

wasn't meant to be. Some things just aren't. And while I know it ain't the same, that's what record collections and old guitars are for, if nothing else.

"When we get through, we'll make a big wish that we never have to do this again, again, again."

Beer and Cancer

Con Chapman

There was a light wind off the water, just enough to turn the tips of the waves white, not enough to make it choppy, as the fishing boat took off from the pier with the guide, the two young boys and their grandfather.

"You're gonna catch some fish today, little fella," the guide—Bubby—said to the younger of the two, while his brother eyed the bait in the bucket. "I guarantee it."

The boy didn't know what that meant but he wanted to catch a fish.

"What kind of fish do you catch around here?" the old man said.

"Oh, all kinds," Bubby said. "Jacks, lotta ladyfish--trash fish not worth eatin'. Snook, snapper. Maybe get a grouper if we're lucky."

The old man looked off down the channel to where the open water lay ahead. "Is it all right if the boys sit up on the deck there?" he said of his grandsons, who had climbed up over the housing of the boat and were sitting with their backs to the cabin glass.

"Sure—we can't make wake through here. Gotta go slow because of the manatees. Nobody gave a you-know-what about 'em until a few years ago," Bubby said to the old man. "Then all of a sudden they're more important than the humans."

The grandfather let out a "Hmph" of agreement, and was silently thankful that the guide had kept his language clean in front of his grandsons. He'd catch hell if he brought the kids home with swears in their vocabulary.

They glided past the houses on the shore, with the guide making a comment every now and then about some illustrious person who lived in one, or some outlandish feature that had been added to another in recent years. The old man took it all in and seemed impressed, but not excessively so. He must have a lot of money of his own, Bubby thought.

As they neared the mouth of the channel the guide knocked on the glass and motioned for the boys to come inside. The grandfather asserted himself in response, calling to the boys to get in the boat for the rougher ride on the ocean. The boys obeyed, chattering to each other, eager to submit to manly discipline on their high seas adventure.

They rode for awhile in silence as Bubby sought out the most fertile fishing grounds. He was sensitive to the tides in a way that the old man, who had fished since he was a boy but mainly on fresh water, was not. They slowed up on the leeward side of a sandbar a football field's length from the shore and Bubby cut the engines. "See them birds up there," he said to the boys. "They know there's fish here." He dropped the anchor, then said "Let me get you guys started."

"Make them bait their own hooks," the grandfather said. The older of the two boys screwed up his face in distaste.

"You don't wanna stick your hand down in there, little buddy?" the guide said.

"No," the boy said quietly as he squinted into the sun. It wasn't clear to Bubby whether he wanted to be fishing, unlike his brother.

"I made your mother bait her own hook when she was growing up," the old man said. "You can learn to do it too."

Bubby knelt down and helped each boy slide a mud minnow on the hook, then showed them how to cast. Their lines didn't go very far out, so Bubby took each one's rod in turn and guided them with a sidearm motion.

"Now let that bait bounce along the bottom, bounce it," he said to the younger, who was reeling in his line quickly. "Slow it down if you want to fool them fish."

Bubby asked the grandfather if he wanted to fish some, and the old man said sure. He pulled a rod out of the tubes that ringed the cabin, and started to get it ready. "That's okay, I'll take care of it," the old man said. He knelt down by the bait box and, with a sureness that his other motions in the boat lacked, got a grub on his hook. Then, with a cast that looked like it was encumbered by arthritis, he sailed the hook a good twenty yards past where the boys' lines landed.

The old man was intent on his work but attentive to his grandsons at the same time. He would cast them a sidewise glance from time to time, encouraging them, telling them to be careful when their hooks neared the boat. After a while the grandfather caught a yellowfin, then the younger boy got a ladyfish, but neither was big enough to keep.

"I think we better try another spot," Bubby said. "I thought the tide would bring 'em in, but they musta gone somewhere else."

They secured the rods and the guide started up the boat again, heading now for deeper water. "There's a reef out here," he said to the old man as he pointed to the screen on the fish finder. The boys gathered around to watch, happy to have an excuse to get in out of the bright sun.

As the boat bounced over the waves the old man allowed himself to stare at Bubby's hat from where he was sitting on the seats, each arm around one of the boys. It had a flap in the back, like the ones worn by the French Foreign Legion. He'd never seen one like that except in a movie or on television.

The guide stopped the boat once they reached a point near the reef, and once again they readied the rods, this time just two, and started to fish.

"That's an interesting hat you have," the old man said.

"Interesting ain't the word for it," Bubby said. The old man was taken aback by the guide's tone, which until then had been deferential and friendly. "I've had two lesions removed from my neck, don't wanna be cut up any more."

"Oh," the old man said, chastened.

"Yep. Bubby don't like spending money on cancer."

The elder boy looked back at him. He knew cancer wasn't a good thing, and wondered why anyone would spend money on it.

"Bubby'd rather spend money on beer than cancer."

The old man smiled wanly. "Sure, I know what you mean."

"It all comes out of Bubby's pocket one way or another. Being a fishing guide don't come with no health insurance."

"No, I know," the old man said, then hung his head a bit and looked away.

"I made my choice," the guide said. "I'd rather be here than sittin' at a desk, or working a drill on an assembly line. I'm out in the fresh air every day, doin' what I love, so you won't hear Bubby cryin' about it. Still, if I have a choice, I'd rather spend my money on beer than cancer."

"Can we have a snack?" the older boy asked his grandfather, and the old man said "Sure." He went to unpack the cooler he'd brought with them, which contained juice and crackers. "Why don't you

get down in the cabin, out of the sun, while you eat,” he said.

“That’s right, boys, you don’t want to get what I got,” the guide said.

When the boys were taken care of the old man climbed back up to stand beside the guide. He wanted to show he was sympathetic, and it was the only thing he could think to do.

Going to the Chapel

Leah Holbrook Sackett

It's one of those moments that doesn't get captured, but it should. It is the apex of video posts on Facebook, very likely to go viral. But there was no one to capture the event. It all went by so fast and incorporated each member of the family. Was there a security camera in the room? Maybe they could access the footage.

Noah looked sullen with a glob of silly putty in his hair, right on top. He was snapping his fingers rapidly. Charlotte had retired from the train table. She was cooing over her American Girl dolls, holding a teacup with her pinky finger up. A mouse was nestled inside the delicate china teacup with the pink roses, a part of her mother's old set. Since they came into money, Hannah had to replace everything she owned. As most of their belongings were hand-me-downs, Corey didn't make a fuss. But he was tired of making runs to the Goodwill donation box.

Charlotte made a bed in the tossed-aside teacup for Minnie Pearl, the mouse. Charlotte was also dressed like Minnie Pearl, with her DIY price tags pinned about her ensemble. She was barefoot, and she put the Silly Putty in Jonah's hair as retaliation for his trying to run over the mouse with his train. His defense was he didn't know the mouse had a name. Hannah entered the fray to see the mouse and dump the tray of Lemonade she'd been carrying. Spooked, she tried to climb up on the train platform; thus, tearing up the tracks. Corey was squat underneath the weight of the platform and his wife, trying to settle everything in place.

This was the Wacaster family.

The Minnie Pearl thing began when Charlotte started watching reruns of Hee Haw on the limited access (Christian channel 24) of the motel room in which they were all living while they waited for a few structural corrections to be made to the regent-style mansion. The House had a name. Hannah was thrilled with this tidbit of trivia. She could hardly believe they were living on the Bluffs of Sweetgum County in The Sweetgum House. Hannah toured this house when she was 13 with her mother on a road trip from St. Louis, a mother-daughter outing. Hannah thought she was going to hate it, but it turned out there was a false wall in the library and a Scooby-doo door in the rec room. The kids were

going to love this place, plus a chapel had been added on to the house after Mrs. Mogensen passed away. They say Mr. Mogensen spent most of his days, taking his lunch there, trying to reconnect with her. He became quite the Arthur Conan Doyle fan.

Corey was waiting patiently to check out with the desk manager of the motel, who liked to pop his teeth in and out in front of the kids. The kids were gobsmacked and tugged at their teeth while walking away to see if they could get theirs out. Corey lingered, making small talk with the motel manager they'd never see again. When he got in the car, he crabbed at Hannah over her water bottle being in his place.

During their first days in Sweetgum, the family had roamed about trying to get their bearings and identify locales for their product. Hannah scared off a few would-be clients with her worn-out appearance. Her assertive tactics and mixed facial signals left the encountered townies put off on Blister Away and the overzealous owner. Hannah looked like a roughed-up victim of domestic abuse (due to her shaky make-up application) In reality, it was the too many unprotected days in the sun, which were wearing out loud on her face. Plus, the tremors were a side effect from her inhaler, Albuterol.

The source of Hannah's wealth was her invention of Blister Away. She invented it out of frustration with her own feet, and it was manufactured, and on the floor of CVS, Walgreens, Wal-Mart, Target, and local hardware stores as quick as Go Fund Me could get to market. It was sold anywhere you can find *Bloody Knuckles Hand Repair*, *Working Hands*, and *Mane 'n Tail Hoofmaker*. This sudden rise in wealth put stress on Hannah, who fought to keep her money in her hands, not her advisors. She didn't know what she was doing; therefore, she was incapable of knowing if anyone was taking advantage of her.

Once they unloaded the boxes and purchased a must-have Harley Davidson for Corey, Hannah took a little time to perform a total make-over of The Sweetgum House and herself.

With the new wiring installed, Hannah did not like what she saw in the mirror. She was preoccupied with the bathroom, a room that did not guarantee privacy, but it was her best shot. She looked in the mirror and stared, her fingers pushing and kneading her puffy flesh. But it would not yield

to her prodding. Her face used to be a flattering heart-shape, but now at 37, it was too round. Fat bulged forth from her cheekbones and curved out to her jawline. Hannah didn't recognize this woman. She tried blending techniques with her foundation, like she saw in a YouTube video. She came off looking like a cheap doll. It was time to refocus on the house make-over.

"I mean, Corey, none of our stuff goes in here. Do you want to go with me to the furniture store, or do you think I should order it all online?" Hannah said.

"I think we should get it delivered and assembled," Corey said, kneeling in front of a Pottery Barn children's bookshelf with screws between his lips and his brow furrowed.

Blasting from Corey's laptop, in Noah's lap, was the 15th round of their NEW Blister Away commercial "Tired of adding pads that don't stay in place? Tired of adding pads to every pair of shoes? Tired of cutting out your own pattern to fit your strappy sandals? Tired of shoe stretchers? Tired of socks that don't go or no-see-ums that don't stay in place, but slip down into your shoe? Then get Blister Away. With Blister Away, just spray your problem area or the whole foot. One application for an 8 hour day. It is found at Amazon, CVS, Walgreens, Wal-Mart, Target, and local hardware stores.

"What do you think of that, babe? Now, we're on Amazon. Hell, you could redecorate two houses," Corey said.

"I hate to ruin your good mood, but tomorrow we are going to start on redecorating the chapel," Hannah said over her coffee cup.

"What? Do you want to pray?" Corey asked.

"No, I want to turn it into a playroom for the kids. An oversized dollhouse for Charlotte and an oversized train station for Noah." Hannah said.

The kids gathered in front of their parents giving direction on how they envisioned the play chapel to be with a kitchen, bathroom, and living room for the dolls. Noah wanted a train platform that could be cranked to different heights as required by the players.

"Could we also have a firemen's pole?" Noah asked.

"Oh, yes, my American Girl Dolls would like that," Charlotte said.

Corey realized he would have to strong-arm the project, keep everyone's schemes in check if it

was going to be practical, and work as a shared space. Hannah had brought a box to the chapel talk. It was an old doll to take up ranks with the American Girl Doll troupe. Charlotte had 14 American Girl Dolls and now Hannah's Nun doll.

"A Nun doll," Charlotte said. "Where did you get it?"

"It was mine as a kid. I wasn't allowed to play with her, in case I accidentally tore her up."

"Can I have her?"

"Yes, I thought she could play with your American Girl Dolls," Hannah said.

"Yeah, she'll be the dorm mom. Thanks," Charlotte hugged her mom with her Nun doll crushed between them.

Noah was standing on his side of the chapel, snapping his fingers. He snapped them repetitively, it was a symptom of his ASD. The more he got agitated, the more he snapped. Corey was afraid Noah would get hurt during construction. Thus Noah was seated in the living room with his Gameboy Switch. It lay inverted in his lap, while he snapped his fingers.

Corey smoked a little pot when he was outside working the table saw. Hannah sniffed his head when he came to bed that night. She tried to be subtle, but it pissed him off, and he smelled like pot. That sniff launched an argument that kept Corey and Hannah up late that night. He rose early the next morning to get into his construction groove without her judgment.

Excited for the chapel playroom, the kids had been playing amongst the construction. While Corey listened to John Prine and Johnny Cash as he worked. Noah was hooked on Fulsom Prison; thus, they listened to a loop of it that went on for days. Fulsom Prison quickly became a stop on the track, much to Hannah's chagrin.

On family bonfire night in the grounds off the west wing, the poor view of the river, but also the least dangerous for falling off the bluff due to a formation of boulders providing a natural fence. The kids toasted their marshmallows, all the while Charlotte kept instructing Jonah how to do it, just to have her marshmallow fall into the fire. Unexpectedly, but welcomed, a pair of Luna moths arrived, not attracted to the climbing flames, but to the scent of the Sweetgum trees all along the perimeter of the estate. In the fading light, the late autumn star-point leaves made kaleidoscopic foliage.

The next afternoon, Hannah accepted delivery of a sofa set, which the movers insisted required an additional fee to move the items into the house. After bickering with the driver, she gave in and wrote a check, to which he proclaimed he only took cash or Venmo. Hannah was about to tell them where they could stick their Venmo, but the sky was heavy with threats of a downpour.

In the case of a tornado, the chapel was the safest place to be. The sirens sounded a hallmark to the pending danger. The kids went with Corey to the sanctuary of American Girl Dolls and Lionel trains. Hannah brought Lemonade to make the experience less scary. While Corey was checking the train table's sturdiness, the unwelcome arrival of Minnie Pearl, the mouse, had come to trespass. Charlotte's overzealous affection for the mouse wreaked havoc and revenge, and Hannah's overboard gesticulations and machinations landed her on the track. Cursing and tears accompanied the pummeled trees weathering the storm, some bent, and some snapped. A massive crash sounded above, but all was peaceful within the family of four. Things like mice, silly putty, pot, and a pretty face didn't seem to matter so much anymore.

Max and Sherri

Alfred Stifsim

The small 20-watt lightbulb in the fan-hood above the stove cast a mellow glow in the dark kitchen as Max leaned against the countertop, trying to convince himself to just go to bed. Listening to the leaky faucet drip into the bottom of the sink in regular intervals, he stared into the darkness of the doorway that led from the kitchen, and envisioned the path through the living room, down the hall, and into the bedroom where his wife Sherri was asleep. He knew the right place to be was lying in bed beside her, but his whole being yearned for the wrong thing.

On the day they met, Max already knew she would be coming; it had been a scheduled appearance by the State of Ohio's welfare department after he'd been fired from his job as an attendant at Speedway for a straight week of no-call no-shows. Truthfully, he got fired after the second day, but he was so strung-out he didn't realize it until he came to several days later, crust in his eyes, skin covered in iron-colored scabs and purple bruises, a needle still hanging from his arm.

Max lowered himself to the kitchen floor and stretched out his right leg. Rubbing at the pain in his knee he laughed about how nervous he was when he first saw Sherri's large 300-pound frame through the screen door. She was the first black woman he'd ever shared more than a few passing words with. It made him even more nervous that he found her kind of attractive.

"You lucky they sent me, a lot of the other girls, they ain't got no time for junkies," she said as she filled out a document on her clear purple clipboard. "Me though," she looked up, smiling at Max with a big pearly grin, "I got respect for you trying to get help for yourself."

Max could feel the heat in his cheeks as his face went flush, the smile warmed him almost as much as her words. "Thanks, nobody's said nothing like that to me before. Especially someone like you."

Sherri's face went tight and she raised an eyebrow at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Max's heart raced, he realized what he'd said sounded bad and tried to explain himself. "I mean like, a pretty woman!" He slunk his skinny body back into the corner of his dirty couch. How could he be so stupid?

She pursed her lips then allowed a smile to quickly return as she flipped several of her long, tight braids behind her shoulder with the back of her hand. "I was just playing. But thank you though."

Max let out a slow breath in embarrassment and scratched at the faded Mickey Mouse tattoo on his lower arm. "Are you gonna drug test me?"

"Why? You want me to watch you pee?" She asked, tapping her pen on the clipboard.

"What? No, I meant—"

"It's alright, I know what you meant," Sherri said playfully. Flipping up the metal lever on the clipboard with a *click*, she pulled a single sheet loose, then snapped the clip back down to tighten it on the rest of the papers. She handed him the sheet. "That's a referral to a drug rehab center. They *will* drug test you there."

Max extended his hand and took it. He looked at the paper then back at her like a child about to ask for candy. "Will you be there to watch?"

Sherri shifted her heavy frame toward him. "Oh, now you wanna be funny?" She asked with a grin.

"Maybe," he replied sitting up with a little more confidence.

"Well, maybe you can do a lot better for yourself than this," she said waving her hand around the dirty living room. Nothing hung from the walls and there were holes busted in the wood paneling. The couch was torn, had vomit stains, and smelled like an old dog, and the carpet had several runs that had been pulled until the plastic grid it was weaved through was showing. "I think you got what it takes to still make something of yourself." Rocking forward to gain momentum she stood up and turned for the door. "I'll be back in a few weeks to check on you." Max jumped up to walk her out. "I did mean that, about what I said. I think you're pretty."

She looked him up and down from his tattered running shoes and jean shorts to his stubbled beard. A small beam peaked at the corner of her lips. "You know, you're pretty cute too. You get your shit together and maybe we'll see."

As he watched her walk to a rusty Buick LaSabre and drive away, Max felt good about himself for the first time in years.

