

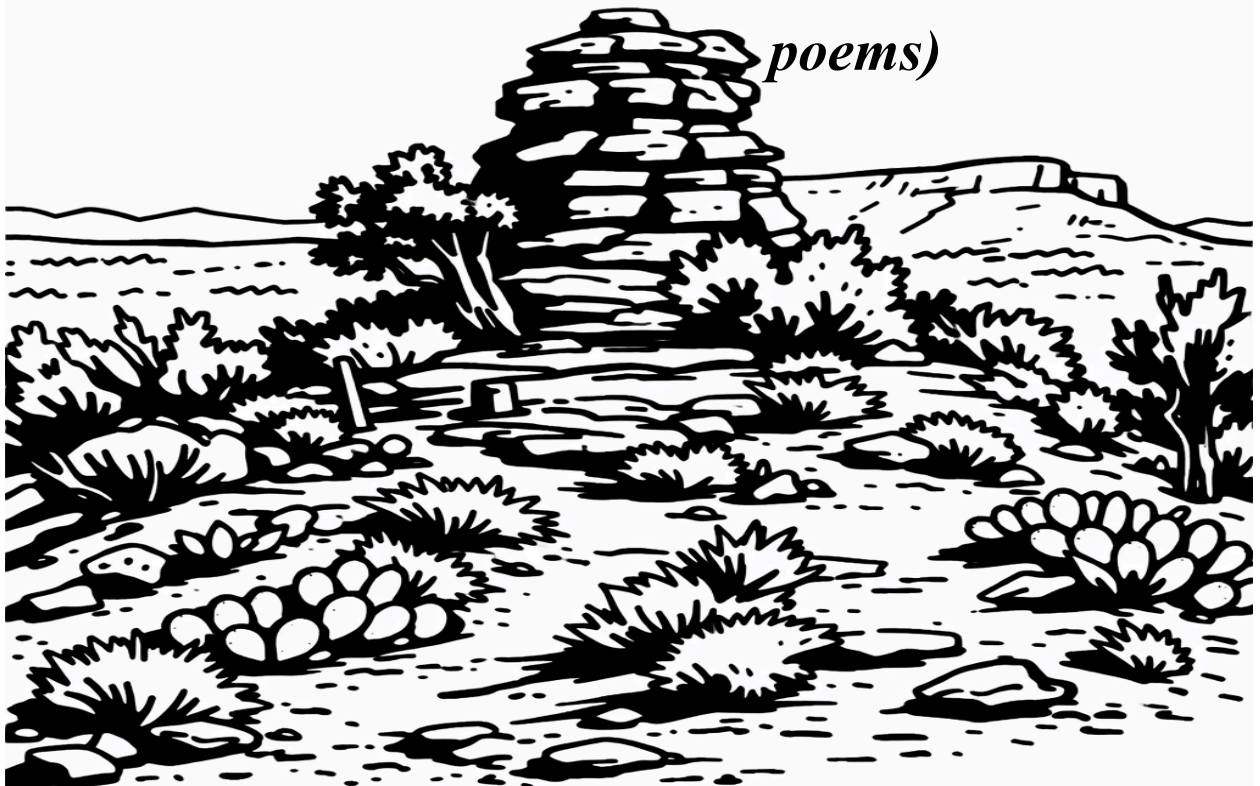
THE
WAY

WE

WALK:

Firstfruits

*(a collection of
short stories and
poems)*



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My firstfruits — an offering to God.

TRIGGER WARNING:

This collection of works follows the themes of addiction, depression, suicide, and love — can't forget love (the greatest of the addictions — God's favorite). Oh ya, and perhaps the most triggering thing of all: I talk a lot about God. Some of you may have already stopped reading once you saw the dedication, or maybe you stopped after that last sentence, and that's okay.

I too have my trauma with organized religion — it's why I no longer consider myself a Christian. I spent much of my youth as an atheist after being forced into an afterschool Catholic school (what did my parents think would happen by sending me to another school after already dealing with normal school). After getting into an argument with my Catholic teacher about the theory of evolution, I decided to renounce and even curse God. She thought that if we evolved from monkeys then it made no sense for there to still be monkeys. I tried to explain to her that we shared a common ancestor, and that we didn't "evolve from monkeys" (I was 8 by the way) — such a terrible burden for a child to have to correct their elders. I thought to myself that a God with such idiotic followers was surely no God at all, but merely an imaginary friend for simple minded folk to place their blame on when nothing goes their way.

I was lost for a long time. I struggled with depression from a very young age, and I even tried to kill myself a few times before turning double digits (and many more attempts afterwards). There was too much pain and ignorance in the world for me to bear, but the pain of not giving life the chance to improve was much worse. Of course this led to a variety of addictions I used to numb the pain for the time being — it of course only made things worse. If you haven't realized by now, I haven't killed myself (nor do I plan on it anymore). I gave life a chance and it has shown me to have its ebbs and flows — the lows were low, but the highs were oh so high.

My life has been a journey with many destinations and many addictions sprinkled in here and there. I love my life, and I love my latest addiction: loving God. My spiritual journey deserves a book of its own, but in short, I can say that I've explored every path from science to buddhism to zoroastrianism to various paganisms to every Abrahamic religion, and everything in between. All of it has led me back to Christ. Our faiths are our own. I will not judge you for yours — I only hope that it is grounded in loving forgiveness, and I hope that you will not judge me for mine.

This is a collection of old and new works that I have written and rewritten specifically for my first publication (hence why it is subtitled *Firstfruits*). These are more than just stories to me — this is my attempt at turning everything cruel in life, and everything worth living for, into words. Not everything has a happy ending, but I believe that to be more relatable.

If it were up to me, I would still be editing this and I would probably never publish it, but a wise man told me to welcome imperfection. These works aren't perfect and at times I hate what I've written, but I hope you get something good out of this.

Believe it or not, I love you — even if I don't know you, because God loved you first. The world tries to convince us that we are unworthy, but if God loves us — having known us since before our inception — then we must be worthy of infinite love and forgiveness. I believe that if given the chance, you would do anything to prove your worth.

This is *The Way We Walk: Firstfruits*.

Click

Sometimes I just like to hear the click of a gun from under my chin—
it's never loaded, but I do it to imagine a world without me in it.

It's dark — I know.

It would be a dark and sad world,
and my ego would simply never allow it.

It's dark — I know.

I keep another gun hidden in my bedroom—
it's loaded, and ready to kill anyone who intends to harm my family.