Sitting on their kitchen floor under the glow of that 20-watt bulb, Max leaned his head back against the cabinet door and thought about everything his wife had done for him. When

everyone else told him he was a fuck up, Sherri was the one person who believed in him, or at least she pretended to believe in him. It didn't matter how honest she was when she said he could still make something of himself. Even if it was a lie, she did it because she'd cared. She wanted to give him value. Unfortunately, the only thing that ever made him feel truly valuable was sitting on the countertop above him in an orange bottle with a child protective lid.

A high school football star turned junkie with a bum knee; he'd been good, clean for three years, but with age and weather changes his pain got worse. Alcohol and Advil only did so much, and he was never one for smoking weed. Reaching up to the countertop, Max took the bottle and held it tightly between both hands. His whole body ached for that golden feeling.

Rehab was easy; sitting around in a circle talking kumbaya bullshit, preaching the same can-do attitude while deep down everyone was plotting their next score. Withdraw though? Withdraw was hell. Once you've puked up the entire contents of your stomach and you're still puking, it feels like your whole body is rejecting itself, like it's trying to turn you inside out. But Sherri was always there for him. She'd wipe the bile from his nose and lips once he was finished praying over the toilet and begging for God's mercy, then, laying him down in bed, she would go out and get him a Big Mac and a large Coke.

"I gotta deal with this shit every day at work. I shouldn't have to deal with it at home," she'd say as she put the white and red striped straw to his mouth. She wasn't upset, she didn't cry, she was just disappointed.

Tears in his eyes, Max would squint at her with a desperate, sickly look. "I know, I'm sorry. This is the last time I promise."

And three years ago, it was the last time. He got clean and Sherri eventually helped him get on partial disability for his knee. He was able to still work part time at an old-school auto parts store owned by Sherri's uncle Lewis. Max sat behind the counter a few days each week and filled out the carbon copy order sheets for customers while Lewis gathered parts in the back, always with a cigarette sticking out from under his greying mustache. The whole place smelled of motor oil and stale Camel Lights from Lewis's chain smoking. It reminded Max

of a hardware store his dad used to take him to when he was a kid.

At the end of each shift Sherri picked Max up after work in her rusty Buick and they would enjoy listening to music together on the way home, though they didn't always agree on what to listen to. Max liked old country tunes. That wasn't Sherri's preference.

"You know I don't wanna listen to that racist ass white people shit," she said changing the station. Max sat back and crossed his arms. "Black people play country too ya know."

"Like who?"

"Charley Pride. And Bobby Womack did a country album once too, I think."

"Oh, I do like Bobby." Snapping her fingers, she started to move her head singing, "*Someday we got to be free!*"

Sherri loved R&B from the 80s and 90s. Her favorites were New Edition and Keith Sweat, but as much as she claimed to hate country, the Devil Went down to Georgia *was* a guilty pleasure for her. Anytime the song came on the radio they'd both clap and stop along to that winding fiddle. They were probably happiest in those moments.

From down on the kitchen floor Max looked up at the radio that hung from the bottom of the cabinet next to the stove. He wanted to turn it on, try and distract himself, remind him of those happy times, but the damn thing was broken. Taking the orange pill bottle, Max pressed it to his forehead and exhaled. Why couldn't this destructive need just go away? Why couldn't the pill bottle be filled with the desire to have a normal life and a family?

Five years of marriage and they still didn't have any kids. There wasn't the money for it. Her 30k a year salary and his monthly disability checks along with what Lewis paid him under the table just wasn't enough.

"I ain't about to be a social worker on welfare," Sherri insisted. "What would I do? Make my visits in the mirror?"

Truthfully though, the money was only partially the reason. Deep down they were afraid of what it meant to bring a child into this angry world. All the love they had to give didn't seem enough to offset the amount of hate that would come for its mixed skin. And even deeper down there was always the lingering fear of what it meant to have a father who seemed at risk of relapse at any moment. A

moment like right there with Max sitting on the kitchen floor.

Four gunshots cracked off outside in the distance of the night. Max wasn't fazed. It was pretty typical of Price Hill at 2 o'clock in the morning. It reminded him of one of Sherri's most popular rants: "People wanna call it the hood, but you know what? A lot of families live here. It ain't like their kids aren't scared to go out at night just 'cus they live here. We're all scared. Just because some of us have to live here don't mean we're a part of the problem. There are poor young men out here who got no incentives to do anything besides buy and sell drugs and shoot each other when things go bad. Then the cops get called for shit they got no business attending to. It's my job to help families out, not some Bad Boys wannabe coming in guns blazing over a domestic."

Sherri had one of the toughest jobs there was. Max had seen it firsthand. She put up with a lot of bullshit; from junkies like him to starving families to people dying of cancer. It was taxing and he tried his best to help her relax. He gave her back rubs and made dinners, and every Friday night he took her out to the dollar movies. She was actually the one who drove them since he'd had his license revoked, but he always paid for the movie. They went to the dollar theatre because it was owned by an Indian family and there was always a Bollywood film showing, and Sherri loved Bollywood; for the flashy editing, over the top drama, and, of course, the song and dance routines. Max mostly found them cheesy, but he enjoyed the occasional action sequences.

Tomorrow night was movie night. Squeezing the pill bottle, Max repeated this over in his head, *Tomorrow night is movie night, tomorrow night is movie night*. As the faucet leaked into the sink, he kept on repeating it to the beat of each drop. He had to resist. Standing up, Max turned to the cabinet at the right of the sink, opened it and pulled down a Cincinnati Reds pint glass. Filling it with water he set it on the counter and placed the pill bottle next to it. The flashing of red and blue lights came through the kitchen window as police sirens blared then disappeared in the Doppler Effect along with the roar of a modified Crown Victoria engine.

The white cap of the pill bottle glared at him, begging to be opened. Gripping the lower, orange part with his left hand, Max pressed the cap down, twisting. It came off with a *snap* and he laid it next to

the glass of water. He squeezed the orange plastic so hard that when he looked down into the bottom, it was through a deformed oval shape. The little white pills taunted him, each one calling him names: junkie, fiend, druggie, worthless, fuck up, loser.

Max's hand shook as he listened to their insults. Hot anger rose from the pit of his stomach and spread throughout his body, peaking at his head. Muscles clenched tight, sweat ran from his brow. He thought of Sherri, sound asleep in their bed where he should be too. Looking into the depths of the sink drain, Max shoved the whole pill bottle through the rubber flaps of the garbage disposal and quickly turned it on before he had a chance to fish anything back out. A gritty, hellish noise emitted, like a wild animal ripping at the bones of an old carcass. He kept his hand on the switch until there was nothing but the hum of the motor spinning.

"Why you in here making all that noise?" Sherri was standing in the kitchen doorway wearing her pink nightgown.

Max turned the switch off and took hold of the glass. "I just needed a drink of water."

She looked at him, yawned, and extended her hand to him. "Come on back to bed. You got work tomorrow."

Smiling, he grabbed her hand and followed her back to their room.

Help Wanted

Amanda Coote

They say if you're ever in the Grizzlies, down the southern ridge where the wildflowers bloom and the plains stretch endlessly ahead, you'll see a grave. A few minutes off the trail and towards the top of the peak with a lightning-burned tree, a single grave with a marker carved out of stone. They say sometimes you'll see flowers around that grave, that most folk don't know who puts those flowers there. They say if you keep riding south past that grave, down the mountains and through those plains till the sun sets, you'll reach a town. And if you stop at the General Store and ask, the owner will tell you who that grave belongs to.

This is his story.

~ ~ ~

The boy showed up out of nowhere. One day there he was, mud-coated and sitting at the corner of the street with a tin can collecting coins like the desert collects rain. George Wilson saw him from the window of his General Store.

He watched the boy day after day. A few passing strangers would drop their change into the tin can and he would imagine the clang it made. Sometimes the boy would be eating from a similar tin can, but with the label still on it. Canned peaches or beans or the like, the boy would dig his fingers into the can and spoon out mouthfuls of the food, which he would chew and savor. He was probably skin and bones, underneath those ratty clothes.

A few weeks after the boy's arrival, George took a handful of his goods and went to the corner.

"Boy."

He set the food down in front of the tin can.

The boy looked up at him.

"Go on," he said, pointing to the food. "Eat it."

The boy looked at the pile, then up at George. "Ain't that stealing, mister?"

"Not if I give it to ya." The boy stared at the cans of food but didn't open them. George sighed. "Look, I'll sit down with ya while you eat, okay?"

George sat next to the kid, who paused, then began breaking open the cans with a knife and devouring the contents. When he finished one, he tossed it over his shoulder and worked on opening

the next. George watched, and asked questions whenever the boy was in-between mouthfuls.

"What's your name, boy," was the first.

"Ethan."

"Where're your parents?"

"Gone."

"You got anyone else to take care of you?"

"No sir."

The next day, George took his lunch with Ethan. And the next day. He knew he couldn't keep doing this forever, he was losing money giving away his food, even to someone who needed it. But the way that boy's eyes lit up every day when George opened the door and walked down the dirt road to the corner. He couldn't say no to the shine in those eyes. So he got out his old 'Help Wanted' sign he put out during harvest season when he needed the extra hands. He put that sign up in the window and waited for the boy to take the hint.

He assumed the boy could not read, because after ten days he still said nothing about the sign. So, George brought it up himself.

He walked up to the boy with his usual cans of food and took a seat. He breathed.

"You want a job, boy?"

The boy looked up at him. "What do you mean, sir?"

"I need an errand boy. Someone to help unpack goods, make deliveries. I'll pay you well, give you a place to sleep."

He dug at the dirt with a stick. "I don't know sir. Ain't I too young for a job?"

"It's not that hard. I need the extra hands, and you need to learn how to make an honest living for yourself if you ever wanna get off this street corner."

Ethan thought, looking out at the gunsmith across the way.

"Alright," he said.

~ ~ ~

George was checking inventory when Ethan came down the stairs. It was 2 years since he'd been hired.

Boy was a good kid. Worked hard, but got distracted easy. Whenever he wasn't at work, he ran off to the creek a few minutes out of town and messed around with the other boys his age. George would see them mocking outlaws, using finger guns to rob places and shoot each other dead.

The boy had messy hair like wheat stalks blown by the wind, and blue eyes that always had a glint to them. He was awkward with the change that comes through all young boys. Boy didn't remember when his birthday was, so George didn't know his exact age, but he could figure it was around 12 or 13.

He dressed in a plain work shirt and pants. Was saving up for a shotgun jacket. Wanted to be like all the guys on the Wanted posters, he said. George didn't like those fancies, but the boy was just a kid. He would grow out of it.

The boy watched George tally the cans and boxes of food, bullets, and other supplies.

"This is boring," he groaned, and leaned against a crate that needed unpacking.

"Good, honest work is always boring," George replied, focused on his work. "Only the bad stuff seems exciting. 'Til you see the consequences."

"What? You mean —" he held his hand up in a fist like it was holding a rope and crooked his neck to one side like a hangman.

"Don't play like that. Now go on, you have a delivery to make at Greenfield Ranch, stuff's already in the wagon."

Boy rolled his eyes and made his way out, giving a little 'giddy up' as he got the horses moving. The boy came back from the delivery close to lunch, and George closed the shop so they could eat. He served himself a bowl of stew and sat across from George. While his mouth was still full of rabbit and carrots, he looked up and spoke.

"Mr. Avery said he's getting new horses. Fast ones."

"Mr. Avery just wants to show off his big city wallet. Finish your bite."

The boy swallowed. "He said I could have one, if I wanted. Said he'd give me a 'special discount'."

"Do you have the money to buy one of his expensive city horses?" George knew he didn't. The boy opened his mouth, then shut it and dug at his stew.

~ ~ ~

"Boy? Boy! Get on down here, you got customers waiting!"

George stormed up the stairs, opened the door to the boy's room. He expected the boy to be there, reading one of his adventure novels — those stories about those cowboys and knights riding

around on quests and the like. George was surprised the boy was such a good reader, given he was not much of a teacher. But he was not there, nor was he anywhere downstairs. George knew where to look. He helped the customers needed helping, then took the faster of his horses. Sure enough, the boy was down by the creek at the edge of town, lying face down in the dirt.

"Now what exactly are you doing," George asked as he approached.

"Playing dead."

His voice was muffled by the ground beneath him, so it sounded more like 'Mmmmm mnd'.

"Well quit playing dead and come on, you got a job to do."

The boy lifted his head just enough to be heard clearly. "I can't, I'm dead. Arthur shot me in the back."

Arthur was the son of the saloon owner, a rowdy mess a year or so younger than Ethan.

"You ain't dead yet, now get up."

Boy made some noise, and George picked him up by the back of the shirt and stood him up.

"Jesus, look at you, you're covered in dust," George brushed at the boy's shirt. "Come on, let's get you back to the store."

"But I wanna keep playing."

"That don't matter. Now, I hired you to do a job, I need you to do it."

The boy kicked the dirt and mumbled to himself, "How come I'm the only one who has to work?"

He got on George's horse and they rode back. After he had finished with the day's customers, the boy came back to George, who was busy sweeping the floor.

"Can I go back to the crik now," he asked, eyes wide and glistening with the excitement natural to young boys.

"No," George replied.

"How come? All the work here is done! Ain't no more customers, we're closed."

"You took a break without askin', so I'm making ya work that time off. Now, go make sure everything's restocked."

The boy looked around the storeroom. "But I already —"

"I said go."

"It ain't fair, pa."

The boy turned, knocking over a can. He picked it up and slammed it on the table. George watched. He thought about the fact that the boy had called him pa. Perhaps that was what he was, in a weird way. More than a boss, the boy more than his employee. Perhaps not. He wasn't sure which way it was.

"Ethan," he called out. Boy turned back to him.

"Yes, sir?"

George thought for something to say.

"You keep up the good work like this, you can do anything. You know that, right? Honest work is how you live."

"Yes sir. Honest work."

"I'm trying to help you, grow up into a proper man."

Ethan didn't respond.

For a while after, he always showed up right on time, worked when he was s'posed to. But trying to keep a boy like that all proper and on schedule was like trying to tame a horse that knew nothing but open plains and freedom. With time, Ethan went right back to skippin' out on work, spending his time down in the creek or about town with his little group of friends.

One morning, as Ethan clambered down the stairs to set off, George sat waiting for him.

"Sit down, boy."

Ethan jumped when he heard George's voice.

He turned to where George sat.

"Jesus pa, don't scare me like that."

"Where you think you're going?"

Ethan smiled, knowing he was in trouble.

"Off to tha crik."

"You know you have a job here?"

Ethan rolled his eyes. "Pa, I'm the only boy my age with a job. Can't I just, have fun?"

George felt anger rise up in him. "I am trying to teach you responsibility."

"But —"

"Listen, boy. You are my employee. When employees don't show up to do their job, their employer is supposed to fire them. Now I'm paying you, and on top of that I'm giving you a home. I don't have to be doing all that. Any other employer wouldn't keep you long as I have. So, tell me boy, why am I? Why don't I just fire ya?"

Ethan stared. "I don't know, sir."

"Well, think about it next time you wanna skip work to play with your friends."

Ethan opened his mouth like a fish gasping for water, then slunk away towards the store. After that talk he stopped goofing off as much, only going out once all his duties were done. But things weren't the same.

~ ~ ~

A year later, the Sheriff stood across from George.

"Real sorry to have to call you down like this," The Sheriff said, adjusting the brim of his hat. "But . . . well, you know."

"I know, Sheriff. Take me to him."

The Sheriff nodded and walked out of the store. He led George down the street, past the butcher and the saloon and the hotel and all those other buildings, to the jail. Ethan was in the far cell, lying down and staring up at the ceiling. As the front door slammed closed, he sat up. When he saw George watching him through the iron bars, he shrunk into himself.

"Theft, Ethan," George shouted. "Stealing?"

Ethan looked at the ground. His hands were in his pockets, and whatever shame he was feeling was hidden from George.

"It was just a beer," he mumbled. "Clark dared me. I . . . just wanted to know what it tasted like. I swear, I didn't mean nothing by it!"

The Sheriff placed his hand on George's shoulder. "It's not a big deal, Mr. Wilson. Boy learned his lesson, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Sheriff," Ethan assured. "I sure learned." He stared into George's eyes.

The Sheriff reached for the keys to the cell, which were attached to his belt.

"I just told you so you could come get him," he explained. "We'll let him off with a warning."

"No," George said.

George knew Ethan saw what he was feeling. Shame, anger, embarrassment. All that was in his eyes as he stared the boy down. Ethan knew not to speak.

The Sheriff was more confused.

"What do you mean," he asked.

"Boy ain't learned his lesson yet. Keep him locked up for the night. Show him what crime like this leads to."

"George, it was just a beer —"

"I don't care," He turned to the Sheriff. "You're locking him here for the night, and that's final!"

The boy glared at him, but didn't speak. He didn't say a word when George picked him up the next morning either. George did enough speaking for the both of them.

"Now I'm hiring goddamn criminals," he muttered. "You know how this reflects on the business, boy? On me? Jesus, you think you'd have learned by now. Ain't I been telling you, every day? Honest work. That's the only way to live. You go out stealing again, do you think the Sheriff is gonna let you off the hook? Life ain't stealing beers and playin' outlaws, it's hard work and surviving. You can't keep livin' like a child! You need to grow up, Ethan."

When they got back to the store, Ethan just quietly went to work. He only spoke once, as George walked past him on his way to the register. It was quiet, but in a way where George knew Ethan meant for him to hear it.

"You ain't fair."

~ ~ ~

It was still early morning, before most of the town was up. George came back from delivering ammunition and the likes to a ranch down the way. He'd wanted to get it done before things got much busier. The door banged shut as he entered, and Ethan looked up from the dining table. He had been reading a newspaper.

"Why you spending money on that crap," George asked. The store was doing poorly now that it was between crops.

Ethan looked back down. "It's interesting."

George grabbed the paper from Ethan and examined it. The front page was talking about a band of outlaws.

"What're you doing reading this?"

"It's the Dalton gang," Ethan explained, a familiar glint in his eye. "This says they been spotted at the old cabin by Bluefin Lake."