On Writing

I am a writer
and sometimes I am a reader,
but right now
in this moment
I am a writer,
and as a writer,
I have a duty to the reader
to write
when I am compelled to do so
even if it takes me away
from what I am in that moment —
before this very moment, before I became a writer,
I was a watcher
of a movie,
a great movie,
and another moment before that,
I was a traveler
on a voyage home,
but then I began to think
and thinking almost always compels me to write,
so I write.

I often detest writing.
It isn't always pleasurable.
Often times it is draining,
and painful,
as if I were cutting myself
to donate blood,
but my blood is spoiled
with grief and sorrow,
and it should not be used as a transplant
but rather for the purpose of observation —
to be studied, to be viewed under a microscope,
so that someone, anyone —
God I hope at least one person —
can look at it as if it were the final piece
to a puzzle needing to be solved.

Once I am done writing this,
I will be something else —
hopefully just a man —
until I am called to write again.

What makes a man?

What makes a man, I asked.

My father told me
a man is a provider.
My mother told me
a man protects.
My brother told me
a man takes care of himself.
My sister told me
a man takes charge.

My coach told me
a man supports his team.
My employer told me
a man does his work.
My landlord told me
a man pays his dues.
My neighbor told me
a man minds his own yard.
My roommate told me
a man keeps his word.

My teacher told me
a man keeps an open mind.
My ex told me
a man reaches out.
My friend told me
a man is a human.
My pastor told me
a man loves.
My niece told me
a man is a superhero.

I'm still learning
how to hold all of that
without becoming someone else.

Alcohol

The urge to drink
drowns me like a sloth
caught in the rain.

I drink on an empty stomach
so that I can feel something
with instant gratification.

I hate

the world around me
that has become too much to bear
for my sober mind.

I weaken my senses
and in turn
my work has lessened
and my words are slurred.

I drink

and I drink
and I drink.

I breathe

in more cocaine than I do air
just so I can keep drinking
and drinking and drinking.

I hate
I hate

I hate.

Myself, everyone, you, the world.

I don't want to,
because I love you too.

I love deeply
and I want to be there for you
but I have nothing to give.

I only have my words.

My words are confusing and
their meaning is lost to me,
yet somehow they create purpose
and eventually they find worth—
worthy of you.

I want to help.

I do.

It is my dream to help,
but this world has convinced me
that only money helps
and money requires action.

Am I a man of action?

I try to be.
I try every day.
Long enough until the urge to drink
drowns me like a sloth
caught in the rain.

I ramble.

I ramble.

I ramble.

Parker, The Drunkard. Parker, The Sage.

Brilliant by day — belligerent drunk asshole by night. Once he has set his mind to something, it becomes impossible to convince him otherwise. Depending on the mindset, this is the power of either a superhero or a supervillain. In Parker's case, he is both — contingent on how drunk he is at any given time.

He is a man to be admired when sober, and he is a man to be pitied when not. With a clear head, he is capable of many wonders — his words carry weight similar to that of a vast fortune, but with every sip of liquor, the treasure spills over into an abyss and his words lose all value. He becomes irate and unstable — an agent of slander. His mind becomes closed off from any other possibility aside from the self-conceived facts emitting pretentiousness. He attacks with words and then whines when the energy is returned before embarking on a monologue of self-righteousness and “altruism”, then he sits and loathes in the shit of his own making. The moment a foreign idea from a foreign mouth enters the fold, he cuts it short. He loves the sound of his own voice for he believes he knows everything and prefers to learn from himself.

In a heated discourse, he is both the victim and the aggressor. He sucker punches then rapes you with his words, and then he cries if you fight back. From his perspective, he has done no wrong. He has simply tried to bless you with his unwanted semen. He fills you up in hopes of impregnating you with his one true religion — The Church of Parker led by Pope Parker who worships the words of Parker written by the one and only Parker himself.

A sane person would distance themselves from a drunkard such as this, but the allure of the sage is great. Parker, the sage, is loving and kind and receptive and adamant about doing what is right for the ones he loves. He goes out of his way to retrieve and save lost souls, and he comforts them with a loving home and a warm meal and thoughtful words. He pays the debts of the broke, and he heals the broken. Parker the sage would hate the ways of Parker the drunkard — maybe Parker the sage is the only one who could help Parker the drunkard. It is a shame that they will never meet.

Forbidden Fruit

I realize that the hardest part
of deciding between right and wrong
is that I know the difference between right and wrong.

I have been cursed with knowledge

that has manifested as an internal compass
pointing me from bad to good in all things going on.

When ignorance was bliss,
I made decisions
that filled my life with sporadic hits of dopamine
only to be washed away
and drowned out
by the guilt and shame
of mistakes made in pleasure's name
(once the reality sank in) —
like the needle
of some righteous vaccine.

At times, I wish I didn't have to choose.

Especially when being bad feels so right
and doing what's good feels like
I'm the only one sober off of life's booze.

I crave earthly pleasure

the same way a poor man hopes to stumble upon a forgotten treasure.
My compass won't allow it though.

It leads me away from instant gratification
toward a long life lived on the currents of a gracious flow.
I should be grateful to know the difference between right and wrong.

And I am, for the most part,

for when it matters most, I hope.

añore

I'm alone in my understanding.

“friends” disappoint me with their disapproval —
..... they disapprove
..... because they don't understand
..... and they will never understand
..... unless they experience my perspective
..... (a more personal outlook).

They could never truly understand
... the same way no one can understand anything —
..... it's not their fault —
..... it's no one's fault;
..... this is life
..... we live and we judge
..... we judge what we don't understand
..... and we don't understand what we haven't lived.

I will always be judged.
I just wish it wasn't my friends
who judged me when all I've wanted
... all I've needed
... is support.

They say they can't support my choices
so they will not support me.

My brother was an addict
... worse than me
... I didn't support his drug use
... but I always supported him
... I was always there for him
... because I loved him
... I supported him
... not his actions —
... him,
... I supported
... him...

..... (he killed himself anyways
..... but that's besides the point)

... I'm alone in my living
..... I'm alone in my judging
..... I'm alone in my understanding

The Kid at the Bar

“I’ve been thinking about killing myself,” said the kid.

I didn’t say anything back; it’s a shocking thing to hear anyone say, but I understood — I wasn’t surprised. He was like me in that way; we’re both just trying to get by and not die trying. The kid didn’t look half my age — let alone look old enough to be at the bar — but behind that youthful mask was an old soul full of stories you’d expect at the end of a fulfilled life. Now he’s telling me that he’s depressed.