"And you'd best hope they don't try and cause any trouble in town."

"Sure, sir."

Ethan grabbed the paper back and walked up to his room.

"You gonna do that delivery, boy," George called up at him.

The boy waved his hand. "Sure, sir."

"Boy . . ." George felt he needed to say something, but what he couldn't figure out. "Ethan, I—"

The bedroom door slammed shut.

~ ~ ~

Ethan must have been near 14 or 15 when he stopped eating dinner with George. He'd come and grab his plate when it was ready, mumble a 'thank you', and take it up to his room. He was out later and later, and most nights George would try to sit up and wait, but always fell asleep before Ethan would arrive.

His work got sloppy out of spite, and whenever George would chastise him there was always this strange look in his eyes, like he was proving a point by being yelled at. Like he didn't care anymore what George thought of him.

Adventure books were replaced with new clothes: spurs on his boots, a bandana he wore around his neck. A black vest with red detailing. He was still saving up for more.

George remembered being Ethan's age. Storming off from the ranch as his father yelled after. The smell of the horse shit he had been shoveling so stuck in his nose he'd spend hours in the clean air before he'd be able to smell anything else. Thinking the whole world was against him. Ethan would learn, he would grow up like he had.

Still. There was this strange feeling, looking at Ethan and remembering how it was even a few months back. Wanting it to be that way again.

One night, he drank a few cups of coffee to keep himself awake and waited up, watched the hall with his bedroom door cracked open. He was gonna catch Ethan coming home late. Teach him a lesson. But, when Ethan finally showed up, the joys of the night still on his face, George couldn't be angry. He just saw the child who read adventure books as he lay in bed waiting to fall asleep.

~ ~ ~

Sean Dalton and his men frequented town. They were careful not to start trouble, since they weren't Wanted in the area and wanted to keep it that way. The Sheriff, not eager to start a bloodbath, sat back and waited for one of them to screw up.

The gang spent most of their time in the saloon, but a few of them would come into the store looking for supplies. Ethan was always real eager to

be on the floor when they did, and he would gawk at their outfits and their shiny guns. Sometimes he came out with his own shotgun jacket he'd finally bought.

One morning, as George was getting breakfast ready, he called Ethan down, but got no response. He checked Ethan's room, all over the store. He checked the creek. Nowhere. On his way back, George heard gunshots coming from the distance. By instinct or curiosity or something else, he followed the source to the top of a ridge a few minutes out of town.

Down the other side of the ridge, in a large field. Ethan was standing next to one of the men George'd seen around town. One of the Daltons. Ethan was holding a gun, and the other man was busy positioning his arm, showing Ethan how to angle it just right to fire. George rode down the hill.

"What the hell're you doing," he shouted.

Ethan stared at him. The other man patted his shoulder and walked over to George.

"Boy just wants to learn how to handle a gun," he said, his voice slimy. "Figured I'd teach him."

"Burton gave it to me," Ethan explained. "Giving me a horse, too."

"And what exactly are you gonna do with a gun and a new horse running the store?"

Ethan puffed his chest, trying to look taller and more grown up than he was.

"Maybe I don't wanna run the store," he said.

"You quit sayin' things like that, Ethan."

George wrestled the gun out of his hand and gave it back to the greasy stranger.

"Now," he said to the man, "you're real kind amusing my boy, but he don't want none of your business, so we'll be bidding you good day now." The stranger sneered and tipped his hat. Looked at Ethan.

"Have a good day, son," he said. "You come find me if you ever wanna do more shooting."

George grabbed Ethan's arm and dragged him away. When they were a good distance from the stranger, he let go and turned to Ethan. The boy's eyes were cold towards him.

"What has gotten into you, Ethan," he asked.

"I'm tired of you," he spat. "Never let me have any fun. Treat me like a goddamn criminal just cause I was foolin' around!"

Ethan pushed past him and kept walking. Just as George was opening his mouth to retort, he turned back and continued:

"You hate me an' I hate you, we both know it! But those guys," he gestured towards the stranger they had left. "They treat me like I was one of their own."

George stepped forward.

"Hate you?" His voice broke. "I saved you from starving in the goddamn streets! You think any of your new outlaw buddies would have done the same?"

"Well maybe I was better there! 'Least I had choice! 'Least I was free!"

George slapped him across the cheek. Ethan recoiled, took a step back. He stared at George. George wasn't sure, but he swore he saw tears at the edge of Ethan's eyes. Ethan turned around, marched off into town. George did not follow.

~ ~ ~

"I quit."

Ethan held a bag in his left hand. He had a new hat, George had seen it on one of the Daltons a few weeks back. He wore his favorite clothes, and the gun he'd been shooting a month back was holstered on a belt. He had other gifts — a horse tied up outside, the bag he held his belongings in, a new pocket watch.

Friends.

Family.

Promises given to him by criminals.

George stared him down. "You ain't quitting."

"Yes I am. I'm tired of working for you. I ain't need a job, way Sean tells me."

"And you think Sean is so smart? Think he just knows how all the world works?"

"Oh, shut up! All the bossing. You ain't ever liked me, you ain't ever been kind. They're kind. Let me do whatever I want."

"You think that's kindness?!"

"Kinder than you."

Ethan turned to the door, but George stepped in front of him. He grabbed the boy's shoulder. Tying him down with that grip or protecting him with that hold. what did it matter now?

"I raised you," he cried. "You think any of the fathers here are just gonna sit by while their boys

go stealing and shooting and later on killing and running and dying? I been protecting you!”

“You ain’t my pa! You said as much yourself, day after day. You been telling me what to do and I ain’t gonna listen no more!”

Ethan shoved his way past. Before George could say another word, he had stormed out. George followed, but Ethan was already on his horse.

“Ethan, you get back here. Ethan!”

He just kept riding. George just stood watching, calling out for him.

“Ethan!”

“Ethan!!”

~ ~ ~

Ethan and the gang vanished before George could find them. He searched every day, riding hard throughout the area. He never found Ethan. Never heard anything. Never got a letter. Figured he was dead in Ethan’s eyes.

Ten years of silence passed.

There’d been violence in the area. Always the sign of a gang coming through. George didn’t leave his store much, so he just heard about it from customers. The bounty posters were put up in front of the Sheriff’s place a week or so back. George ignored Ethan’s grownup face staring at him from the paper. He looked so angry. So different. He had a beard. Short and rough. Like he was never taught how to properly shave it.

People talked. Customers who knew him, had known Ethan, offered their condolences. Some said they never could have imagined it happening. Ethan was just a kid, just a sweet little boy with a wild nature. Others said it was unavoidable. Orphans like him have trouble adjusting, usually wind up at the end of a rope.

All the folks who stopped by agreed on one thing: George couldn’t be blamed. He surely did all he could as an employer. Wasn’t his fault Ethan turned criminal.

Wasn’t his fault Ethan’s the way he is. . .

Or was it? As a boy, he’d hated the father who set curfews and punished him too harshly. Yet he became that kind of man towards Ethan. Perhaps he could have tried harder. Perhaps he had made Ethan this way. Perhaps Ethan was just a kid, trying to understand the world and stuck in a dream, and George trying to take that all away too young pushed

him the wrong direction. The more he thought about it, the more the guilt built hard in his heart.

~ ~ ~

George sat down a few months later. Put a pen in his hand and began writing, not knowing if what he wrote would ever be seen by Ethan’s eyes.

Dear Ethan,

I have said many things to you which I now regret. And I fear that those words are what drove you away. Understand that I only ever had kind intentions toward you, though it may not have seemed that way. It has been many years since I last saw you. But I know your face. It’s pasted all over town on Bounty Boards. I hear about you too, in the papers. In a strange sense, you appear to be living your dream. Running around, being free and the likes. In that way, I suppose I must be proud of you. But at the same time, I am ashamed that I could not prevent it. Maybe it is your destiny, maybe I am a lousy father. I do not know which to believe.

I doubt you will read this, but if you do, let me know how you are faring. I hope you have a good life, whatever life it is. That is all I can hope for anymore.

With regards,

George Wilson

Dear Ethan,

I cleaned your room yesterday. Couldn’t get myself to sell anything. It’s all here, if you ever want any of it. Even your books. I have started reading them. A bit violent for my taste, but I can see why you would have loved them.

I have not filled your position. It is still here for you, should you return. I don’t think you will ever take it, but I can hope.

George Wilson

Ethan,

I saw that your gang is on the run. I get worried every time I hear about gang members getting captured by law. I do not know what I would do if I saw your face among the hanged men. Please write so I know you are still well.

George

He sent the letters to all the post offices in the area. If Ethan ever stopped in using his real

name, he'd get them. George doubted it would happen, but he figured he had to try one last time.

~ ~ ~

The time of outlaws and bandits had seemed to spring up out of nowhere. It vanished just as quickly. New law, guys who called themselves Pinkertons, began hiring themselves out to rich folks looking to protect what was theirs. More was civilized and less was open land. Gangs were killed or brought in by the bucketful. The Daltons, and a handful of others, stood strong. But their time was ending. Everyone could feel it.

There was talk of a gang coming through the area. It had been six years since Ethan's bounty first popped up. He was still Wanted. George saw the posters all over. Saw the Pinkertons shuffling about. Many asked him if he knew where Ethan was, figured he might have some clue. He didn't. George refused to hire anyone else. It was strange, though. He still had the 'Help Wanted' sign in the window. Waiting.

One day, the waiting came to an end. He heard the front door open and stepped out of the back room.

There he was.

His beard was gone. His hat replaced by a newer one. The clothes had changed, a new winter coat that still had specks of snow on it from the mountains. His hair was short for the first time in his life. The only thing that was just how George remembered were his eyes. Blue and showing everything in them.

"Ethan."

The boy didn't speak. No, he wasn't a boy any longer. He was a man. Had been for a while.

"What're you doin' here," George asked, stepping towards Ethan and taking his hand. "There's Pinkertons all over, looking for ya!"

"I know, sir, I . . ." Ethan shifted, scratching the back of his neck. "Well, frankly, I cannot say why I am here because I do not know myself."

George looked out the window. This was too open. He led Ethan into the back room where they wouldn't be seen.

"Sit down," he said, and pointed to the desk. "You don't want somebody knowin' you're here and calling the Sheriff."

Ethan stayed standing.

"You don't gotta be so kind to me, sir."

"Quit callin' me that, I ain't your boss. What you doin', coming here with a price on your head?"

Ethan took off his hat. Fiddled with the brim. "You know," he said, "when I ran away, everything was just like my dreams of it. Sean, Burton, all the Daltons. They was my family. I was free and it was, indescribable. But things, they been changing. And I don't know if it's me or them or just everybody. But they been less kind and more cruel and . . ." he took a shaky breath. "I killed a man. I killed many men. And everybody else, they're getting ready to go kill a lot more men over money. And I'm sitting there riding after them, and I don't know why but I just turned and started riding here. I think, I'm afraid."

He looked up at George. George flung his arms around him. It was the first time either had ever hugged anyone.

George moved to his desk, digging through for what cash he had locked in one of its drawers and pulling out a wad of it.

"You did good, coming here," he said. "I got a lot of cash saved up. You and me, we can run away from all this. Find somewhere safe they can never find us."

Ethan shook his head.

"I been running for so long now, I'm tired of it. I didn't come for that. I don't know why I came here. But, now that I am, I just want to apologize. I should've listened to you."

"You don't need to apologize, you were just a boy. I didn't know how to raise you right."

"I got your letters," Ethan said, his voice wavering. "Read them all. Never could get myself to reply. I knew if I did you'd ask me to come back and stay. And I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Loyalty. 'Bout all I'm good for, funny enough. Ethan, the good little boy who never refused an order. I'm a bad man. But at least now I stick to being *something*."

"Ethan," George pleaded, "you can change. Stay, please. "

Ethan smiled, a sad one. "I can't run away again. Not like I did with you. I have to stay, at least 'til the end of this job. Then, maybe. I don't know. Things are changing, maybe the gang will just, split up after this. Most of them're already gone. But I can't be like that."

George nodded. He didn't understand but at the same time, he knew. He held out his wad of cash for Ethan.

"You take this," he said. "Take it and do what you need to, then leave. Don't look back."

Ethan hesitated.

"Take it," George insisted. "Before I change my mind."

Ethan grabbed the stack. He put his hat back on, turned to the door. As he opened it, he looked back.

"I . . ." he said. "I was real foolish."

"So was I."

Ethan nodded and left. George fell back in his chair. He cried. He cursed himself for being so forgiving, berated himself for letting Ethan go risk his life again. He wondered why it had to be this way.

~ ~ ~

The town was in chaos the next morning. Pinkertons and army men raced through after breakfast time. George hadn't seen it, but he heard about it from the folks shopping. As soon as he knew about it, George left his store. He asked the Sheriff where all those men with their guns and horses were going.

"It's," the Sheriff replied. "Well, it's the Daltons. Robbed a train coming through. Up by the Grizzlies. Law's going after them."

George mounted his horse and rode hard. He followed the trail until the sound of gunshots told him which way to ride. But the more he rode, the further away it seemed to move. There was a chase going on. He pressed his horse to move faster.

George started riding past bodies. Horses, people, sometimes both. Law and Outlaw alike, dead. The snow was building around him, white sprayed with red and lines of people buried into it like undug graves. He prayed that Ethan was not among them.

By the time he got to the action it was just about done. There were so many bodies laid across the ground. A few lawmen still stood at the bottom of the hill, training their guns on the remaining members of the gang. One of them he recognized as Sean. George stood at the top of the hill, looking for any sign of Ethan.

Then he saw that one of the Pinkertons was holding a man hostage. George did not need binoculars to recognize who it was.

One of the Pinkertons was speaking to the Daltons, "Sean, the game is up. Turn yourself in or we'll kill you and the rest of the gang, starting with him."

"I'm sorry, Sean," Ethan cried. "They got me. I told ya it was bad business, robbing the train."

"That you did, son," Sean's voice was steady. "Officers, let the man go."

Sean held his hands up in the air, taking his fingers off his pistol's trigger. The other members did the same. The law holstered their guns and the one holding Ethan shoved him forward. Ethan stumbled, and moved toward the gang.

For a moment, it seemed as if the Pinkertons were gonna shoot Ethan before he could cross to his brothers-in-arms. But Sean acted first, bringing his gun back down in a flash and shooting one of the agents. The rest of the gang followed suit. The Pinkertons fired back, but they were easily overwhelmed. Soon, only the gang members and Ethan still stood.

Ethan was sort of cowering, shielding himself from the bullets that had whizzed past. He stood, slowly. Patted himself, turned to look at the dead men behind him.

"Damn, Sean," he said. "For a minute there I thought you was gonna let them kill me —" Sean raised his pistol and shot Ethan 3 times in the back.

Sometimes, people take real long to hit the ground after they been shot. They just stand there like they aren't sure what happened. Like maybe it ain't real. Ethan stood like that, just wobbling and staring. He turned back, stumbled, looked his killer in the eyes. Sean shot again, and Ethan finally fell.

Burton whistled. "Christ, what you do that for?"

"Boy was a traitor," Sean said. "You all saw. Him and the rest of the ones who left when things turned sour. Probably told the Pinkertons everything. He knew the rules. Let's get the money and go."

The men left. Some stared at Ethan's body for a moment, but they all followed. All that was left were followers.

George was frozen. Had been since he saw Ethan in the hands of the Pinkertons. But something in him finally told him to move, and he raced down the hill to Ethan's side.

He was still alive, somehow, but his breathing came hard. Blood was pooling around him, staining the snow.

“Ethan,” George said. “Just, hold on. It’s gonna be okay.”

Ethan tried to laugh, but it came out a wheeze.

“Don’t speak, Ethan. Save your energy.”

George whistled for his horse, tried to lift Ethan. He was a dead weight, but George got him standing.

“We’re going home now, okay?”

He got Ethan onto his horse and started riding. He went as fast as he could, but Ethan wasn’t able to hold himself onto the horse and would start to slide off if any movement was too much. George could feel the warm, wet blood seeping through his back. He closed his eyes, pushed the horse faster.

“You hold on tight, you hear?”

They had to get through the mountains to get back to the trail to town, which made the going even slower. As they reached the top of the final peak, Ethan grabbed George’s arm.

“Stop,” Ethan mumbled. “Stop. Just, hang on.”

George knew. Ethan was halfway off when he stopped the horse. He slid the rest of the way, trying to stand but falling to the ground. George rushed to his side.

“We gotta go to the doctor,” George said, trying once more to lift Ethan up. Ethan stopped him.

“I ain’t making it to a doctor.”

Ethan looked up at the sky. His eyes seemed dimmer, but there was still that little boy on the street corner in them.

George felt a lump in his throat. “I’m so sorry Ethan, I – I shoulda rode after you.”

Ethan turned his head to look at George. “You did.”

“Not now. When you first left. I shouldn’ta let you go. I. You were my boy. You are my boy.”

He knelt at Ethan’s side. Ethan breathed hard before he spoke next.

“You were my pa. I shouldn’ta said you weren’t, cause you were. I wish I had listened. I’m sorry, pa. I was a lousy boy.”

He smiled and took his last breath.

Ethan was gone.

George buried him there. He couldn’t get himself to move the body any further.

He made the marker out of a stone nearby. Took him months, working late hours after closing the shop. He carved in Ethan’s name. He couldn’t put in the little years. He still didn’t know how old Ethan really was. Had been.

When George finally put the marker up, he held a little funeral. Just him and the grave and the empty sky.

~ ~ ~

They say that after he tells you this, the owner will have tears in his eyes. And as you leave the store, you can turn back and see a Help Wanted sign gathering dust in the window. And most will move on, and forget, and die. And that the story may die. But there will always be that little grave in the mountains and the marker with the name Ethan Wilson carved into the stone.

The Sunshine Girl

Mitchell Toews

Evan travelled north, away from town. The intersecting mile roads offered a clear measure of his progress with foxtail and bulrushes standing tall in the roadside ditches like summertime sentries. The tires sang on the soaked highway and the speedometer needle dangled somewhere just below fifty miles per hour.