“I’m not depressed.” He’s been reading my mind all night. “I’m just tired.”

I asked, “What’s the difference?”

He thought about it for a moment and then he said, “I guess I feel depressed... When I think about my life... all the shitty moments, the amazing highs — none of it matters anymore. All I think about is: ‘What’s next?’”

“Listen, kid. I’m old... and if there’s anything I can tell you about the progression of life... is that it’s—,” I didn’t know what I was saying — I was 4 whiskey waters deep, and my mouth was faster than my thoughts. The fact that words came out was a miracle enough. As my double vision settled itself, I attempted to finish my thought, “What was I saying? — life... it never stops.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

The kid threw back the rest of his beer and patted me on the back, “It’s been nice meeting you — what’s your name?”

“I’m — I... I don’t remember.”

The kid smiled and chuckled a harmless chuckle, “It was nice meeting you, I — I don’t remember.”

I laughed so hard that I nearly fell out of my chair. By the time I contained myself to look up, the kid was gone.

A Prayer, Unedited

Learning to pray
is the same
as learning to be honest with yourself.

You can't ask God for help
if you can't name what hurts.
You can't give thanks
if you don't know what you're grateful for.

Lately, my prayers
sound like begging.
I feel embarrassed.
Ashamed.
So I go quiet.

I dress my wounds
in prettier words,
then feel guilty
for not thanking God first.

Guilty for always asking for more
instead of sitting still
and reflecting on what I've been given—
what He has empowered me to earn.

But my problems keep growing.

I've survived this long.
I've overcome so much—
thanks to God—
yet the hurdles keep getting higher,
the obstacles grow more monstrous
than ever before.

And I'm tired.

I want to be where I've always dreamed of being—
the dream God placed in me
in my heart,
on my mind.

I'm closer every day.
Better every month.
Transformed every year.

And still,
I feel far away.

My struggles pull me closer to God.
I'm grateful for my faith,
because I'd rather be praying
than hanging from a tree someplace.

I know what I want to give this life,
and I believe
I wasn't built to compromise.
But living isn't easy—
it's really fucking hard.

Sometimes I hate it.
Sometimes I want to curse God.
Sometimes I do.

I usually do.

Then I feel guilty.
I remember everything He's done for me,
and so I hate myself.

Until it clicks.

God would rather hear my anger
than my silence.
He'd rather I speak
than disappear.

So when I pray,
I bring everything:
the hate, the love,
the shame, the pride,
the ingratitude, the thankfulness,
and all the mess in between.

Prayer is a hard thing to do.

But God—
I'm grateful
to have someone to talk to.

The Pier

I'm not scared of heights
and I'm not scared of the ocean,
but something about standing on the edge of a pier,
with no intention of jumping in,
feels daunting.

If I were to fall in, then I could swim,
but I would be wet and cold,
and then I'd have to find my way out.

There's no beach nearby to walk out on,
and there's only the occasional ladder to climb every hundred yards or so,
then I would have to heave my soaking wet clothes atop my shivering cold body
out from the depths of the unforgiving water.

It's an inconvenience at most — a temporary shock,

so why is it daunting?

Why does my balance waver like I've never stood on solid ground before?

Why do I hesitate and struggle to sit on the edge?

Could it be as simple as not wanting to be wet and cold?

Or is there a more complex reasoning?

Perhaps some ancient echo —

the firing of synapses shaped by an ancestor's near drowning —
still lives within me.

I don't know,

but I do know this:

I will continue to stand on the edge of the pier.

The view is quite nice.

Woes of Man

Choices make a man.
Have I made good choices?
Have I acted rash?
Have I acted on temporary emotions
that have set forth permanent decisions?
What am I doing?
Where do I go?
What do I do?

I'm tired.
I don't sleep well, I don't sleep at night.
I sleep when the sun rises
and by the time I wake
the sun is already setting.

The dark has become my home
in the world that I traverse.

Why am I here?
What is my purpose?
Does God have a happy ending in His plan for me?

Does it get better?
Does it get easier?
How will I die?
Will it be by my own hand?
Or from natural causes?
Or perhaps by the hand of another—
perhaps a broken heart.
Perhaps a gunshot,
or stabbing,
or strangulation,
or cancer.
Maybe it's everything
all at once.
I can only be so lucky.

What am I doing?
I seek God
and I still sin.

What am I doing?
I'm so tired.

I'm so tired
that I can't even sleep.

I want to save everybody
I want to save my loved ones,
but look at me.
I can't even save myself.
Do I carry the honor of a savior?
No... I don't think so.

My savior, Jesus Christ,
has not abandoned me,
but I feel abandoned.
He takes my worries,
but I still feel worried.
What am I holding on to?

Why am I holding on to everything?
What is the point?
I have no idea what is going to happen.
I have no idea where I fit in here.

I have my urges—
some of them good—
some of them bad,
some of them destructive.

I have so much work to do.
And what am I doing?
Am I avoiding my path?
Did God make me with my faults?
Or are they my own creation?

I'm so tired.
I want to sleep, but I can't stop thinking
and I have no one to talk to—
no one to vent to,
no one to rant to
because then I would have to listen to them
and I don't have the space for it.

Nor do I feel like I could truly express myself,
in the ways I feel I need to express.
Nor do the ideas that I wish to discuss come to mind
when I have an opportunity to speak.

My thoughts are jumbled.
My mind is foggy.

I don't want to wake up.
I want to sleep
an endless slumber,

and I want to live.

I want to live a good life—
the life of stories—
the life of triumph,
but you can not have triumph
without struggling first.

My burdens are heavy.
My struggles carry weapons
formed for my discomfort.

And my hands are scarred.
My body aches.
I feel
broken.

God save me.
or will I have to save myself?
and is that an act of God?
Is that God's will?
Of course it is.

Of course it is.

Where is my church?
Where are my people?
They're everywhere.
They are you.

So why
am I afraid?

Why am I too tired?
Why don't I talk to you?

Am I too hard-headed?
Am I a fool?
I don't know...
these are not questions for a fool
to answer.

I feel pain;
I feel misery;
I feel despair.

I enjoy what little sunlight I get,
then I return to the dark.

All I have to do is sleep through the night,
and I can wake up with the sun,
but I don't.

I wait.

Because I am in a foreign land
living a foreign lifestyle—
one known by all languages—
the lifestyle of a drunkard,
of an addict,
of a vagabond.