After a while he grew bored with the sameness of his prairie surroundings and scanned the pick-up's spartan interior for items of diversion. His gaze caught on the large screwdriver resting in a holder mounted to the underside of the metal dashboard. It had a two-tone yellow handle and was the extra-long version: a full 20 inches of heat-treated chromium-molybdenum micro-alloy. It had a "cabinet tip", meaning that the width of the flathead end was no greater than that of the shaft—it was not flared.

The screwdriver was the biggest one they sold at Barkman Hardware. Its handle was the same colour and opacity as the syrup from a can of Del Monte peaches, a favourite of Evan's. The tool's length was equal to his forearm from elbow to fingertip, the shank as thick as a woman's ring finger and made with the Zen-like balance of a Japanese carving knife, providing a firm heft known and trusted. Holding the screwdriver was like shaking the hand of a friend.

No amount of abuse, prying or cursing seemed to deter it or wear the thing out and the only harm that could befall it was loss. *That's where the custom holder comes in*, Evan mused. Two galvanized steel U-clamps were screwed to the dog-chested curve of the dash. It was a single-purpose holster made to order. He always knew where the tool was and if it was not there, he didn't leave until it was found and re-sheathed. It was the sweaty, awkward effort—lying on his back, drilling the holes and fastening the screwdriver holder in place—that made the old truck his and Evan knew that too.

Today was a rainy summer day, tea-warm drizzle from the grey belly of a staying-put cloud that sagged from the sky. The dead-set straight highway shone with a dull sheen as he and the Chevy came up behind another pick-up. Evan could see right away that it was tracking crookedly. Instead of two

neat, parallel tire tracks cut into the black of the wet pavement, there were four tracks; two close together pairs separated by a wider division of glistening roadway.

"His right fender is gonna arrive in ad-vance of his left," Evan monotoned to the interior. By some imbalance, some polio for mechanical creatures, the truck was advancing at a five degree angle. *Dog-tracking* in the parlance of farm vehicles, trotting hounds, and airplanes landing in heavy crosswinds.

He followed along behind the oddly-skewed truck. The cab contained a big, round-shouldered man driving and a narrow, upright-sitting woman on his right. She had shoved herself into the extreme far side of the seat, her arm compressed against the door and her small hat touching the glass. Although the man glanced frequently and sometimes for extended periods at his cab mate, she did not return his gaze. The man, in fact, sprawled and gestured and sent his considerable weight sluicing from side to side like thirty gallons of gas in a fifty-five-gallon drum.

"It's like he's doing the polka with himself," Evan said quietly.

The pick-up Evan trailed was pale yellow—not even yellow but more like melon or September poplar leaf or maybe the shade of a pickerel belly but without the sparkle. *Rusted pretty bad, too*, he thought. The driver's side of the chassis hung like a droopy eye, a hand or so lower than the right.

He was near enough to see the v-shaped dents in the top lip of the tailgate but not quite enough to discern the exact colour of the woman's hair. Honey blonde, maybe. Or, "strawberry blonde," as his cousin Phyllis from Winkler called her own shade. He could tell the passenger was young, thin, wearing a lightweight "go to Winnipeg" jacket, not a farm jacket and that she—unlike the truck she rode in—sat up straight and tall. *Bet her dad is a preacher.*

As they neared the main highway intersection, Evan examined the man more carefully. He wore a John Deere ball cap—the trademark green and yellow made the familiar brand obvious even for a town kid like Evan. The driver moved his head more than his body. He turned and twisted and nodded and canted and craned so much that Evan felt his own neck becoming tired. The fellow was a six-footer, maybe a touch more. Evan could tell that with precision because they each reached the same

point in relation to the rear window in their respective trucks.

The two vehicles took the cloverleaf onto the big road, curling around to the west. They rattled along over the rippling frost heaves on the wet highway, each shifting up through the gears. Evan could see the driver battling with the shift lever mounted to the steering column. “Can’t get her into third...” The International truck, just like Evan’s Chevy, had a “three-on-the-tree” shifter and they could be sticky. That stiff, mashing tendency of the transmission linkages was the reason for the addition of the big amber-handled screwdriver and why it had such a prime location in Evan’s truck. The screwdriver was the tool used to free the gear shifter rods when they bound themselves together like the snakes in Medusa’s crown.

Evan gripped and regripped the circle of the steering wheel. The truck slowed in front of him and the man heaved at the shifter arm with furious vigor but earned no avail—the old corn-binder continued to slow down. Confident that he knew what the trouble was, Evan followed them onto the shoulder. The auto parts his uncle had requested from Winnipeg could stand to be delayed. The shop closed at five, there was still time.

Evan sucked in and held his breath. He held it during the creak of his door opening, the gravel crunch of the shoulder under his boots, and the light tap of his knuckles on the glass. He exhaled and breathed the wild fragrance of rapeseed, now coming into season. The patter of light rain sounded on the truck hood as the driver’s window slid down. A bent toothpick toggled up and down in the man’s lips and he sized Evan up before speaking, regarding him with a slight backward lean of his spine, towards the blonde-haired passenger inside.

“What can I do you for? Looks like you got more to say than a dog stuck down a well...”

“*Goon... Dach,*” Evan replied in hitching *Plautdietsch*—perplexed by the heavily accented, unfamiliar expression the driver had tossed at him. “I just thought I’d check what was wrong. I been following you for some miles here and I’m guessin’ you got a jammed gear shift.”

The man stared blankly at Evan, searching for words. Evan wondered if he spoke any other English or if that opening line was his whole vocabulary. The young woman seemed to be following along. Just then she piped up from across

the truck cab. Her accent was mild and she spoke with the syntax of English sentences not Low German. Her voice was soft and soprano.

“Yes. The gear shifter on this truck sometimes gets stuck. Jake—this guy here is named Jake—gets stuck then too, it’s like they’re twins. Do you know what to do?” she asked, verb-ing her nouns. Jake sat unmoving but for the twitching toothpick. She smiled and a small, sunlit crack instantly appeared in the unassuageable cloud cover in the gray above. Just a crack.

“Sure. Hang on,” Evan said, and jogged back to his truck. He pulled the screwdriver from its dashboard mount. It felt, irrationally, eager to be set to work.

“Just turn it off, please,” he said when back beside the open window. Still immobilized, Jake did not move but the young lady reached across with a slim, grey jacketed arm and counter-clock-wised the key with her gloved hand. The engine quieted with a final quivering jitter.

Evan slipped round to the front and unlatched the hood. He heaved it open, *without a squeal*, he noted approvingly and beheld a spotless, well-maintained engine compartment. He was both surprised and not. *Why should I have assumed that he’d have poor truck maintenance habits? Hell, might not even be his truck... books and their covers.*

“Neat as a banker’s desk,” Evan yelled, bending at the waist to peep through the gap between the raised hood and the windshield. Likewise, Jake and the sunshine girl were tilted forward to observe, like surgical students leaning studiously over a cadaver.

The tangled rods of the gear shifter told another story though. Like those of his truck, these were long, thin fingers of hardened steel—mysterious and arcane in their convoluted mechanical fluency. They connected from the steering column post and down to the transmission and articulated the shifter’s position in first, second or third gear to the corresponding location on the three-speed tranny below. The two heaviest, longest rods were locked against one-another. With a practiced probe of the screwdriver’s lone, flat tooth, Evan slipped it into the criss-cross clench and levered.

“*Puh-whang!*” sang out the gear rods as they released in an ecstasy of metallic relief. Separating like uncoupled lovers, they vibrated for a brief

moment then sought their own private space near one another.

“You can grease it up a bit, right here,” Evan hollered, pointing for the driver’s sake. Jake’s narrowed eyes followed the pointing screwdriver tip. Hands drumming on the steering wheel, he nodded, coming out of his trance now that the truck had. The young lady paid attention too, leaning forward from the waist, her slender neck extended.

Evan slammed the hood shut and returned to the side of the truck. *This guy’s a little old to be taking advice from a young buck—a Scheckbengel out running errands— like me.*

Jake started the engine and it idled with a smooth complacency; the transmission’s truculent behaviour apparently being outside of the motor’s direct concern. Foot pinning the clutch down, the big-bellied man shifted through the gears a few times and they did not quarrel.

With some rubs against his shirt, Evan made sure the screwdriver shaft was clean and then nodded at Jake. He was turning his gaze to the woman— *Who is she anyway? His daughter?*—when suddenly Jake blurted out, his shoulders hiking up as he did so, “I’d like you to meet my wife... my *Frü*, or that’s what she’s anaways gonna be, once we get there to Winnipeg.”

Neck muscles straining, Evan kept a straight face. He stuck his hand in front of Jake and, in a neighbourly voice, said, “Congratulations! My name is Evan Holthacka and I’m glad to meet you and your fiancé.” Jake shook heartily but when Evan reached further across to congratulate the bride-to-be, Jake grabbed his arm and packed it back out the window.

“Here, you can have that back now. We’re da Schmeatums. I’m Schmeatum... Jake and this here is gonna be Mrs. Schmeatum— Mrs. Jake P. Schmeatum, to be pacific,” he said with a serious look.

As Evan started to walk back to his truck, Jake whistled and said, “Hey, Holthacka! If you wanna steer behind us ‘til we get to the Justice of the Peace, in case we get all hooked up onder the hood again, that’d be a good plan... Or you can just borrow me dat *Schrüwendreia*, once.”

Now it was Evan’s turn to freeze, so stunned was he by Schmeatum Jake’s overly familiar suggestion. Also, *Justice of the Peace? What’s wrong with a church wedding? And... take my screwdriver?*

What if my gears jam? Off balance, he quickly regrouped. It was, after all, in so many ways an opportunity to do what Jesus would do: It was the Golden Rule, it was the law of the open road, and a modern day expression of good Samaritanism all balled-up into one beatific act.

But saving him, just as he was about to sputter out an unhappy *yes* to Schmeatum Jake and risk his beloved screwdriver’s fate—forever, he feared—Mrs. Schmeatum Jake-to-be spoke up.

“Oh, *nayyy*, Jake! We couldn’t *impose* on this young man’s generosity by taking his obviously new and expensive screwdriver. What if we, on accident, were to forget to return it?” She wagged her head in exaggerated, school-marm dismay. “*Oh, bah nay!*”

As she spoke, she moved away from the grasp of the far door and angled her torso slightly towards Schmeatum Jake and Evan, her lips moist and... parted.

“Sure, sure,” Jake allowed, and fumbled with the gear shift lever. “Jost follow us,” he called to Evan, his eyes never leaving those of his betrothed.

Evan gave him a thumbs-up gesture and made a friendly wave to Mrs. Schmeatum Jake. He noticed as he did so that her lips were pink, her cheeks a smooth rosé and her blue eyes were large, complemented by feathery lashes, dark and curved. As he committed her facial features to memory a ray of sunshine glanced off the truck box. He was bedazzled.

“Starla Grieves,” she called out. Evan heard her say it and stopped. Schmeatum Jake pumped the window shut, grunting with effort.

Then he heard a click. He saw Jake’s head, nodding emphatically as he spat words out in a hissing whisper. The driver door was open a quarter-way with Jake gripping the inside handle.

“None of his beeswax, anyhow!” Jake concluded his speech, before pushing the door open to the limit and heaving himself out, eyes flashing at Evan.

“Thanks for all da help, eh?” Jake said, coming up to where Evan stood, part way between the parked vehicles. The toothpick clung to his lower lip as he spoke. He was, at close range, several inches taller than Evan. His girth, a full barrel that wrapped his torso from shoulders to hips, was the difference-maker though. Evan was still teenage thin, his shoulders boney knobs with matching

protrusions at the elbows, wrists, and knees. A body in youth—unfamiliar with and unconcerned about pain and damage and harm. This knotty, angled frame knew only health and virtue, driven by a nearly spotless true intent.

“Sure, no problem.”

“My *Frü* dere, she didn’t mean nothing. I mean—like—you get it that we’re engaged to me married. Like, for serious.”

“Yeah. You said.” Evan took a step back. Jake had pepperoni breath. A half-eaten Hot Rod stuck up from his shirt pocket like a pencil. Shifting the screwdriver to the opposite hand, Evan moved back to where he had been. Or maybe a bit closer. “I heard you.”

“Okay, den. Jost wanted to make sure we were clear as day on that part.” He put his hands in front of his chest. With a light, smacking sound, he tapped a round fist into the palm of its partner. “Good to be clear, Holthacka. Don’t want no pecking around, what’s not called for.”

The truck door slammed with a tinny clang. Knobby rear tires spun up a skiff of gravel, scattering white stones into the grass of the ditch. Slowing, picking its way over the loose rock of the shoulder, the truck crept forward until Jake was sure of the footing and accelerated into the westbound lane.

Her head was turned, looking without reservation in his direction while they pulled away. As the vehicle shrank from view, Starla Grieves waved a white-gloved hand at him through the rear window glass, fingers fluttering like a bird on the wing.

He paused, watching their departure. As Schmeatum Jake reached the shift point for third, Evan heard a familiar, grinding, steely squall. The summer sun, as if in anticipation, emerged in full glorious adornment to flood the prairie in golden-amber light. Evan pivoted on the ball of his foot and sprinted back to his truck with the screwdriver held like a baton.

“This time my *Schrüwendreia* ain’t gonna be able to help them out,” he said to an attentive red wing blackbird on a swaying bulrush stalk. “Those two may have to postpone their nuptials... one of them may have to take a ride straight back to town with me!” he said, seeing only blue eyes, blonde hair, and white-gloved fingers, delicate and long.

End

Flashback Blues

Dan Fields

Maddie couldn't stand smoking menthols, but in her agitation she'd bought them by mistake. It was too late to turn back. The rain was getting worse, and she felt bad enough as a fugitive without becoming a castaway.

She gagged on the sickly mint-green taste of the smoke. "Shit piss BASTARD!" she cried, driving her fist into the horn. The cigarette burned a tiny unsightly hole in the vinyl, defacing the Chevy logo. Annoyed by a pang of guilt, she mashed the butt to particles with the heel of her hand, packing ash into the cracks where it couldn't be picked out. The horn wailed in protest.

Maddie was angry with herself, not the stoned and possibly colorblind teenage clerk who'd grabbed a pack of greens when she asked for reds and a lighter. She'd borrowed her brother-in-law's pickup without asking and driven ten miles in flood conditions for a nicotine fix. Now she didn't want the smokes, but there was no way Ron and Leigh-Ann wouldn't find out she'd been gone. Maddie's older sister was quick to take offense on behalf of her easygoing husband. She channeled their mother's disapproval like a topflight Ouija board.

To ground herself, Maddie cranked up the stereo. The CD in the player crooned mournfully against the roaring storm. She'd heard "Angel From Montgomery" on a dozen jukeboxes, but otherwise didn't know one John Prine record from another.

*(last Monday night I saw a fight
between Wednesday and Thursday over Saturday
night)*

It fit her state of mind well enough. She'd arranged a weekend visit at her sister's with the best intentions, hoping to catch up on overdue conversations and get moral support on her first serious attempt to quit cigarettes. She'd made it through the first twelve hours, and had only called her husband Jason for a friendly check-in.

*(you got news for me
I got nothing for you)*

Three rings, picked up halfway through the fourth.

"Hey stranger," Maddie purred, "Mama's getting clean. Going nuts without you."

"The hell is this?" murmured a sleepy petulant voice. Female.

Maddie knew she hadn't misdialed. She'd never taken a gut punch before, but she rolled with it, cool and philosophical. *Bitch picked up Jason's phone. Thought it was hers.* Maddie hung up, counted ten seconds, redialed.

Four or five rings. Jason picked up. Not cagey. Bombed. The mistake hadn't registered.

"Hey..." said Jason in his Everybody's Pal voice, the tone that got him in trouble. He sounded pleased to hear from her.

"Jason," Maddie's voice trembled, "where are you?"

"Aw, hon... I'm just a damn mess with you gone. You know that." A bump on the other end of the line, someone else moving away from the phone. Maddie knew the sound of sheets rustling.

A recriminatory shitfight had ensued, culminating in the high-speed impact of Maddie's phone against Leigh-Ann's laminate floor.

*(don't pin your blues on me
just go ahead and do whatever you wish to)*

Leigh-Ann did her best to offer loving sympathy, but lacked what her little sister truly needed. The house was tobacco free. Maddie had even surrendered the emergency pack from her glove compartment. Leigh-Ann might have allowed her one of those, but they'd been ceremonially flushed. They had to settle for getting mildly drunk together.

Although the evening ended on a docile note, Maddie had come to after midnight with a savage craving. Watching the VCR clock flash 12:00 in the dark of Leigh-Ann and Ron's cramped spare room, she battled insanity.

(oodles of light, what a beautiful sight)

She'd chosen Ron's truck because it was last in the driveway, his keys on the kitchen counter with the mail. No sense waking her hosts to witness the folly of her cold-turkey attempt. She hadn't noticed the rain until she was on the road. The Marlboro

Man had called her from fitful, miserable sleep. Certain biochemical forces took no shit from Mother Nature.

(both of God's eyes are shining tonight)

It came down to a question of control. Jason had none. Unsupervised and lonesome, he drank. Got sloppy. Flirted. Together, he and Maddie supervised each other just enough to avoid major injuries. Only in her absolute nightmare scenario would he have gone home with a stranger on purpose. She had to believe he wasn't bad, just a baby who needed constant watching to keep him from touching the stove. Rage had a bitter savory appeal, like coffee that scalded the tongue, but Maddie resisted it. She stood a chance of forgiving an irresponsible slip. Calculated, malicious infidelity was different. She'd never make peace over that. She'd kill him.

A fist of grief pushed into her stomach, the fear that it was all screwed and she just hadn't accepted it yet. Like coughing with a bruised rib, or the warning tingle before a back spasm - a constant cringe, wondering how much the next pang would hurt.