I tell myself:

I am clean, I am healed, I am found,
I Am is The Word, and The Word is The Way, The Way is The Truth,
and The Truth is
I AM is God

I am is love
I am is peace
I am is power

I AM INFINITE.

Yes, I contradict myself.

A Body Isn't a Person

Have you ever seen a dead body?
Have you ever seen a dead body of someone you loved?
Did you recognize them?

I didn't recognize my father.
Not really.
I wasn't there when he passed, so
by the time I arrived
he had already been dead for an hour or so.

When I got the call
that his time was near,
I was working in Los Angeles.
He was up in Fresno.
I left work immediately
and I drove
at over 100 miles per hour
for the 3 hour drive.
He must've passed sometime
after Bakersfield.

Anyways,
I wasn't there for him.
I didn't get to say goodbye.

He had been in hospice,
and I knew I needed to be with him,
but I couldn't get my time off approved.
My job didn't allow it.
I hadn't been there long enough
to make such a request:
a year.

It had been a year
the day my dad died.

I made it home
not knowing my dad
was already dead.
"He doesn't know"
my aunt said
as my mom

and brother
approached me.

It wasn't real,
it didn't feel real,
I wanted to wake up,
I wanted to see my dad.

My brother fell into my arms,
crying.
I held him.
I think I cried.

I can't remember.

I went into the room
to see my dad's body—
my godfather was sitting with him
in silence.
He had slipped a dollar bill
into my dad's pocket.

They made a bet long ago,
during the Vietnam war,
that a dollar goes
to whoever died first.

My godfather asked
if I wanted to be alone
with my dad,
I said yes.
He left.

And it was just me,
with the body of my father—
but it wasn't my father anymore.

The soul, the essence, of my dad
was no longer there.
His face was so thin.
His color had already faded.

Someone had tied a cloth
under his jaw,
knotted at the top of his head
to keep his mouth closed.

I held his lifeless hand.
The skin felt like leather.
I kissed his forehead.
It didn't feel like
I was kissing my dad.

My dad was gone.
This body wasn't him.

My dad was gone
and I never got to say goodbye.

I felt so alone.

He was the last man
who could teach me
how to be a better man
than him.

Fault Lines

These scars I carry have long been forgotten
with unknown origins, without a time stamp
of how they were formed, or when, or why, but they
are a part of me as much as my heart that beats
pumping the life force from the top of my head
to the bottom of my feet.

These scars remain closed until provoked
with the questions of those who wish to know more.
Those who see scars as stories,
raised upon one's skin like a topographical map,
showing how low the valleys go
and where the highs of mountain tops lie.
They see reminders and warnings
of triumphs and mistakes.

These scars have changed me,
and when aggravated, they reveal what I have become.
A friend, a lover, a stranger asks gently
unaware their hands rest on fault lines.
And like an underwater volcano,
triggered by the shaking of the earth,
I erupt, creating tsunamis that devastate,
leaving those in their path behind in the wake.

When the water recedes, I am still standing,
cataloging the damage I caused
with a pressure I refused to name.
I learn too late that silence is not the same as healing,
and buried things do not stay buried—
they wait.

8 Days

Day 1

The flight attendant forgot about the water I requested. She was probably flustered by the exploding can of Dr Pepper that she dropped on my foot. My socks and shoes were now soaking wet and stained brown. To be fair, my shoes were already dirty — I had never cleaned them after dragging them through the dirt lot of a music festival months ago. I wanted to be angry about the whole situation, in fact, I was angry, but I wanted to make it obvious. The flight attendant never apologized — my ego had been insulted. I was becoming evermore furious, but a public outlash had never been my style, so instead I avoided eye contact with her. I let myself zone out while staring at the ceiling lights and their changing colors. Blue. White. Red.

I knew that if I looked at her, then I would have faked an expression of compassion and understanding so as to ease her worries. The problem was that my face wouldn't be able to hide how upset and annoyed I really was. My eyes can tell no lies, so I am forced to live an honest life. I continued to stare at the only empty space I could find: the hypnotic ceiling with changing lights. Blue. White. Red. It was bland, yet peaceful. The order of the colors never changed. Blue. White. Red. In that moment, it was the only peace I was guaranteed. Blue. White. Red.

The cross around my neck began to feel heavy. I had wished to tuck it away and express my irritation, but that would be a betrayal of my faith — my tiresome and demanding faith. I felt weak for needing God as an excuse to not act belligerently. A good man is good regardless of their beliefs — a good man is strong. I wanted to be strong, but first, I needed to be a good man.

I asked God for a cool head. The display of this cross made me a representative of its corresponding beliefs, and the perception of those beliefs can be skewed by someone who does not properly reflect it. According to the simplistic nature of the doctrine, I am to be loving and forgiving, but that was easier said than done. Sometimes, I hate so much that I end up hating God — it goes without saying that I often hate myself. Sometimes, I wish I could live without the shame of having betrayed my creed, while flaunting my wrath and ignorance — indulging in such activities leaves a man feeling hollow. I would rather die full of potential than to live life as a hollow man.

The plane eventually touched down, but it may as well have been a crash landing. I could feel myself getting agitated with each reasonable inconvenience, so I sat down after deboarding the plane and I wrote. I used to pray for times like this, so I could write like this — whenever I pleased — I had the freedom to travel and do the things that I wanted to do such as visiting family. I left my job, so I could be happy... but I'm still miserable. At least I'm miserable doing the things I want. If anything, I'm dramatic — a few bumps in the road and I get pissy. I should be grateful — I should be.

I made my way out to the pick up / drop off zone of the airport — mom was waiting in another lot nearby. She had been tracking my plane with the flight code I texted her, and, like always, she arrived early — eagerly anticipating my arrival.

Not long after, mom pulled up and collected me. We decided to get some food at a restaurant along our route home, and we made our way there with idle conversation. Mom was a talented individual — she could carry on a whole conversation with herself. She could speak fast enough to answer questions I never had. She had many other talents, I'm sure, but this is the one I get blessed with witnessing. I was on edge around her, especially when we haven't been around each other in a while. I knew her and she knew me, and we loved each other, so we did our best

to be tolerant of each other's bad habits (her overexplaining and my easily irritable state of being).

We didn't share many interests, especially with baseball season being over. Her preference had always been tied to topics that didn't allow for a discourse. The "talks" she engaged in were really just commentary about her day or days past or days to come. The only reasonable response I could muster, without hijacking the conversation, usually involved a head nod, or a one syllable response to register engagement. When the conversation lulled, I would try to bring up talking points that I found current and important, but then she would get distracted by another story of hers that held no value for an easily irritable man like me.