Maddie could never have ended up with someone like Ron, a dull dealer in small engines, but neither could she fault Leigh-Ann's lack of imagination in choosing him. He was pliable and trusting as well as hardworking, affectionate, loyal - the qualities of a wonderful hunting dog. They had two sweet kids who Maddie wanted to get to know better. Without Jason around, maybe Leigh-Ann would be open to that. Jason was a show breed, sleek and pretty but crucially lacking the willpower to check his high spirits. Those qualities charmed and excited Maddie. He'd come along when she needed him, as her Daddy and Momma reeled into mutual decline. The appreciation, sex appeal and good times Jason offered had liberated her from family melodrama, from Leigh-Ann's well-meaning but overbearing scrutiny, and from general expectations that she'd meet and marry a sensible, reliable man who was no damn fun.

Maddie clung to an abiding faith in the existence of an honest, intelligent, reasonably handsome man who was not a wimp, a junkie, a pervert or a high-functioning psycho. She also believed without embarrassment in demonic

possession, life on Mars, and the strong possibility of mermaids, though she'd never seen any of those things either.

(rays and beams of incredible dreams)

Answering some hostile psychic cue, the rainfall doubled in volume. The windshield looked like full buckets were running down it. The ditches brimmed. Water crept over the road. She needed to get home, not just to face the music but for genuine safety reasons.

Landmarks were indistinguishable. Maddie couldn't read the white blur of a speed sign. From the interstate it was less than eight miles to a stoplight, then two more miles to Leigh-Ann's driveway. The local filling station left the pumps running late for credit card customers, but not so much else as a working Coke machine. This is why Maddie had to drive to the big highway, where a little truckstop village kept the lights on all night, to buy cigarettes.

(small town, bright lights, Saturday night)

In daylight the drive was nothing much - pasture land peppered with dreary establishments. A semi-defunct paintball course, looking like an abandoned summer camp where chainsaw killers cooled their heels. Cranmer Tool & Die, which employed Leigh-Ann as a receptionist. A quaint country plant nursery which also sold grisly Jesus-on-the-cross pictures in homemade stained glass. A dealer in above-ground pools (last decade's models). Painted signs for people who cleaned industrial pipelines and drilled artesian wells. Now all Maddie wanted was a lit window where she could park and ask for shelter. With her phone broken back at the house, she wondered whether Leigh-Ann was up and frantically trying to call her.

*(but dreaming just comes natural
like the first breath from a baby)*

A black truck startled her, drifting sideways through the curtain of rain to her left. It overtook her with ghostly persistence, forcing her to brake or risk collision, and settled into the lane ahead of her like a fat man on a barstool.

From what she could make out it was a midsize pickup, ten or fifteen years old. Its condition was what Daddy would've called "fair-to-lightly beat to shit." The phrase had earned him sour looks and swats on the elbow from Momma, which only amused him. That flash of mischief was the Daddy that Maddie missed.

*(hot love, cold love, no love at all)
a portrait of guilt is hung on the wall)*

Jason drove a metallic-red Toyota, and Maddie didn't know any friends who might have lent him their black pickup truck for the night. Then again, she didn't know all of friends. Even with the odds against it, she could imagine several carousing scenarios where he'd accepted a ride, got stranded without his wheels and begged a loaner off a pal when he realized he'd pissed his marriage up a wall. Could Jason be driving the black truck? Was there a chance he'd braved a flash flood, still drunk, to try and make amends in the middle of the night? More likely to get his ass kicked for pissing on Ron's front porch.

*(stranger in the closet, lock the diary
The past is running faster, singing harmony)*

No, she assured herself. The black truck was a stranger. It slid left, a telltale drunk-motorist lurch that flipped her stomach. Time to get off the road, pronto. She nudged her speed to pass, worried about skidding. She squinted ahead for oncoming lights, barely seeing the black truck swerve. They almost crashed but Maddie caught the brake, slipping back into position. She couldn't risk the northbound lane on a blind curve. The only evasive direction was into the night and the climbing floodwater.

*(the whole town saw Jimmy on the six o'clock news
his brains were on the sidewalk and blood was on his shoes)*

That line was just about too much, but Maddie had to keep both hands on the wheel so there was no choice but to let it play.

"Shit fire," she muttered through tight lips, and waited. Prine in his mercy wrapped up the maudlin song and a livelier one took its place.

*(while window shopping through the past
I ran across a looking glass)*

The black truck centered itself over the dividing line. If it wasn't so clearly a blood alcohol problem, it might have been a nasty game. Despite similar predicaments in the past, Maddie had never been so close to true danger - her perverse guardian angel taking a night off. She cut her speed, but the black truck wouldn't pull ahead. Once normal senses clocked out, the limbic system took the wheel.

(reflecting moments remaining in a burned out light)

The stranger sensed her without consciously registering her presence, creeping and shifting to keep her low-beams as a reference point. One ill-timed punch of brakes and she'd sail right into him. The lot next to the Grab-n-Guzzle, where Maddie bought the wrong cigarettes, had a row of old storage units converted for commercial use. One was a scummy icehouse forever crowded with motorcycles and work trucks, advertising Mixed Martial Arts and wet t-shirts. The slatted metal door was broken, only rolling halfway up, so patrons had to duck under it. Giant picnic fans hummed in place of air conditioning. Management maintained an exclusive atmosphere with stenciled block letters above the entrance, "Proper ID Required or SHOW US YOUR TITS!" That was where the night must have started for her friend in the black truck - beers and shots to wait out the rain. Maddie had enough years behind a bar, and in front of one, to know the type. Easing home wasted four nights a week. Lefty Frizzell on the radio. Not hurting anyone, especially on rainy nights when nobody sober would be out driving.

*(tragic magic prayers of passion
stay the same through changing fashion)*

The black truck wavered off the center line, drifting back before Maddie could act. She leaned on her horn. The black truck tapped its brakes twice in cryptic reply. Maddie drifted beyond frustration into furious fear. Logic reassured her that it couldn't be Jason, but the mere possibility incensed her. If it were him weaving in front of her, oblivious to danger, could she have summoned the will to run his butt off the road and teach him something about the

common good? And if it was some poor old anonymous drunk, would that change how she felt?

(freeze my mind like water on a winter's night)

Jason wasn't mean or violent, only careless and horribly, horribly inconsiderate when his hands were off the controls. She'd let a little drunk driving slide when he acted sorry about it, because she was no model of perfect behavior. She was beginning to realize her mistake. Rafting down the highway at the mercy of dangerous water, about to wreck her harmless brother-in-law's livelihood for a pack of unsmokables, how different was she from the garden-variety road alkie, too hung up on her troubles to keep out of harm's way?

Maddie fell in love with cigarettes at fifteen, the age of love eternal. She had no interest in giving them up for her health. She knew the risks, but the self-important mewling of the anti-tobacco lobby only made true smokers want to flaunt it more. Nothing, not a T-bone steak or a bottle of fine wine or the first cool autumn night or the world's best sex - five years ago on her second date with Jason, blitzed on silver tequila during a Dwight Yoakam show - none of these would be as rich and fulfilling without a pleasant smoke to conclude it.

The only reason Maddie could work her way around to quitting would be to make room for a new member of the family. She'd been on the fence about motherhood for a while, but had nearly worked herself up to pitching Jason on the idea. Going smokeless was laying the runway, and she hadn't expected instant results. But what had become of the project now? She wasn't a willful public menace, but she'd picked a bad time to quit and it seemed she might have picked a bad prospect to quit for. All she had was a load of shit on her hands.

Maddie mashed the horn, cursing monsters and the dark. She punched the accelerator, bearing left, and nearly made it. Her rear fender clipped the black truck's driver door, and both trucks began planing over floodwater toward the right shoulder. Just before Maddie sped clear, the black truck whipped around and spanked her tail to tail. In the heart of the spin, time went slack and spread out awhile.

*(photographs show the laughs
recorded in between the bad times)*

Leigh-Ann had always been the example sister, Maddie forever falling short. Not bad, just unfazed by punishments for her frequent small acts of disobedience. So often was Leigh-Ann held up in contrast that Maddie considered her incapable of defiance.

The exception had been Frank, Leigh-Ann's first boyfriend - seventeen with rich parents, a beautifully restored Mustang, and (according to Daddy) a small fortune's worth of ego without a nickel's worth of pride.

Leigh-Ann had been fourteen. Not for the world's best-groomed, most polite seventeen-year-old would Momma and Daddy have allowed their courtship, let alone an entitled punk like Frank. He'd already taught Leigh-Ann, raised on delayed gratification and goodness as its own reward, the sweet flavor that parental disapproval gave to young love. Maddie, still in grammar school, marveled at the things neighborhood mothers whispered about her sister.

(happy sailors dancing on a sinking ship)

Frank had totaled the Mustang and his teenage body before age eighteen. Just before winter vacation, Leigh-Ann got caught sneaking in late against Daddy's explicit orders. Hearing the argument from under her blankets, little Maddie feared murder. Leigh-Ann insisted that although she'd gone out to see Frank, she'd had a change of heart and come home before the rendezvous.

Daddy and Momma shouted Leigh-Ann down, demanding the truth until the phone rang. The highway patrol had found Frank and some of his dickhead friends mashed under the car in a drainage culvert. Some neighbor was making sure Leigh-Ann hadn't been involved. Leigh-Ann was exonerated, but the worst had already happened. Her parents' fury, compounded by tragedy, formed a little scar on Leigh-Ann's heart.

*(ten times what it grieves you,
that's how much more I hate to leave you now.)*

The model student's first rebellious impulse had ended the world, as she saw it, just in time for Christmas. With high spirits permanently strangled out of her, she'd accepted a straight path to domestic contentment and a general avoidance of trouble and

fuss. Nobody put similar pressure on Maddie, least of all herself, and wild times were to come. Until tonight, she'd handled life's dips and sharp turns with skill.

*(all I got for proof
is rocks in my pockets and dirt in my shoes)*

Ron's truck spanned the highway diagonally, stopped and out of immediate danger. Maddie could drive on as soon as she felt ready. She saw the black truck's taillights pointing skyward, like the screws on the *Titanic*, the cab half-submerged in the flooded ditch.

(goodbye, non-believer)

There was no telling whether the driver door could be opened, provided the driver was conscious.

(don't you know that I hate to leave here)

Maddie thought about Jason, sleeping it off somewhere warm and dry, ignorant of the scapegoat sent in his place. The stranger needed help, the sooner the better, but Maddie needed another minute to gather her thoughts. The sky growled with fresh thunder.

(so long, babe)

Somehow, though it seemed impossible, the rain started coming down a hell of a lot harder.

Hearing Double

Lance Mason

As a boy in the careless California of the Fifties, I didn't want to know any hard truths if they were alien to the seamless and uncluttered fun in the day-to-day life of a 10-year-old. Yet my mother told richly embroidered tales of my father's brother Clyde, a ghost I never met, playing semi-pro baseball in the flaring '20s and threadbare '30s of the American Century. Those fables fit a child's paradigm for life's untroubled flow, as did Uncle Clyde's fabled ability to read a deep drive to center from the crack of the bat. But other family rumors, lean in detail, of my father breaking him out of prison, did not jive with that view, so when my first question to my father about this met with gracious evasion, I never pursued it. Ignorance was, if not bliss, then out of harm's way, at least.

This was often the pattern for family memories when I was young. The fear, hard times, and heartbreak of the Depression, followed by WWII's battles and death, did not invite easy reminiscence. If a story told of a relative, a close one, behind bars, it wouldn't have had much playing time around the post-war dinner table. If true, it wasn't an ensemble cast or set of events parents would've enthused over, or even revealed, if it could be helped.

My two older sisters, born in the '30s, and closer to my mother's family than my father's, had no interest in baseball. To them, Clyde was a phantom, a cipher. Bitsy, the third child, was an unreliable source, born to torment the truth at every turn. Sheila, the last before me, does not embrace dishonesty, but organizes her memories with an egg-beater. My father, in the Navy 1922-46, was often away at sea, while my mother kept the house for an expanding brood, and had no truck with foolishness. Where was a boy from these roots to find his facts on a convict uncle?

When it comes to recollection, even a sharp mind's memory can feel disordered, roaming to and fro, episode to episode with a tweaked, even bent, sense of time and timing. And here there are at least four minds—and memories—at work: mine, my mother's, my father's, and Clyde's. Hence, ferreting mixed with imagination must be factors in the telling,

guided by a history of the times, so it makes sense to let Clyde tell his own story.

* * *

"Down in South Georgia, red clay is baseball. It's the ground for our game, grass being sparse inside the base paths. A bit more in the outfield, 'less it's killed by moldy pine straw." A Northern sports reporter, with his small town's small-time paper in his hand, is asking me about baseball down home, and I try to rise poetic to his questions, telling him how, when that clay infield is rain-weathered and smooth from use, the ball bounces true, but not when it's ridged and rutted from wagon tracks and horses' hooves, or riffled from spring rains backed by drying winds. I'm not worried about what I say since more than a few hundred will neither read what he writes nor know who he was talking to, certainly no one down South will, so I keep talking.

"Down in Alabama, Gadsden way, where my people hail from, we didn't have ball teams much, and the swamps and forests and wetlands didn't help the sport at that time, not like now." I tell the reporter that Stone Mountain, Georgia, where my folks settled a home, had a ball field on the north edge of the town common, a long peg from the Methodist Church, Mother's place of worship. He puts it all down, how once we came into Georgia, with the red soil and Ty Cobb and the amateur and semi-pro-leagues, we got a look at the game for what it was, pure joy and science, and how, on those warm, clear days of summer, we'd break down our hitting and fielding to the finer points.

I don't tell him that Emmett and Eugene started us off, putting together some pop-bottle and paper-route money for a mail-order ball from the Sears Roebuck in Atlanta. Father was away quite a lot doing railroad work, and we children—young Dan, Dorothy, myself, Lance, Teresa, Gene and Emm, as we called them—didn't dawdle, but rather found our pastimes close to home. For the boys, me especially, that was baseball, and I tell that to the paperman, but I don't give him any of these names or family details, for reasons you'll catch on to.

"We call it *baseball*," I say, "but it could be *batball* because, along with the ground, the bat is at the heart of it." The beautiful action of the game—the throwing, running, catching, the pitching, even the balls and strikes—it all swings 'round the hitting, 'round the bat. "Without that, it's just another game with a ball." Still, I reckon the name won't change.

Then we talk about these bright boys down in Louisville getting famous for the bats they sell, mostly ashwood, and I give him my take, that some players fancy harder woods, some softer, some heavier, some lighter. "Mine's sycamore, with a thin-ish barrel and stout handle, and I get pretty good whip on it when I hear a pitch I like." More about that later.

Along with my fielding work, hitting fills out my game, and I ain't alone, I say. "As good as Mr. Cobb's field game was, his batting put him tops in the league, and Ruth once had good stuff as a pitcher, but now here in the Thirties is famous for his bat."

#

It's 1927, the year Babe Ruth will hit 60 home runs. Our team, here in South Georgia, sits on the bench in front of a low wood sign for Uncle Junior's Biscuit Flour, and that's us, the Vidalia Biscuits. Seems like a childish name for grown-up ballplayers, but this here's biscuits-and-gravy country, and if selling some of that pays the owner's bills and lets us play ball for a little money, yours truly Clyde Masters ain't complaining. Still, it'd be good to have a big-league dugout to keep us out of the sun between turns at the plate.

From the bench I look across to the infield at the visiting team crouched for play. As kids, we called it sandlot ball, and still do, but our infields are that same red clay, dried out and ground up, then tromped over by Bub Hewitt and his mules after the rains, plowing it up in clods, and then rolling it down into packed, red sand. After that, since there ain't no groundskeeper, it's on us players to look after it, keep the kids off it, and the dogs and their mess, and to clear the gophers from the outfield grass. It's our ground, you see, where we play.

When we take the field, DeeJay mixes his deliveries—the heater, a screwball, and the “leaver,” a pitch of his own. Bobby Uttick brings him in a few tufts of outfield grass, and Deeje stows them in his glove or cap, where they get sweaty for extra action on the hide. Pinching a few leaves of wet grass between the ball and his second finger, he gets some slippage on the pitch, and when he lets go the flying grass distracts the batter. By the top of the third, he's throwing little white pills, plus the leaver. If the Pilots get any hotter under their jerseys from the frustration of not hitting any of what DeeJay's serving up, there's gonna be a fist fight.

This is country baseball. Minor league, farm systems, semi-pro, call it what you like, it's a stew of

them all, with some of our clubs attached to big-league teams, some independent, some part of the small leagues in their districts, and some flying by the seat of their pants. Pay ain't regular, and sometimes not at all, even when promised.

Father works as a brakeman and signalman on the South Atlantic Line Railroad, mostly regular work, but not union here in Georgia, so the bosses run the show and the pay, and we seven kids grew up knowing the thin end of meals. Still, James Sinclair, a top man with South Atlantic, was involved early in organizing baseball in the South, so when he got word that the third son of one of his workers' knew his way around the ball field, someone came 'round to talk to me.

I was maybe fourteen, batted lead-off most games, still do, and got on base pretty regular. I had an eye, and not much hittable got by me, like now, specially in the clutch. I caught centerfield due to my speed, which most folks think comes from my feet, but actually comes from my ears, as does my hitting. It began about then. At the plate, batting left, I'd have my hands and bat right back to that shoulder, then I'd crouch and rotate right just enough that both ears were aimed at the pitcher. This made use of something Father knew from working the rail lines.

"Children, I can tell you where a train's goin' just from the pitch of its whistle." He'd tell us these stories at the table or out on the back veranda after Sunday service. "If I've got the train's sound, the rise and fall of its screeches, or its thumping through the rails, I can read speed and direction long before I can see that locomotive comin' round the bend." I told this at school, and the Blueton boy called me a liar, but Miss Plattbury said it's true, what the whiz kids call the "doubler effect," which I figured doubled your ability to predict the speed of something from its sound. I felt pretty good then, but Jonny Blueton didn't when I punched him in the head.

The way this worked on the ball field, the cheers and hoots would die away just as the pitcher went into his windup, making it the best time to listen to his throw. Pitchers will hide the ball, but can't hide the sound it makes on the move—something subtle, like a lady's fan twitching in the air or the breeze blowing a dollar bill off a banker's desk. You only get it for part of a second, as the ball separates from his fingers and starts to roll in the air. That's when my ears would tell me the speed and flight of the throw. Think of a tree branch humming in the wind or a

mockingbird flying past. It can't tell you much, but, along with a good eye and quick hands, I didn't need much extra to beat the pitch.

Batting lefty put me closer to first base, too, and hearing the pitch meant I knew if I'd swing before I did—any decent ballplayer knows that—and where it was likely to go. All this gave me a jump on the pitcher, getting me on base more often from the leadoff spot, and came with me as I moved up in the game.

Mind you, out in centerfield, my ears were even more important, same as now. Once that ball's been hit in the air, your eyes have to find it before you can chase it ... unless your hearing's real good, when the crack of the bat can give you a jump. With a right-handed hitter swinging late, the ball comes off the wood at a different angle than, say, a lefty pulling to right field. Same with a ball off the meat of the barrel instead of the top edge. And all those sounds are different, bat speed counting for about half the sound, the other half being impact and angle.

So, mostly, you can fool the eye, but not the ear. Finding a fly-ball in the sky with just your vision costs half a second, but if the sound of the bat can tell you where that ball is going, you're a fraction faster to the catch. I could get to the outfield hit because I heard the shot that sent it—the arc, the speed, deep or shallow, and whether it's going left of second base, or right, or straight up the centerfield alley.

Mr. Sinclair saw some of this in me at fourteen, and by the time I was sixteen baseball was my life. Soon I was playing with the Biscuits in the Georgia State League, getting meals, travel, and two dollars a week pocket money. The next season, I got \$10 playing centerfield three games a week, and \$1 per RBI if there was a crowd of 100 or more.

#

Today when I walk into the clubhouse all the fellows are crowded around the notice board, but then split apart and give me the half-jealous, half-admiring eye. Pinned up there on the cork is a piece of letter paper:

*To Clyde Masters,
We hear you can play some good ball. Just
remember, it's a war, and we batters are the artillery.
Best of luck for the season.
T. Cobb, Detroit Tigers*

A boy of 18 getting a note from a big-league ball-player, much less the greatest ever out of Georgia, doesn't help that boy rein in his inflated feeling of self-importance. Word's out about me now, maybe through Mr. Sinclair, but for sure in some of the local sports pages, too. I'm hitting .326, and yesterday from centerfield I pegged out a runner who took too big a lead off second. The Waycross, Georgia, *Courier* had this to say after our match-up against their local Grasshoppers:

Stone Mountain spikesman Clyde Masters continues to thrill local fans of the horsehide with his lightning-in-a-bottle streaks on the base paths and wizard-like grabs on the outfield grass.

It can be hard after that to get your head through the doorframe and stick to training. But I take Mr. Cobb's note home and show it to Mother and Father, and the family decide I should stick with baseball, and I do.

#

The '29 World Series has just ended, the Cubs against the Athletics in a hummer—Lefty Grove, Jimmie Foxx, Hack Wilson, Rogers Hornsby. I'm on a streak as our season winds down, and half a dozen of us meet at the Biscuits' clubhouse for practice. Nailed to the door is the pasteboard announcement that will lead me to prison:

Closed until further notice. All effort will be made to re-locate healthy players to other clubs.

The last bit never happens, not for anyone I hear of. Also, the mention of "further notice"—never see any of that, neither.

It's a plain shocker, but not a surprise. Philly won in the fifth game in the second week of October, but down here the weather stretches out and can let you play into November most years. So fan appetite for the Series and baseball kept us running right through, our clubs' owners hoping people would come to the park and imagine they were in Chicago or Philadelphia.

But city money up north has pushed up the players' pay, creating Big League contracts for radio broadcasts, and keeping families at home listening, so clubs down here just couldn't hold out. Here we are, late October, owed a fair piece of wages, RBI

bonuses, and such for the last month, and all we get is stiff-armed by the owners.

This rattles me pretty good. Father hurt his leg in a railyard collision and is out of work with no union help or paid doctor care. The sisters have tried to get work, Lance sends what he can from his Navy pay, and Gene and Emm, now in California, pitch in. But I'm the one salting the soup with my baseball earnings, about \$30 per week, half of what the family lives on. Now that's gone, and two weeks from now Wall Street will take the long drop out the high window, giving us all a long, cold spell of hunger, despair, and broken lives.

#

It's 1931, and I'm 25 now, and we're driving in a flatbed REO Speedwagon Six across washed-out clay flats and open stands of scrub pine. That is, my brother Lance is driving. I'm trussed up under the chassis out of sight of any lawmen, state or county, while Lance does his level best at the wheel, fast enough to keep us on the move, but slow enough to dodge any bogs or ditches, anything that might trap the truck or put me into the ground.

We're heading toward the Okefenokee badlands, through no-account share-cropping and other hard-scrabble territory, and past a few rough-and-tumble sawmills, some legal, some not. These are the early years of what'll be called the Great Depression, and getting some money ahead and food on the table is any man's aim, day in, day out, and the reason I'm under this truck.

Lance and me had exchanged a couple letters while I was inside, nothing in secret or any foreign language, just so he knew how strong I was on getting off that Reidsville Prison chain gang. In his second reply he said,

*Clyde,
I expect I will come south for a spell from my post here at Norfolk Navy Yard. After ten years in, I am due for extended shore leave before taking up my new post at the Yard in Philadelphia.*

There was a good deal more in the letter, but the first part was what I wanted to hear. Then he wrote,

Before I take the long leave, however, I hope to visit you once or twice on weekend liberty.

which he did and, bit by bit, we cooked up this plan, not what you'd call ingenious.

When his long leave did come, Lance drove south into Tattnall County acting like he was without a job, easy to do in those times, and, since he knows engines and mechanics like a dog knows digging, he got on with one of the big cotton farms that contracted work to the prison. They put him on as a farm-truck driver, and before long he's friendly with a couple of the gun bulls, ones who'd never seen him at the prison grounds visiting me. Coming toward the time, we get help with the plan through back-and-forth chats between my pals inside and their visitors, passing each other news about made-up people they pretend to know, but it's really up-to-date info for Lance and me.

The chance comes on a Saturday when my crew is out chopping cotton far from any town. After a meal break (to work us, they had to feed us), the set-up looks lucky for our plan, one solitary armed guard standing on the pavement, and the prisoner group I'm with over in the ditch near the cotton fence. Lance pulls up in the REO between us and the gun-bull, says a fine howdy-do to him, distracting him with a chat for a short minute before driving off, me having snaked under the truck from the opposite side and up into the rope loops Lance has rigged under the chassis. Then we're off.

At the first side road, Lance turns right into some cover, then onto a farm lane he'd scouted up the week before, and pretty soon we're picking our way south, out of sound and sight of Georgia State Prison's finest. Due to my baseball training and farm work, and the thrill of being free again, I could hang in these ropes until Judgment Day, but when night comes we camp rough in the trees, feeding on cold grits and ham and a quart bottle of Jax beer Lance brought.

"Big Brother," I say to him, "you pulled off that move slicker than snot. Can't tell you how good it feels to breathe the air of a free man."

"We got lucky, Clyde, and we better stay that way if we don't want to get shot ourselves."

Next day, we figure word is out about the stolen REO and me being on the run, but we don't know for sure.

"We'll cover our tracks," says Lance, "before heading to Valdosta." That's west of here, where he has his '29 Model A Roadster hidden in our cousin's barn. "We'll meet up with James after dark, and he'll

drive us on to the barn in his own car." James won't show up in the roadster for the same reason Lance didn't bring it to the farm job—too flashy there, and we can't have it seen in the area of our escape. Then we'll drop the REO where the owners can find it. We ain't thieves.

We're edging out of brush country into a town when Lance stops and bends down to me. "This here's Astoria, but we ain't stopping, just cruising past the shops." I'm still under the chassis because, well, you never know. And lucky I am, too, because even from down here I spot a Sheriff's car waiting on the far side of town with a mounted posse in tow. The front horseman puts up a hand for Lance to stop, and a young deputy gets out of the car. While he talks to my brother, the rider nudges his horse over to the other side of the REO's cab, but stays mounted. What I can't see or hear, Lance tells me later.

"Sorry to putcha all out, suh, but we're chasin' a fugitive f'om Reidsville, 'scaped yestiday f'om a chain gang, white boy 'bout yo' size, bit youngah. Y'all f'om 'round these pahts?"

From what the lawman says, it seems he's not connecting the REO to the escape, so maybe them at the farm don't know yet that Lance has run off with the truck. Lucky us, and the open flatbed's got nothing to hide, at least on top. Lance don't lose his nerve as they question him.

"No, sir, I'm on liberty," Lance says in clipped, Navy speech, hiding his Georgia drawl. "Due to report to Pensacola by the weekend." He pulls his ID wallet out of his shirt pocket, flips it open, and shines it at them. This stands the deputy right up, first time he's seen the U.S. Navy in the flesh and a genuine government ID. Next to it in the wallet is a waist-up photo of Lance in shipboard whites, hat in hand. Before they get a good look at his name, Lance folds it and taps it on the steering wheel. "Borrowed this fine machine from a shipmate's brother over in Valdosta. Thought I'd try for some bowfin down around the swamp." With one hand, he rattles the fishing pole he's got propped up in the cab, and with the other he puts the ID back in his pocket. "Ever fish down this way, Sheriff?"

The man glances up at the mounted rider, then back at Lance. "I ain't the Sheriff, jes a dep'ty, like these boys on theah ponies." He knocks his knuckles on the window frame and says, "Cain't say

'bout the fishin', but y'all keep yo' eye out for this fella. He's a dangerous man."

#

We were ballplayers, the three of us, me, Jude, and Bean, not criminals in life or by habit. It's the clean truth that when we went to rob the Waycross Mill we didn't have shooting in mind. It just happened, that boy surprising hell out of Jude, coming out of that storeroom shooting like he did. Good he didn't have no shotgun, mighta killed all of us.

"Jude only made the shot with that old hog-leg pistol by dumb luck, but hit that boy direct in the head, killed him on the spot." Lance knows this, but I explain it all because he was at sea during the trial. I'm in prison now mainly for being stupid, fool enough to think I had any business driving the getaway car for an armed robbery that bad luck turned into murder.

Lance says, "You coulda been up for hanging, Clyde. For that, you're lucky."

I nod at him, looking into his sad blue eyes.

"Hanging, maybe, or Big Sparky."

Jude and Bean said it would be an easy job—in on the Friday, the crew's pay in the safe, and we're out with the cash. We'd drive a stolen car and make a clean escape into the Okefenokee, where we had a skiff waiting at a narrow neck of the swamp and another car on the other side. But a blown radiator hose south of Waycross meant it didn't happen that way, and we had to scatter off Swamp Road before we got to Fargo. The cops and dogs rounded us up on the weekend, and witnesses from the mill office fingered the other two, with Jude as the shooter. I got caught with them and got eleven years hard labor for a string of charges I can't pronounce. This hurt Father more than a dozen train collisions.

#

Franklin Roosevelt is President, we're all in the Depression, and no one knows for how long. Lance, still in the Navy, has married Regina, a Mick from Philadelphia, and Catholic. They met a while after he transferred up there from Norfolk. After the chain gang, I smuggled my way north, too, kicking around some baseball towns until I got on with the Newark Bears. I've been playing up north now for two years under a different name, which I can't tell you for fear of being caught. I never got out of minor-league ball, but still have my speed and batting

eye and, more important, my double hearing (I read later it's called "Doppler," but that don't matter).

Jean, as we call Lance's wife, loves me to talk about how I can start my outfield chase from the sound of the bat on the ball. I guess she and her brothers—there's nine of them, along with two sisters—are keen on the idea they have a relation who's a ballplayer. And I love telling the little stories, like my running down Tommy Henrich's deep fly-ball to left-center on that cool, clear afternoon in Patterson, New Jersey, him with the Indians' farm system, on his way up, me treading water with the Bears.

Through each season, I get a few chances to move up, but can't take 'em for fear of being found out and sent back to Reidsville, or worse. I like talking baseball to Jean and the rest, but not about how I can't push into the majors because I can't show my face in the big city papers or use the name my mother and father gave me. That's the long story, the hard one.

* * *

I never met Clyde or heard much about him after my childhood. Five of my mother's brothers moved to California with the war effort, or after, working for Convair, Northrup, and Naval Intelligence. Gene, or Eugene, my father's older brother, settled in Frisco, and we had a relationship with him, and heard about how he had fudged his age and joined the Army in 1917.

It seems Clyde faded out of baseball—and life—robbed by a mistake brought on by hardship.

United, Under John Prine

Belle Brett

Even in this former capitol of the Confederacy, Peter mused that we would probably have something in common with the other John Prine concert-goers, perhaps like ourselves a bunch of graying hipsters in sensible shoes whose tastes ran equally to Joan Baez and the Rolling Stones, but when we arrived at the historical theater, Peter in a black shirt and slacks, and I in a white blouse and jeans, we saw huddled under the dripping overhang a motley crowd of spiked-heel babes whose parents were probably still children during Woodstock, the entire Delta Upsilon fraternity, and middle-aged folks emblazoned with images of the American flag; and once inside, the experience of being out of place intensified after we took our seats high up in the balcony, and a striped-shirted lad in back of us talked non-stop through the opening act (our insistent hushing having no effect), while five oversized souls rose up as one continuous mound and switched to another section of the balcony and then switched again, allowing us to take their places and distance ourselves from Mr. Chatterbox, and people came casually in and out, parading in front of us and climbing over seats with bottles of iced water as though they were at a baseball game, but most surprising was that despite the restlessness, this was a crowd of worshipful fans, including the striped-shirted drunk, who let out a knowing whoop after the first few bars of every song, the coked-up blond woman with glasses, whose attentive partner, old enough to be her father, kept asking if she wanted some sugar to calm her down, and she, banging against the back of my seat in time to the music, breathed in my ear, "Tell me if this is bothering you," and then provided off-key accompaniment to each song and moaned and sputtered "ooo-ooo" as if on her way to an orgasm, and the rest of the audience, who hooted and clapped its way through a two-hour non-stop performance; and perhaps because of them all, we had to agree, now breathless as we danced in the aisles beginning with the third of six encores, that we, too, had found religion that night.

Song Pull

Robert Morgan Fisher

For Dave Carter

Five minutes.

Door to the green room clicked shut. Glen rechecked his tuning. Fresh strings on the Martin. He always fought slippage on a new D, without fail. The other tunesmiths on deck didn't think to double check their tuning and Glen resented them for it—they'd eat up valuable time onstage. If everyone were prepared like Glen Hesby, maybe they'd each get to go around for five songs instead of four. This was the first writers-in-the-round Glen had attended in eight years. Last one was at this very place, venue famous for such songwriter showcases, sometimes referred to as song-pulls or guitar-pulls.

He hadn't missed any of it. Not the inflated egos, corn-pone humor, unearned adulation, false modesty, insincere encouragement. None of it. A good eight years away from all that. And he especially hadn't missed his own misguided, sycophantic sucking up. Pretending to praise famous singers and songs he actually hated.

He looked around the room again with a more forgiving mindset. It wasn't that bad. Two of the writers he knew and actually respected. The other two would have to prove themselves. He knew his harsh judgment was misplaced. It was the system of aggressively enforced mediocrity he loathed. It'd kept him away for almost a decade. Now he was back, giving it one more try with a different approach. Fact was he never thought he'd return, not after what he went through, not after such a prolonged... *failing*—there was no other word for it. It hurt to even articulate such a word in his mind, for he loved words, knew their power and glory.

He hadn't always been like this.

As a child, Glen often wandered hills, fields and woodlands alone, deep in thought. Nature welcomed him: sun, rain, river. Flock of wild geese passing overhead was a wonder to behold. They shared a sadness with Glen, as if upon arriving at the lower latitudes they'd now be expected to deliver a message of profound grief. He sang on these pastoral jaunts, sometimes out loud and always in his head.

Songs of the late 60s, early 70s, when country music was playing catch-up with rock, soul and folk.

The songs he'd measure all his early efforts against—before things changed in a dozen ways. It wasn't just the hippies back then. It was soul music out of Detroit, Memphis and Philadelphia making inroads into issues nobody would've touched in '65 when Glen was only six. He listened to it all, claimed everything as an influence and welcomed it into his personal country tradition.

Late at night, he'd dial up scratchy AM C&W stations to worship Porter Wagoner, Loretta Lynn, Bobby Bare, Roger Miller, Charley Pride, Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash. He learned the names of the edgy writers, the ones pushing the envelope: Mac Davis, Hank Cochran, Jimmy Webb, Kris Kristofferson, Tom T. Hall, Curly Putman, Jimmy Driftwood, Jerry Reed, Harlan Howard, Shel Silverstein, Bobby Russell.

He searched out names in parentheses below song titles on 45s, then followed those writers when they put out albums of their own.

You could learn a lot by listening to a song as done by the person who wrote it.

Someone once told Glen: the songs you hear in seventh and eighth grade—*those* are the ones that leave a mark for the rest of your life. It was true. People talk about songs from their junior or senior year of high school—but by that time you're past it, not really listening. It's the ones from age twelve and thirteen that take over and define a person. They comprised the 14-karat standard for Glen's early work.

Them hippies were kicking our ass, an emphysemic old-timer would confide to him years later at Tootsie's, across the alley from the Grand Ole Opry.

We had to lay a little social import' 'tween the lines.

And Glen was grateful they did, for those would forever be the songs he loved.

He'd already made up his mind: a beeline for Nashville upon graduation. A long way from his hometown of Franklin. His parents urged him to at least give community college a try, but he couldn't be dissuaded. He'd been playing guitar from the age of seven and to write country songs was everything he cared about. Not just songs, but songs that mattered.

He worked in restaurants at first, then situated himself a little better and started up a handyman business. He was good with tools, liked constructing and repairing things. It was also a way to meet people in the business. Once he was called to a superstar's house to plane and hang a door. He noticed a guitar in the corner, asked if he could play a few songs. The man, a legend, listened politely, smiling. Glen was never invited back.