"I didn't mean to cut you off," she would say, and yet she would continue to do so anyway.

This was her way of disengaging from conversations that came even remotely close to themes concerning religion, politics, or anything that risked an intense disagreement. She preferred simple conversations that couldn't possibly invoke a passionate dialogue. To her, I was someone who was overly zealous and aggressive in their views on life. I was someone who would fight tooth and nail to prove a point. I was someone who had cut people out of my life for not being on the same page as me, and she didn't want to risk being one of those people — again.

I respected her choice to not engage anymore. I understood it deeply, but it still made me sad. To me, she was made of glass. She had already cracked from years of stress and loss, and other painful things that come from life, so I tried to be understanding of her not wanting to engage with my dramatic behaviours, but in protecting herself, I had lost nearly all interest in pursuing meaningful conversation with her. I still tried, but I always felt disappointed — drowning alone in my thoughts. She always seemed preoccupied with anything other than what I had to say, but I know she loves me, even in her predictably erratic state.

We stopped at the restaurant and enjoyed a meal together. I had two cups of coffee before stepping outside to smoke a cigarette while she paid. The silent and brisk air harmonized with the passing of cars and people walking to and fro. A minivan that I had been standing next to made the sound of doors being unlocked, then I saw a young woman approach the minivan and climb into the front seat. I tried to guess her story since this car looked like it would belong to a family, but the lady looked too young to be a mom. She was very pretty, and I enjoyed her presence while I finished my cigarette. My mind prepared itself and my body wandered back to mom, who was waiting for me in her car.

We began our drive home, and, finally, she asked me a question that could lead to something of value. She asked me about an old friend who I had a falling out with on two separate occasions. Both times were near the end of two separate vacations that we took together. The arguments that could be boiled down to the same principle of "live and let live." During the first trip, he mentioned a mutual friend of ours who wore an N-95 mask in his car by his lonesome. This annoyed my friend, but I didn't care. "Live and let live," I said, but this was not sufficient to him. As expected, this led to politics surrounding Covid, and name calling, and, ultimately, it was an unproductive conversation. The second argument happened over dinner as we sat by a table that had been enjoying themselves since before we arrived. One lady had been laughing loudly. She was obviously enjoying herself, but her laughter disturbed my friend. He would constantly make comments of disapproval and annoyance, that in turn became annoying to me as I disapproved of his own actions. I told him once again, "live and let live." This was said amongst less diplomatic comments that assaulted his ego.

He didn't talk to me for the rest of the night which I found funny. It was poetic as it rhymed with an instance earlier during the same trip where I had been offended and I didn't talk to him for about half an hour before being confronted. When I expressed my hurt feelings, I was met with the comment of, "If I knew you were this sensitive, then I wouldn't have said it."

The next day, after I enjoyed the silence of my friend not talking to me for a whole night, I apologized and ended my apology with: "If I knew you were this sensitive, then I wouldn't have said it." It was a sweet moment for me. I no longer cared for his friendship. I only wished to get along so that I could enjoy my vacation and have someone to drink with.

After sharing this story with mom, our conversation snowballed into greater topics. We spoke of the types of things that splinter relationships — like politics and the personal choices one makes in their life — then we spoke of the specific relationships that exemplified this, but the excitement was killed by yet another interruption. By this point, we were back at mom's house — only for a moment, because we needed to meet with my little brother at another restaurant. We were supposed to have two hours to allow our first meal to be digested, but my little brother rescheduled for an earlier time which meant that we had to go immediately. He was late as usual — arriving at the originally agreed upon time. This kind of behavior was expected of him. He was always kind and cordial, but he had no respect for our time.

After our second meal — after we said our goodbyes — mom and I went on a walk while I smoked another cigarette. I had recognized a bar nearby and I mentioned that my big brother, her firstborn, had taken me there years before his passing. It was the first time I shared a drink with anyone in my family. This comment regarding him eventually gave way to small talk once again, but we were warming up for a deeper conversation. My cigarette burnt slow and mercifully — allowing me to appreciate the fresh air and the increasingly less idle conversation that came along with it.

When we reentered the car, I shared a song that reminded me of my big brother. We spoke of the way he chose to live his life and the consequences that followed. After a moment of silence — tied together by a shared grief — mom told me about the coroner's report. It had been over four years since he took his life, and she had never mentioned this report before — she felt it was a good time to share. She never brought it up before in an attempt to spare me the pain of the details, and of the regret that I could feel after reading it, but she decided to give me that choice.

I already knew that he hung himself, and I was already familiar with the harsh reality of a hanging, but what I didn't know — until reading the report — was that he was practically sober. No drugs were in his system, but there was a little alcohol involved. His ABV was at 0.04%. This meant that he was sober enough to legally drive in California. I was surprised, because after more than two years of sobriety, my big brother had relapsed and found himself getting high on things he had supposedly never done before — things that stripped him of his sanity. He hadn't been in his right mind for the year or so leading up to his suicide, and it broke my heart that, in the end, it was his sober thoughts that allowed him to leave us in such a dramatic fashion.

Although dramatic, and although I still feel anger towards him for it, I can relate to the *why* of it all. Anytime I tried to hang myself, I would never use rope. I would use whatever was around me like an extension cord from my dad's workbench, and I would tie a noose and I would set a bucket on top of some rocks for a little bit of instability. Then I would shorten the noose — enough to where I would have to stand on the tips of my toes. I would wait until I would lose balance, so that the bucket could kick out from under me causing me to hang. That was the idea, but that moment never came. Everytime, I stood there long enough to realize that I was scared

and I didn't want to die. I was more scared of dying than I was of living, and it was that fear that kept me going. Nowadays, I genuinely want to live — the only fear I have is the awe-inspired fear of God. I can only imagine what my big brother's final thoughts were. As his feet went out from underneath him, and he hung there — did he regret it? I think he did.

I spent time with him in those last few years while he was experiencing his final relapse, and while he was losing mind. He accused everyone around him of various activities that they had not committed, but he never did that to me. I went to stay with him, and we would talk and share stories through the night — he seemed mostly alright. In that last year or so of his life, that is where I felt the closest to him, because that was where he was most vulnerable. To me, my big bro had been a superman of sorts (just like my dad was) — an idol that I could only admire without any hope of becoming like him. In his suffering, he became relatable, and I realized: I was him.