He soon learned something important about Nashville: there's no town nicer at telling you you're not wanted.

Still, he persisted. Interesting noises coming out of Texas, an outlaw movement. But also authentic artists who seemed to live well beyond the accepted conventions of Nashville: Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, Townes Van Zandt, Eric Taylor and Guy Clark. There was a much-talked about Lubbock Mafia: Joe Ely, Terry Allen, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock. John Prine and Steve Goodman out of Chicago. By commercial standards, these artists had gone rogue and were laughed at by the power players in Tennessee. But to Glen they were vital and seductive.

After dating around he got serious with Darcy. She was an up-and-coming executive at a dog food company. They got married and soon had a little boy named Orville. The good luck of fresh fatherhood led to Glen's first staff job at a small publishing house. *Urban Cowboy* had swept the country and every mall in America sported a fern bar and a mechanical bull. Every song had a hook and God forbid you should write about anything other than cheating or getting laid. It was two-step, line dance or ballad—all of it background music for sex.

Glen occasionally went out to bars to study the crowds and songs, but there wasn't much to it: verse, chorus, bridge, verse, chorus. His draw at the publishing house was slender. He badly needed to get a cut on someone's record. He needed more than a cut: he needed a monster hit, a super smash.

Those first few years with Darcy and Orville were idyllic and frustrating. Glen expanded his handyman business to guitar repair. Housewives were tempted by the handsome handyman with the Sam Elliott mustache. With some remorse, he occasionally strayed. Again, anything that took his eye off the goal was jettisoned. The important things were: songwriting and family—in that order. Life was

essentially good. It was Morning in America and every dog needed to eat.

For a while he considered moving down to Texas, make a fresh start.

But when the oil industry tanked a rival Music City USA down in Austin never materialized. He stayed put, emulated and imitated his heroes, embraced their habits like smoking, drinking. A little speed here and there. Never enough to wreck him, though. He didn't become a casualty like others he knew. The music was too important. Anything that interfered with it was a nuisance to be shucked.

When he was reminded one night that Kris Kristofferson had been a Rhodes Scholar, he suddenly felt caught out, exposed. It dawned on him the kind of song he wanted to write might require a more thoughtful, informed approach. He thought about heading back to school but couldn't afford it and would've been embarrassed to be a twenty-eight-year old college freshman.

To improve himself, he read promiscuously. Some snobby professor from Vanderbilt who'd hired Glen to lay flagstone in his backyard recommended philosophers like Epictetus, *Nietzsche* and Heidegger. Glen tried—but quickly grew discouraged. It was boring beyond belief. Maybe a Rhodes Scholar like Kristofferson could've found these tedious writings inspirational, but not Glen.

An intuitive librarian steered him to the authors and poets he needed. Thanks to this woman, a rich, literary world was uncovered he never knew existed: Flannery O'Connor, Charles John Quarto, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Dickey. On his own he discovered Reynolds Price, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Joy Williams, Barry Hannah, Miller Williams...

What effect this had on the songs he was pitching at that time is debatable. Already, corporate sensibilities were exerting more influence, locking down that parochial, definitive Nashville Sound. He began to lead a double artistic life: there were the songs he pitched to publishing houses—and then the songs he wrote to please himself. The songs for publishing houses were drawn from an industry template, a formula, adhering to strict rules in terms of content, meter and vocabulary. As time wore on, the rules for such songs became increasingly narrow, banal and downright silly.

For years, Glen sang Orville to sleep every night. He bought him a little guitar. But the boy wasn't a picker and you just can't force that on a kid. Orville was a loyal listener, however. He especially loved the offbeat songs in Glen's private repertoire. The ones Glen would never pitch in a million years. Story songs, mostly, with nuanced social observations.

Once, at a gathering of songwriters, he tentatively played one of these hidden songs. It was about that meth operation in the backyard and a whole host of other unsavory, gritty realities of rural existence. They looked at him curiously. Then one veteran, a smug song-plugger with three platinum co-writes under his belt, broke the silence.

Well, that'll sure liven up Fan Fest!

He laughed right along with them, but inside it was a humiliating death.

Glen finally placed a commercial song with a mid-level female star. Actually, she was recording a new record and had merely put a hold on the tune. It never made it onto the record. Still, Glen and Darcy threw a huge party to celebrate.

Not getting on the album was a disappointment—but there was always the next record, right? Or maybe that song would make it onto the *next* one. Or the one after that. There were two songs that went top ten off that album, earning CMA and Grammy nods. Glen tried to keep it in perspective: now that the door was open. It was only a matter of time. Even when he had to go back to being a full-time handyman, he never stopped believing that any minute mechanical royalty checks would start filling up his mailbox.

But it never happened.

Years flew by.

Glen's hairline retreated, his paunch advanced and Orville showed every indication of being gay.

He never forgot the day he and Darcy looked at each other and finally accepted the fact of Orville's orientation. Glen was actually okay with it. His love for the boy knew no boundaries, but it was not something he'd expected. Life was like that, of

course, full of surprises. When Darcy served him divorce papers a week after Orville's graduation, you'd think Glen would've been better prepared.

That was the summer of lawyers, recriminations and tears—very hard. In the end, they parted as amicably as possible. Within a couple of years the three of them started reuniting for holidays. Darcy eventually remarried and Orville graduated with honors from culinary school.

Rumblings of an Americana movement, a progressive groundswell.

But corporate country paid little heed and did everything it could to marginalize and squelch. Johnny Cash reinvented himself, covering songs by hard core rockers way outside the Nashville mainstream.

Glen cautiously threw his support behind some new faces like Steve Earle, David Olney, Mary Gauthier, Robbie Fulks and Robert Earl Keen. There were groups from Seattle, Chicago and Minneapolis with names like Uncle Tupelo, Old 97's, Bottle Rockets, BR5-49, Jayhawks and Son Volt who revered the gods of yesteryear but didn't sound much like them.

Glen's support of Americana didn't extend to pitching songs in that vein—that would've been professional suicide. It would've burned the fragile bridges he'd worked so hard to build in what he often called his *imitation career*. He still dreamed about breaking into the elite inner circle but the door remained locked with no key and no tangible invitation forthcoming.

With file sharing and Napster, the dismantling of the music business was swift and merciless.

First, the big chain stores shut down.

Then veteran country stars couldn't even get a record deal. They were retiring the old guard—but what would take its place? Not much, it turned out. Just more teen idols lashed together with a little twang. Glen quietly stopped making the bars and open mic nights. He threw everything into maintaining his handyman and guitar repair business, getting out of debt—possibly retiring on a Powerball win.

It was tough going. After 9/11, a few country stars marketed themselves as musical uber patriots—but that struck Glen as disingenuous for a number of reasons. He kept writing, answering the voice in his head. A dialogue with... something.

He hadn't seen Darcy or his son in a couple of years. He'd talk to Orville every month, but once they got beyond niceties like weather and current events, there wasn't much to discuss. Neither seemed able to prise anything of substance from the other. It was all polite and impersonal. Glen was curious about his son's life and hoped Orville would share details when he felt like it. After culinary school in New Orleans, Orville had worked in several big city restaurants across the midwest. He didn't seem to have much time for a personal life. That was about as much as Glen knew.

Darcy called him a few weeks before Thanksgiving and invited Glen. He accepted on the spot but then Darcy started asking why he never seemed to take an interest in Orville's life.

That's not true, he said. I'm always interested.

Well, why don't you ever ask him about his work or anything?

I didn't want to pry. Did he say something?

Not in so many words. Anyway, I just think you should spend some time with him and... some alone time on Thanksgiving. Take a walk together. Anything.

Okay, sure.

Glen felt bad when he hung up. His reticence had been meant respectfully. Then he thought about it some more and realized he wasn't afraid of what Orville might share as much as he feared opening up to his son. For these had been dark days for Glen, the bitter oxide taste of failure was always on the back of his tongue. And it seemed the housewives weren't as attracted to handymen as they used to be.

In the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, Glen felt anxious.

Every time he tried to visualize the forthcoming conversation with Orville, he got angry. He rehearsed certain lines, mostly assessments about his own life, but they came off as either enraged or maudlin. He snapped at a customer on the phone

then had to apologize. He almost kicked in his TV screen one night when he accidentally turned on one of those tacky national talent-search shows.

He knew the meal would be at Darcy and her husband Thane's brand new million-dollar Belle Meade home. Thane had been quite a catch—ancient Nashville money. Their wealth embarrassed Glen, though Thane was very polite, classy and deferential. Glen tended to drink too much when he was nervous.

He arrived at one for the football games, started in on shots of twelve-year old scotch with beer chasers. He was visibly sloshed by three. Chatting with Orville was now out of the question—besides, he was busy cooking.

He kept his mouth shut during dinner, hoping turkey and dressing might sober him up. But he drank more wine than was prudent and wound up excusing himself to get sick in the bathroom. Orville seemed embarrassed. Darcy wouldn't let Glen drive home and he spent the night sprawled on a guest bed while the room twirled.

Next morning, Glen had the most vicious hangover of his entire life.

His brain felt like a dead crustacean, swollen and decomposing in its shell. He puked in the bathroom again, cleaned himself up and was in the process of quietly slipping out when he heard noise from the kitchen. He knew that, at the very least, he should thank them for having him over, if not apologize.

In the kitchen, Orville was preparing something for lunch. Glen watched him rifle through cupboards and a Sub Zero, arranging items on countertops.

You missed breakfast, said Orville. Saved you some coffee.

Thanks, son. He hadn't called Orville son in years, felt strange to do so now. Glen's voice was thin and anemic.

Tied one on last night.

We were worried about you.

Where's Darcy and Thane?

Black Friday at the mall.

Ah.

You okay, Dad?

Yeah, he said, then: No. My head is about to twist off.

Orville placed what looked like a bloody mary before Glen. It was the prettiest drink he'd ever seen. Glen's hand impulsively reached for it.

Tomato juice, cayenne pepper, Tabasco, raw egg, milk thistle and a slice of apple instead of celery, he said. Works every time.

Raw egg?

Yeah. No vodka, said Orville. Forget that hair-of-the-dog bullshit. Keep it safe. Delicious. And it was. Like a balm for his wounded liver. Not cured but now it at least felt more like the morning *after* the morning after.

Glen sucked on the apple slice. How's your life, Orville?

It's good, I don't know if you remember anything I said last night.

Glen didn't. Nor did he fully appreciate the turkey dinner. It was a shame. Even through numbed taste buds Glen could tell that Chef Orville had outdone himself. All of it had come up with the booze.

I don't usually drink like that, said Glen. Holidays make me nervous.

I know. Well, I'm in a relationship, Dad. You'll meet him soon.

All right. What's his name?

His name was Tim. Glen recited the pairing of names several times in his head: *Tim and Orville, Orville and Tim...* Orville had kept a low profile in high school, didn't come out until college. Glen wondered what kind of boy this Tim was, suddenly curious about the relationship in a way he immediately recognized as being protective. Glen never allowed himself to ponder the details of Orville's sex life. It was all a grand mystery and none of his business.

He likened it to a field of foxholes: all the people in his life occupied a foxhole, some shared their foxhole with a significant other. All that was visible aboveground were heads—what went on below the surface did not concern him. As long as there was eye-contact and an understanding they were happy.

Wish I could be a better dad to you.

Orville handed Glen a cup of coffee. Why do you say that? You're a great dad.

I mean—I don't know.

Glen hadn't meant to say it so bluntly and it felt good to get it off his chest. But he knew further

explanation was required. He wasn't sure he was up to it. Especially in his current state.

How about some food? said Orville. Want a sandwich?

Sure.

Orville sliced fresh multigrain, lightly toasted it, then slathered on mayo with a pinch of dill and paprika. This was followed by interstitial layers of thinly-sliced turkey, ham, gruyere, cheddar and leftover cranberry sauce which he freshened up with added orange peel zest. Orville hummed as he worked. Glen watched in silent awe, aware that his son was just making it up as he went along. Before putting the top on, Orville sautéed a thin slice of onion and heirloom tomato, fast-fried an egg, then placed everything, along with a slice of butter lettuce, on top. It was all done so quickly. Amazing.

The finished product was thick, but not too thick. Orville sliced it in half and skewered each side with a sandwich stick merrily capped by a green olive periscope. The cross-section looked like something off the cover of *Gourmet Magazine*. Glen could see the still-warm onion, egg and tomato slightly melting the gruyere and cheddar.

His mouth began to salivate, stomach producing underwater noises. Orville heard the telltale grumbling and chuckled. But it wasn't quite ready yet; he took leftover stuffing, mixed it together in a bowl with some water, smidgen of flour and oil, then fried up crispy stuffing patties in the same cast iron skillet in which he'd sautéed the onion and tomato. Pickle, fresh fruit and a scoop of potato salad on the side and lunch was born.

It looks too good to eat, said Glen.

That's where you're wrong, said Orville. More coffee?

Please. How'd you do that?

I don't know what you mean.

Fix all that, said Glen.

This right here? I don't know, just used what's available.

Did you have a plan?

Yeah, it's simple: make the meal *I'd* want to eat.

Every time?

Sure. I mean, there are recipes. I know how to follow directions. But it's ultimately all about what *I* like.

Pleasing yourself.

'Zactly, said Orville. It's all you got, ain't it?

Sandwich was indescribably delicious. Orville poured chilled water for each of them.

Ever heard of Warren Zevon? said Glen.

Sure.

His last words before he died: Enjoy every sandwich.

Wise man, indeed.

Monster songwriter.

Any hits?

Glen thought. Oh God, let's see.

Werewolves of London is probably the biggest. But he wrote so many classics for other people. He was an incredible wit and had a truckload of demons.

Wrote a lot for Linda Ronstadt. *Poor Poor Pitiful Me*.

I know that one.

Hasten Down the Wind and *Carmelita*.

Orville, mouth full, shrugged.

His titles were the best: *For My Next Trick*

I'll Need a Volunteer.

Orville laughed.

Yeah, and after he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer he wrote one called *My Shit's Fucked Up*.

Wow.

Yeah. Awesome lyric.

Orville said: That would never play in Nashville.

Got that right.

Awkward pause—a tacet.

Dad, y'ever gonna play again?

Thinkin' about it.

What's the worst they can say—No?

That's true.

Lovin' ya.

Lovin' ya too.

His hangover was miraculously gone.

You're on.

They headed for the stage through a labyrinth of hallways. As they passed the kitchen Glen paused to watch the dishwashers at work.

He remembered pearl diving when he first arrived from Franklin, too many decades ago to count. There was another guy, also an aspiring songsmith, though he'd been at it for a lot longer. His name was Dave... Dave something. Pure poetry. An Americana original before Americana even

existed. Dave referred to himself as a Vision Miner. Gentle, soft-spoken in the extreme.

Glen hadn't thought about skinny ol' dishwasher Dave in years. His stuff had been dismissed as all wrong and too smart for Nashville. Yet dishwasher Dave persisted, starry-eyed and hungry. Glen too had dismissed him—though he secretly liked Dave's songs to the point where at this moment, heading for the stage, he realized that skinny Dave had been an enormous, albeit unconscious, influence on Glen's hidden songs.

In fact, the songs Glen used to reinvent himself now were frank imitations of Dave's. He'd have to acknowledge that fact publicly at some point. Maybe someone might recall him. Wiry-haired, malnourished, dishwasher Dave was a recognizable Music City Row eccentric in his day. There were many like him, Glen reflected, with morose nostalgia.

What Glen wouldn't give now to own a CD of Dave's songs.

Dishwasher Dave: Prophet.

He recalled a specific conversation he'd had with Dave, right after the holidays. Dishwasher Dave had gone home, wherever that was, played for a family gathering. Upon his return he described a postcard scene to Glen: leading little kids in carols next to the tree by a picturesque fire. It'd been a white Christmas that year. Later, after the kids were in bed, Dave's family asked about his songwriting career.

When we going to see yer name in lights?
Sold anything?

What'd you tell 'em? asked Glen.

The power and glory... ain't all that they tell you.

Glen took his seat in the row of chairs onstage. He was first up.

I cook to please myself, he said.

He gave it a strum.

Hope you like the meal.

END

The Happy Hunting Ground

Sheldon Lee Compton

For Breece

Last night I dreamed of the “happy hunting ground.”

He is thrust into the place of bones. These bones that look human but are not. They are different because, he sees now, the skulls are all wrong. But the rest of the bones are normal—legs, ribcage, bits of arms, shoulder blades. But what of this place? More tunnel than anything else, in the way a tunnel hides a promise of light directly within the darkness of its mouth. Following this promise, he moves ahead, no longer studying the skulls so closely, remembering, memorizing, the legs, ribcages, arms, shoulder blades, each part of each former person as tarnished pearls in the black.

When he at last emerges from the tunnel he is met with the most perfect spring day, an environment with the *sweetest air and water*, but a spring day that shimmers and then changes to the most perfect summer day where *in the dry heat the deer make dust in the road*. Predictably, here comes cooler weather and *the fog of fall with good leaves*. It's a fading version of a small town, but it could be Milton. A small town is, after all, a small town. In this small town the railroad tracks move forward to the vanishing point and splits two giants of the great range—John Attic Ridge and Abner Mountain. The scent of creosote comes up in waves from the treated ties. As far as twenty yards out from the tunnel, the cool breeze moves in a wall against him. A coating of sweat turns cold on the back of his neck, and he is at that moment aware of the rabbits.

Across an expanse of bottom field at nearly the same level as the Big Sandy tributary running behind it, no less than two dozen rabbits stop all at once, spread out a few feet from each other and, seeing him, begin to beat the ground. But after no more than a few seconds of this, in perfect synchronization, they flop into the trimmed grass of the field, chin the ground for a bit, and then begin dancing, actually spinning in the air.

Seeing all the activity out in the open by so many rabbits, he raises his hand, his finger pointing forward like a barrel, the thumb held up like a hammer, and fires off three pretend shots into the bottom field. At once three of the rabbits begin to

spin slowly and fall stiffly backward, their front feet cartoonishly clutching their chests before going entirely limp. He can't remember ever seeing rabbits behave this way, but it was nice to be hunting again, so he fires off three more shots and three more rabbits pretend die. Then all six rabbits roll over in the grass and regain their lazy beating of the ground.