I don't know what I expected to feel upon reading that report, and I wasn't sure what to feel after reading it. I only had more questions. Nothing that mattered enough to ask. What was done was done. All I could think of was the guilt I had when I first heard of his passing. I had given him permission to kill himself during our final conversation. It was sometime after his first suicide attempt where he tried to drown himself in the family pool. I told him something along the lines of suicide being his choice; if he truly wanted to go, I asked him to do it somewhere where mom wouldn't be the one to find him. I never thought he would actually do it. They found him alone on the 14th floor of some construction site in downtown.

Mom and I made our way home, and we shared space as I worked on my writing while she watched her shows. Eventually, all of the leftovers had been eaten and two movies had been watched before we called it a night. Despite my irritability, I enjoyed our time together. It had been a good first day back.

Day 2

On the second day, I didn't get up to much. In fact, I only stepped outside a few times to smoke a cigarette while mom prepared food for Thanksgiving day. Besides that, I spent my time writing.

I felt motivated to rewrite some old poetry. In its previous state, it was too simplistic and uninspired — well, not entirely — God has always inspired me even when I wasn't doing anything about it. Sometimes I wouldn't act on the free inspiration, and other times I would be rash and sell myself short (just so I could move on and do something less emotionally draining) — all good art comes at a cost; becoming an artist is becoming someone who can pay that price.

In this case, I sold myself short — before, I thought the poems were complete, but after reviewing and reworking them, I hated their previous forms (and I hated myself for thinking they were good). I was able to add so much more substance; more doesn't always mean better, but this time it did.

Day 3

I woke up late again, feeling overly relaxed and unmotivated. The real danger was how comfortable I was. Being back in this city, under mom's roof, it had a way of making me feel that way — comfortably lazy. Mom loves me unconditionally and she would do anything for me, but coddling only inhibits growth (it's why I moved away). I had to leave home to experience the stress of life that pressures one into becoming the kind of person only a village can shape — a truly well-rounded individual who isn't weakened by the sheltering of a paranoid parent.

I decided to continue with the rewrites of my old poetry, and then I read what I had rewritten to mom and she enjoyed it. It was a poem about temptation, and the burden of knowing the difference between right and wrong; I talked about how I wish I could be ignorant, so that I can go through life blissfully while doing what I craved — things like having copious amounts of sex with numerous partners, experimenting with all kinds of drugs and being high all the time, and ultimately indulging in whatever came to mind without feeling remorse for having violated some ethic code. This led to us talking about God and the beauty of a relationship with a higher power — the beauty of serving something bigger than our selfish desires. Even though I believed myself to have good morals, I would still find a loophole to get what I craved. I needed something bigger than myself to keep me honest — I needed God. Does that make me a bad person? If it were anyone else, I'd say yes.

Like every conversation I get comfortable in, we found ourselves walking the tightline of politics and the hypocrisy of our government, and weaponized ideologies that are marketed as Christian beliefs. Naturally, we found ourselves on the topic of AI and the repercussions that would come with the ability to make real news appear fake and fake news appear real. Mom had to call it quits with the discussion, because it was getting too heated. I get aggressive when debating such serious topics. I tend to believe I have the only right opinion and it doesn't make for a pleasant experience (for anyone involved — including me). She was right to end it. I went to my room and rewrote a few more poems.

Day 4

I woke up at a more reasonable time, but I was still too comfortable. I read the next rewrite to mom, and she enjoyed it. It felt nice being seen.

During my daily bible study and journaling, many conversations came up concerning God, and of the writers of the book of psalms, and of Paul, and of whether or not we should love Lucifer as a fallen brother. I asked, "Aren't we supposed to emulate unconditional love?"

To me, there was a lot of hypocrisy to confront in the scriptures, but it took some time for me to realize that I needed to confront my own hypocrisy first before I could make sense of anything else. At the end of the day, I know nothing, so I shouldn't pretend like I understand — I should always seek to better understand than I do at any given moment.

I was beginning to feel fat and lazy. I hadn't completed a proper workout since I flew back here. The only thing that had brought me any solace was the fact that I had more time to spend with mom. Whether we weren't speaking, or whether we spoke of meaningless things, or whether we spoke of things that inspired passion, I was just glad to be near her. A part of me looked forward to returning to San Diego and the life I had there, but I also dreaded the feeling I always felt when saying goodbye to my mom. I love her so much.

We watched some television — *Malcolm in the Middle*, and in this particular episode, Hal's father passed away. He wasn't able to process it at first because he didn't have any extravagant memories of his father, but eventually the weight of reality sank in when he realized that his father didn't need to do anything. He was his dad and that was enough.

I ended the night with a proper workout. Falling asleep was easy after that.

Day 5

I rewrote and shared another poem with mom, which she enjoyed, then we ate breakfast and watched a movie and more episodes of *Malcolm in the Middle*. It was another lazy day, but I enjoyed sharing space with mom and our occasional conversations. Even the small talk was

beginning to grow on me. I really do love her — no matter what.

I ended the night with another workout, and I was feeling great again.

Day 6

I woke up and read another revised poem to mom. It was the final rewrite. Afterwards, I set the tv up for her and I so that we could stream a live church session. We listened to worship music and heard a decent sermon, however, we weren't fulfilled, so we watched another sermon which gave us that spiritual recharge that we needed. We were both moved, and I was invoked with the spirit of discretion as there were some things the pastor said that I didn't agree with. He seemed to be fear mongering — a common tactic amongst politicians and pastors alike — it's disgusting really, but I give all these idiots the benefit of the doubt. "Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they do." Oftentimes, the bad guys believe they're the good guys — just like me.

Mom got sick and had to rest. I came to comfort her as she threw up. Once she felt better, we watched *The Passion of the Christ*, and we were moved by the portrayal of Jesus' suffering. It was a heavy topic, so we moved onto lighter subjects. We watched a Studio Ghibli film called *My Neighbor Totoro*, and I wrote a new poem about lacking inspiration, yet trusting in God to guide my pen.

Mom thanked me for comforting her while she was throwing up. She was always there for us, but whenever she was sick, she would be sick in solitude. For her, it was a nice change of pace to be the one comforted. I had never thought about it before, and it made me sad to see the ignorance I displayed toward her personal struggles, while I was always expecting her to come to my aid no matter what.

We talked of our plans for my final full day in town, and whether or not we should invite my brother. Then we began talking about him and why we think he never prioritizes us. He rarely acknowledges us, but he responds to his friends and girlfriend everyday (we would have to wait several days, or weeks, for a reply from him unless he needed something from us).