There is the strong urge to tell his mother about the rabbits. *And you could shoot without a gun, never kill, but the rabbits would do a little dance, all as if it were a game, and they were playing it too*. As he begins the letter to his mother in his mind, how he would explain this strange place and these strange animals, the season turns again. Winter with *heavy powder-snow* as the railroad tracks disappear beneath the weight; that thick scent of creosote doesn't fade away as much as turn off as if captured in an unseen vacuum. It is replaced with the crisp sensualities of cold. When the snow stops he can see he's at the summit of John Attic Ridge.

The summit is profoundly quiet. The mountain descends in sharp slopes all around him. The trees, the sky, the mineral flesh of the soil, the foliage—everything is white. When the first animal comes into view, it's a big deer. The buck is heavy-horned and clumping along under its weight and power and constantly lip curling to get at the wind. It is also entirely white, including the beams and tines of its rack. A closer look reveals that even its eyes are coma white.

In line behind the buck are other animals, all white, including a small herd of goats, two thoroughbreds, and a massive and lumbering buffalo with a head like flaming torch of cotton. The horses are only visible within all the white when their tight muscles draw together to create the hint of grayish lines along their bodies. He grieves to tell someone how the buffalo *snorted, tossed their heads* from somewhere in the snowblind, to explain how it seemed a kind of language sharing a kind of secret.

All of a sudden he is tired, and materializing there on his side is his Army blanket. It is rolled tight and fixed to his waist by three shoestrings tied together in reef knots. There's no question that he will bed down here on the summit in the snow, and so he is asleep nearly before he is flat on the ground. This is where he will write later he *dreamed within the dream*.

At Fleety's she tells him the story of the bones. If he could have remembered the perfect

spring and the dry summer and the white devouring everything in the winter he would have shared this with Fleety. But all he could remember where the bones inside the long tunnel. The skulls. This is why he felt it was a predetermined event, her telling him about the only thing he could remember from where he had been. He believes in fate, intervention, and destiny; he knows these are some of God's tools to understanding.

The bones were poor people killed by bandits, Fleety explains.

He listens to her, but everything she says after explaining the bones comes in muffled bursts like a coughing fit into a pillow. Finally she takes him by the hand and at once they are both deep inside the tunnel where he started from. The bones are there, just as before, walls of legs, shoulder blades, fingers, hip bones. The skulls are more misshapen than before, less human. They are lighted in the dark by the faintly pearly tarnish. There is much about the bones that are the same, but there is more that is different now.

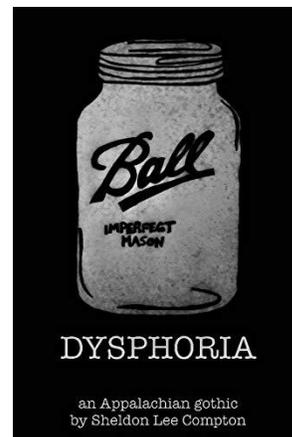
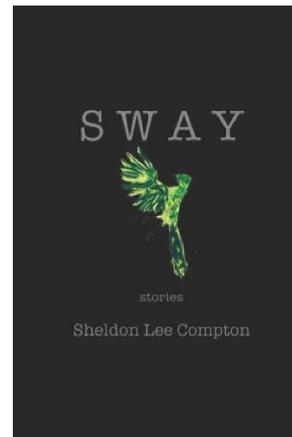
He has no time to study the bones or the tunnel walls closely. Fleety guides him to a place he must have overlooked the first time. She moves aside and allows him to enter this new place *under a huge rock where no light should have shown*. When he is standing fully inside the space, two things become clear: he is in a cave and he is irreversibly alone. In this cave where light should be a fable, he finds a dogwood tree. It glows *the kind of red those trees get at sundown and the buds are purple in that weird light*. The scene holds his attention fast, even as the distant thumping of footsteps starts up behind him inside the darkness of the tunnel. By the time he looks away from the dogwood tree and turns to the sound of the footsteps, there is little time to do anything other than to throw up his arms in a weak defense.

His forearms go instantly numb. Flecks of blood splatter his cheeks and forehead, warm at first and then drying and cooling. And then he sees the instrument swooping downward again toward his outstretched arms—a pick axe, but one much larger than usual.

The man holding the axe was much larger than usual, too. Clearly mad as a hatter, he swung the weapon in bursts, crushing and chopping at the skulls. All the while he is yelling, explaining that he is *trying to make them human-looking*.

Then I went back to the other side of both dreams.

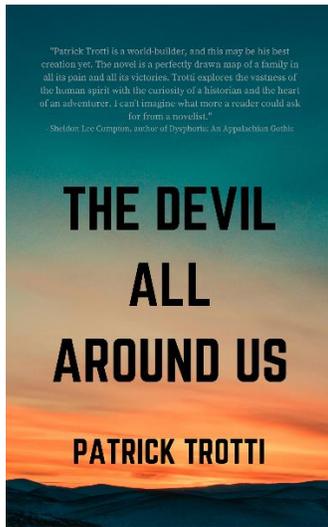
Who might have read this letter and, like me, saw it in such bursting imagery? Who might have read it when it was too late and wished they could have reached out to Breece, helped him see that the happy hunting ground could be here, now, in this moment? The list of questions could fall from the face of the earth and we would still have nothing more than an orchard in early morning, the world returned quiet in the wake of so much sound.



Out not from Cowboy Jamboree Press, Sway: Stories and Dysphoria: an Appalachian Gothic, both by Sheldon Lee Compton.

Book Review and Author Interview

Patrick Trotti's The Devil All Around Us



Quick Review

by Adam Van Winkle

“I cannot believe in a God that wants to be praised all the time,” Patrick Trotti’s epigraph for *The Devil All Around Us* reads. And it’s a fitting quote from Nietzsche to start this collection about cultish religion and family strife.

The Lemminkainens are revealed through five generations in this sweeping book due out this Fall from West Vine Press. They are a band displaced from a coastal Canadian village to upstate New York.

The tale comes full circle as the family is uprooted due to religious fanaticism and face schism due to the youngest member, Lukka, and his “spiritual salvation.” Along the way they face struggles with mental illness, drug abuse, and oil greed.

With this book Trotti joins the likes of Faulkner and Pollock, exploring how one family deals with the hardscrabble life through multiple generations, through multiple tellings by various characters.

And as with reading those vaunted authors, it’s a tough one to put down once you pick it up. Grab yours when it drops.

<https://westvinepress.com/>
<https://www.patricktrotti.com/>

Author Q & A

Patrick Trotti interviewed by Adam Van Winkle

AV: Having been published alongside you in the Breece Pancake collaborations at Plumb, I’m guessing Breece is an influence for you, or am I oversimplifying there?

PT: Breece is a huge influence for me. He really opened up a whole new world for me, showing me what was possible both thematically and stylistically. Short fiction was no longer something I skipped over in favor of novels. It was accessible in a way that was hard to quantify. I think that, above all else, it gave a voice to the voiceless characters of everyday life. I really respected how he anchored his words in his love for place and how setting became as much of a character in any of his stories as any person was.

AV: Who might some other writerly influences be?

PT: Jack Kerouac was my first love. I was introduced to him at a real low point in my life, a turning point of sorts, and he was just what I needed. His inquisitiveness was not only refreshing, it was inspiring. It was a call to arms in a way because it gave me the confidence to begin writing myself. His fearless exploration of his personal life, the mining of his daily existence, was not only brave but it was inventive in that it signified to me that the personal was interesting enough to make books out of. He remains perfectly imperfect to me.

AV: Gosh, *The Devil Around Us* feels ancient and old, like a haunted generations deep family holler or something...how did the idea for such a sweep of time come to you?

PT: Thanks, I was trying to give the book an ancient, vintage, feel. The idea of such a sweeping book appealed to me because, up until this point, I had never written such an expansive story before. I wanted the freedom to rewind and fast forward through time at will. I got the bug in me, not sure how or why, that time itself could be a character in a story and just explored that idea further.

AV: I like the Nietzsche quote to start...and I think I have a good sense of Nietzsche and what that quote suggests, but I'd love to hear your thoughts on that?

PT: To be honest, I've never really read Nietzsche before. I came across the quote when doing some background research on religion in general and it stuck with me. It jumped off the page, through the screen, and stuck with me long after reading it. And the more it hung around in my head, the more it became obvious that it deserved a small place in my book somehow.

AV: You have a lot of juxtaposition of pain and pleasure, the bad and the good. I'm thinking specifically of the tattooing pricking the skin, but the sound of the humming tattoo gun lulling the "patient" Jukka to sleep. Does that tie to a larger theme you want to express?

PT: I definitely wanted to juxtapose contrasting emotions and play with the friction that two competing forces created. I tried to take a statement or an abstract idea and then break it down from both sides of the argument. But specifically the bad and the good, the pain and the pleasure, I intentionally made it a point of peeling back the layers of something that is, at first glance, good that turns out to be, upon further inspection, bad and vice versa.

AV: Is the family ritual and religion in here something you know firsthand? If not, where does it come from in you as a writer?

PT: The idea of ritual, or repetitiveness, was a vital cornerstone to this book. I think that everyone, me included, has some experience with some sort of ritual(s) in their daily lives. While I'm not a religious person firsthand, I wanted to express the idea of fervor and obsession taken to the extreme. I think that writing about stuff that I don't know about from personal experience is part of the reason I decided to write in the first place, you know? This idea that I can explore unknown elements is very appealing and seducing in a way that's hard to describe.

AV: This thing ends on a pretty positive note. What do you want a reader to get from this family, this book?

PT: That's such a tough question for me to answer. I wish that the reader will get an eerie, hard to define, feeling from reading this book. Maybe they'll go back to their families and appreciate them a bit more, ha. Other than that, I hope that readers can open themselves up to the idea that a simple question can produce multilayered, complex, answers. Hopefully I gave everyone enough to chew on.

Contributors

Brian Beatty is the author of four poetry collections: Borrowed Trouble; Dust and Stars: Miniatures; Brazil, Indiana: A Folk Poem; and Coyotes I Couldn't See. His next poetry chapbook, Hobo Radio: Magpies and Crows, is due out from Ravenna Press in 2021. Beatty's stories and other prose efforts have appeared in numerous publications, including Cholla Needles, Cowboy Jamboree, Hobart, McSweeney's Quarterly Concern, Monkeybicycle, Noir Nation, The Quarterly and Seventeen.

Sheldon Birnie is a writer living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, who spent the better part of the past two decades playing with punk rock and country bands in basements, barns, and dive bars across Western Canada. A journalist by trade, his creative work has appeared recently in BULL, Rejection Letters, Riot Act, and The Daily Drunk, among others. Find him lurking online @badguybirnie

Belle Brett is an artist and a writer. Her novel, Gina in the Floating World, a gritty coming-of-age story set in 1981 Tokyo, was published by She Writes Press in 2018. When not writing fiction or making art, she can be found sorting through her lifetime collection of treasures and writing a blog about it, "Slow Downsizing."

Jessica Burdg is a writer with a passion for personal narratives, creative nonfiction, and poetry. She is a mother, a once-upon-a-time journalist, an experience-enthusiast, and an advocate for anyone whose voice has been silenced. Jessica is active in the nonprofit community and is the Editorial Chair of the The Brain Possible, a foundation that assists children who are differently-abled. Her first book, More Than A Diagnosis, became a bestseller in 2020, with all proceeds benefitting the foundation. Jessica's words are featured in many magazines and journals, including Entropy Magazine, TulipTree Review, the International Human Rights Arts Festival, and others. Her essay on mental health was a finalist for the 2019 Conger J. Beasley Jr. Award for Nonfiction. Find her at www.jessicaburdg.com.

Con Chapman is a Boston-area writer, author most recently of Rabbit's Blues: The Life and Music of Johnny Hodges (Oxford University Press), winner of

the 2019 Book of the Year Award by Hot Club de France. His work has appeared in The Atlantic, The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor and a number of literary magazines. His third novel, Kimiko Chou, Girl Samurai, is forthcoming from Atmosphere Press.

Sheldon Lee Compton is currently at work on his first nonfiction book, The Orchard Is Full of Sound: On Breece D'J Pancake and Appalachia, for West Virginia University Press.

Amanda Coote is a recent graduate at the University of Arizona with a BA in creative writing. Her work focuses on the humanity behind genre styles, especially focusing on how the societal structure of certain time periods and genre worlds would affect day to day life.

Patrick Dawson spent nearly three decades as a journalist, most of it as a national and international correspondent for NBC News, CNN and ABC. He was the recipient of two Emmy awards for Outstanding Writing in News. He also once hosted a radio show in New York. His short story "The Language of Rivers" was the recipient of the 45th New Millennium Writings prize for fiction in 2018. His story "Threesome" was a finalist in Narrative's Fall 2018 contest and also longlisted for the Virginia Woolf Award for Short Fiction. His story "Purgatory" was longlisted for the Pulp Literature Press Hummingbird Fiction Prize. He is currently at work on a collection of short fiction and a novel.

Dan Fields has recently published fiction with Harbinger Press, Hellbound Books, Novel Noctule and the Nocturnal Transmissions podcast. He lives in Houston, Texas, with his wife and children. See more at www.danfieldswrites.com

Robert Morgan Fisher won the 2018 Chester Himes Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the 2019 John Steinbeck Award. His fiction and essays have appeared in numerous anthologies and literary journals including Upstreet, Pleiades, Storyscape Journal, Teach. Write., The Wild Word, The Arkansas Review, Red Wheelbarrow, The Missouri Review Soundbooth Podcast, Dime Show Review, 0-Dark-Thirty, Psychopomp, The Seattle Review, The Spry Literary Journal, 34th Parallel, The Journal of Microliterature, Spindrift, The Rumpus,

Bluerailroad and many other publications. He's written for TV, radio and film. Robert holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles and is currently on the teaching faculty of Antioch University in several capacities. Since 2016, Robert has led the UCLA Wordcommandos, an acclaimed twice-weekly writing workshop for veterans with PTSD. He often writes companion songs to his short stories. Both his music and fiction have won many awards. Robert also voices audiobooks. (www.robertmorganfisher.com)

In summer 2020, **Leah Holbrook Sackett** published her debut book of short stories with REaDLips Press. In addition, she is an adjunct lecturer in the English department at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. This is also where she earned her M.F.A. Leah's short stories explore journeys toward autonomy and the boundaries placed on the individual by society, family, and self. Learn about her published fiction at LeahHolbrookSackett.website

Anthony Koranda is a MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in Barren Magazine, Hair Trigger, Magnolia Review, and elsewhere.

Mark Lucius is a writer, songwriter and speechwriter who lives in Milwaukee. His long-form memoirs have appeared in the Great River Review and Best American Sports Writing. His work will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Fewerthan500*. His many songs include "Mama Crazy Mantra" and "Piranha Springs." He has written more than 1,300 speeches and received five Cicero Awards from *Vital Speeches of the Day*. He is grateful to John Perry for the introduction to John Prine's music those many years ago.

Going through school, **Lance Mason** worked in gas stations, picked lemons, packed lima beans, laid fiberglass, sold hot-dogs, spliced phone cable, and sold boats. Following his BSc (Loyola) and doctorate (UCLA), he has lived, worked, and taught in the US, New Zealand, and Brazil, and roamed around the world half-a-dozen times. His work has appeared in fiction, nonfiction, and professional journals, several anthologies, and won a dozen honors and awards. As he works on his sixth novel, Loan Star, his third, The Killing of Chuy Muro, is in

development for a film by Framework Studios in LA. His work, reviews, and bald opinions can be found at www.lance-mason.com.

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories have appeared in Peculiars Magazine, Ellipsis Zine, Emerge Literary Journal, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Ghost City Review, Lotus-eater, Crêpe & Penn, WINK, Drunk Monkeys, Door Is A Jar, and Yellow Medicine Review. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Jon Sokol is a writer, forester, traveler, and outdoorsman. He lives in Northeast Georgia with his wife, Karen. He mostly writes fiction often drifting toward southern gothic and his fascination with all things peculiar. Jon's work has appeared in Sanctuary and The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, and he's currently working on his MFA at Reinhardt University. He can be reached at www.jonsokol.com and @JonSokolWriter on Twitter.

James Stewart III is a Black writer from Chicago. He earned his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MA from North Central College. He is currently finishing a novel about the daily struggles of a multi-racial working-class family and the costs they pay for loving each other. He also co-curates a text-based performance series "The Guild Complex presents Exhibit B" and is a managing editor of the magazine *Critics' Union*. Stewart's writing can also be found in Pangyrus and Another Chicago Magazine.

Alfred Stifsim graduated from IUPUI with a bachelor's in American History (2014, Indianapolis). He is currently working on his first novel. You can find him at alfredstifsim.com.

Mitchell Toews lives and writes lakeside in Manitoba. His work appears in print and online, in places near and far. He is working on a novel. You may follow him on the trails or out on the water or ice, or more conveniently at Mitchellaneous.com, Twitter or Facebook.

Patrick Trotti lives in Rochester, New York where he is a freelance writer, editor, and publisher. Born in 1986, his first loves were basketball and baseball. While his work explores various themes and

transcends a lone genre, his main focus centers around literary auto fiction. He stylistically fuses the minimalism of dirty realism with the pessimistic self exploration of social realism. He is perpetually at work on another book.

<https://www.patricktrotti.com/>

Adam Van Winkle is the author of Hardway Juice (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2019), Abraham Anyhow (Red Dirt Press, 2017) and While They were in the Field (Red Dirt Press, 2019) and his writing has appeared in places like Bull Men's Fiction, Red Dirt Forum, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, The Southern Literary Review, Cheap Pop, Pithead Chapel, MonkeyBicycle, and Crack the Spine. He recently published an essay in Gimmick Press's Obsessed anthology. He has a series of plays, adaptations and originals, forthcoming from Cowboy Jamboree Press (Fall 2020). Find him @gritvanwinkle and www.adamvanwinkle.com.