The night came to an end and we said our "I love yous" and "Goodnights". I worked out again before bed, then I slept quite well.

Day 7

I woke up at a reasonable time and did my bible study and journaling like every other morning. I played my guitar and sang some psalms while mom sat quietly and listened. Afterwards, I worked out pretty intensively, and I got a good sweat going, then I cleaned up before going out to breakfast at around 4pm. We went to our favorite smash burger spot, and it was better and greasier than I remembered.

We played some games on the phone after eating, then we went home to decompress for the day. After a few hours of letting the food digest, we went out to our family's favorite mexican restaurant, but they were closed due to a power outage, so we went to our second favorite mexican spot and we got food to bring home. It wasn't nearly as good as it had been in the past but that could have been because we arrived during their last 40 minutes. We ate at home and watched another studio ghibli movie called *Spirited Away*. I had told mom about it the day before, and I told her how it was a major part of my childhood and that it gave me nightmares, but after watching it with her, I realized that I had never really watched it before. The movie was mostly new to me except for a key scene of the parents turning into pigs. I had always thought it had a sad ending, but I was pleased to find that the ending was actually a happy one. I didn't

think the parents would be saved, but they were — I didn't think anyone would be saved, but they were.

I realized that I had been making assumptions about my past this whole time, without giving myself the benefit of the doubt that things were never really as bad as I made them out to be. Mom got tired and went to bed, so I had my last cigarette for the night and I began cleaning up and preparing for my flight back to San Diego.

Day 8

Before my alarm could go off, I woke up with ease, and I studied my bible and journaled. I took a shower and cleaned up my room and finished packing. Mom and I played some games on our phones while we had another debate about religious topics. This time around, I was more aware of how fast I was to anger with disagreements. I had to remember that I don't know everything, nor do I know the things I argue about, but I am passionate. Passion without the necessary wisdom to articulate it can be a messy thing.

We both decided to fast today. Time flew by and we left for the airport before embracing each other and saying, "Until next time." I hate goodbyes. Goodbyes sound definite. God willing, we will see each other again. I hope so.

I sat at the terminal gate and someone sat next to me despite there being open seats elsewhere. He began to eat loudly, and I tried to not let it bother me, but it did. He burped and it reeked. I was becoming irritated. He pulled out a can of Dr Pepper from his jacket, and all I could think about was him spilling it on me — like that flight attendant on my journey here. I wanted to say something to him (nothing nice), but instead I decided to move to another seat. By that time, there were no open seats left, so I stood — awaiting my turn to board the plane. I couldn't help but chuckle. Life can be poetic when you notice its patterns. If you don't like the rhyme, then revise it.

The Price of Freedom

What is the price of freedom?
The price of freedom is a scam.
It's packaged as a product and
like most products
it is a solution to man-made problems.
Those in power pull the strings
while the billions of us
stand by and watch,
or step in and act.
Simply put: all of it is good and bad.
Why make it complicated?
Like the supposed price of freedom,
it doesn't make sense to ask.
Why would I ask for something that has been given to me?
By my being born,
I have earned the right to live in this world
and no one can take that away.
Yet those in power
vote for laws in our place,
and they try anyway.

Freedom isn't marketed as free,
but it is—
It's already ours, and it can never be taken away.

Fall Out of Line

Fall in line,
from the black void we march
shoulder to shoulder with the crowd,
feet scraping, sounds of fatigue and triumph
come from all around.

The ground mutters patience
with stories imprinted by the footsteps
of those who have done the walk
without needing to make sense
of the purpose it serves
and the talk it talks.

Stand in the queue
of the ones who are due
who follow their own signs,
and still managed to arrive here
just like you,

self-diagnosed geniuses,
but they are all insane
ready to break until a seam appears—
a crack, a fault in the mundane.

Be the one to attack it without fear.

Wait long enough—
don't shove the moment,
don't confuse the timing.
Keep your strut,
follow the pitter-patter of rhyming feet,
then wait and anticipate your moment to be free.

See it.
Name it.
Step when it opens,

and pursue that gap.

Your hour is here,
so move whole,
move clean,
and remove yourself from this trap.

With high regard for the tests to come,
commit with heat in your chest
that rises from the fires under your feet,

then fall out of line.

Make your own lane, and run
with nothing holding you back,
not even the signs of the frozen damned
can tempt you
to the black.

What If

I'm afraid of the *what ifs* of life—
the unknown outcomes
with the larger-than-life stakes
the gamble that bets on one's integrity,
testing whether we can meet
death's dealing hand
between what is
and what might have been.

Life is hard enough
just to stay steady,
to feel safe
so why would someone choose
to bet on the odds of a dream
that many would wager
on how you would surely lose.

There is no way to know
what comes of the gamble we make,
but there is certainty
in knowing which bets
are worth the take.

They're the ones that keep you up at night,
the ones that occupy your mind

It's okay to be afraid of the *what ifs*.
It's okay to bet against the house.
At the end of it all,
it is we, the dreamers,
that give fate its shape.

Across the Aisle

I should probably start looking for a job,
I thought to myself
while sitting across from another lonesome soul at the airport.

The best ideas I've had
have never been born from thoughts.
They roll out
like the words of this poem,
but I'm starting to doubt this will be any good.

That's what thinking gets you.

The only difference
is that I wasn't writing five minutes ago.

I was too busy thinking about writing.
Thinking up thoughts,
it's akin to breathing on purpose.

Once I stopped trying, that was when
I could finally breathe
naturally and write.

Maybe it's just me.
Maybe I just hesitate when I think.
When I think, I stare off into space
and people
like the guy across the aisle
feel uncomfortable.

STARDUST

CPT WILLIAMS' PERSONAL LOG

Day 2141

I need more stardust. There's no way I can survive another 959 days sober. I should be arriving at the next checkpoint station in 23 days, but Ricky told me sometime ago that he wasn't sure if it would be ready. Apparently, it takes 3 months to render a single batch. This would be easier if I could make it myself, but the ship isn't equipped with the proper hardware — thankfully, the checkpoints are. I lost comms with Ricky before he could confirm anything, but hopefully his guys will be ready this time. My mission is practically over. I just need to return to earth and await my replacement. This ship — with the help of the maintenance bot — could make it home without me (given that the bot doesn't start another fire). They don't need me nearly as much as I need to be high.

Day 2143

I'm losing my mind more so from the withdrawals than I was from the binging. I started seeing faces in the shadows about a week ago — it really got to me today though. I was running a maintenance check and I saw another one in my peripheral, but it was much more detailed than usual. It looked like someone I knew from another life — someone I had been trying to forget. I could make out her face; I could see her smile — a devilish grin. It's given me a good reason to get back to these journals. Updating my personal log has a way of grounding me more than work ever has. It focuses my attention. Fuck. I need to sober up.

Day 2144

I'm feeling better today. The hallucinations hold no power when I just ignore them. I know better than to believe in something so obviously fake — after all, I am a scientist. I'll be fine no matter what happens. The maintenance bot has been doing better too. It's been over 100 days since the last fire (this is the longest it's been without an incident since the start of our journey).

Day 2164

Ricky's guys came through!!! I'm set for another 2000 days if I ration this out right, but I won't spend another second up here if I don't have to. This ship was intimidating when I first took command of it, but over the years, it has become too familiar. Every corner, every room, feels too small. I miss having a house with a yard. I miss the greenery. I'd even settle for fake turf just to feel something between my toes again. I can't handle solitude anymore. Living up here is simple, but so is madness. When I started this mission, I was honored to be a part of the team that would establish the first universal highway, but I've lost that excitement somewhere along the way. With each checkpoint established, our crew diminished until we reached the end of the line. After the final checkpoint, I was alone. By the time I make it back to earth, it will

have been 10 years since I've last seen my friends, or whatever is left of them. After I heard about Sara's death, I lost interest in my mission. I'm not sure why it affected me so badly — I've been a robot living on autopilot ever since. I should probably try and stay sober.

Day 2178

I had been on another binge. I don't know how long it was this time, but looking back on the command logs, it must have been about 10 days. My entries get a little paranoid when I'm actively bingeing — I need to work on that. Mission Control obviously can't know about my drug use, but then again, what are they going to do about it? They can't do anything until I get home, and even then, the payday will have me set for life and I won't need to work again anyways. During my binge, I blew through what could have been 100 days worth of stardust. My body couldn't take it anymore and I was bedridden these last few days, but that didn't stop me from a bedside bump here and there. I notified Mission Control via the command log, so no flags were raised while comms went dark. Luckily, system diagnostics have come back clean, and I'm on track to reenter Earth's orbit on day 2500 — the hardest part of my journey. I'll be less than an hour away from touching down, and yet I'll have to stay in orbit for another 500 days while they prepare for the next expedition. At least I'll be able to see big blue again. That will be nice.

Day 2198

These last few weeks have been the most stressful days of my entire tour. I lost the stardust after the binge — which was okay at first, but it quickly became an issue. My check ins were late, and I missed some of the routine maintenance checks. I told Mission Control that I've been under the weather and they've been understanding. I need to get my shit together. The damn maintenance bot started another fire — I'm beginning to think it's an arsonist. Anyways, I found the stardust tucked away with the cannabis in the greenhouse. All is well that ends well.

Day 2203

The bot started another fire! And this time I saw it! It was 100% intentional, I decided extreme measures were necessary, and I disabled it.

Day 2212

I lowered my intake of the stardust. The highs have been much more tame. My work has doubled since I disabled the bot, but I've been enjoying my quiet time. I miss it sometimes — the bot and its endless noise making — but life has been therapeutic lately with this lighter dose. I don't remember much of what happened. The repetition of my days make for one blurry memory. That's why I started journaling after all — to remember, but it doesn't help that I forget to update my personal log most days. The ship is in one piece though, so I'm doing something right (even if under autopilot). I was the only one qualified for this mission, so I would hope so. They said I was reliable, but I'm starting to wonder if I was the only stupid enough to take this job. I had no history of disobedience, and I've worked solo expeditions alone in Antarctica for many years. My resume was practically made for this job. If I never met Ricky — if I never took that first hit of stardust, then maybe I'd still be that reliable guy. I often reflect on who I was

before this craving overtook me. The real problem is that I like being addicted. The only thing I look forward to is sobering up so I can get a fresh high. My job used to excite me — the simple things used to excite me, but now I can't enjoy anything unless I'm wasted.

Day 2500

T-Minus 40 minutes until I am back within earth's orbit. I just passed Jupiter, so the braking initiatives have kicked in. I'll be passing by the remaining checkpoint stations from here, but Mission Control will send a freight ship to supply me for the remainder of my stay here. Rick has some guys coming on that ship, so it shouldn't be an issue getting any stardust. It should be here on day 2755. That works out because I will likely be out around then. I have my good days, and my bad weeks. This is going to be the last batch for me. I'm going to get clean before I touch back down on earth.

Day 2734

My math was a little off and I'm out of stardust, but it's okay. I can survive 20 days until the next shipment

Day 2745

It wasn't enough that I single handedly supervised this entire tour to Alpha Centauri and back — and helped establish the checkpoint stations along the way — but now they're expecting me to wait another 255 days before I can return home. All because they couldn't figure out a better schedule with training my replacement — poor bastard is going to be stuck up here for much longer than I ever was. I heard that they might be sending whoever it is to Wolf 359. During my next call with Mission Control, I'm going to see about a temporary replacement to take over in the meantime. This would be so much more bearable if I just had some stardust. I might make that a case too. Stardust should be standard for these longer deployments. It wouldn't be the first time drugs were used to enhance operatives in the field. Like the nazi's and their meth, stardust kept me active and alert. There is obviously the downside of my sanity slowly degrading, but with proper research this could turn out to be a miracle drug for service workers everywhere — the possibilities are endless for every industry. Even in its current state, the hallucinations aren't an issue if you have a strong mind.

Day 2754

I'm tired. The only rest that can save me is death. Ricky's guys couldn't bring any stardust. I've been doing pretty well since I ran out, but the withdrawals are only going to get worse. I've never actually made it through withdrawals before.

Day 2793

I've been trying to keep myself busy — I haven't been sleeping much as of late. Somehow I'm still behind on tasks. I wanted to reboot the bot, but I couldn't find it. I swear I've

been smelling something burning, but I can't find anything to prove it yet. It has to be around here somewhere.

Day 2844

I haven't found the bot yet, but I found an air duct that had been cut open with a torch. I knew I wasn't crazy. I heard the withdrawals from stardust could last for years, so I was beginning to doubt my sanity, but this has to be real. I will find that bot, and I will kill it for good this time.

Day 2984

The bot tricked me. I thought I found its den, but it was a trap. It attacked me, and I had to fight it off. I barely managed to escape before trapping it in the med bay. Soon this whole journey will be over. Unfortunately, between me tearing apart the ship to find the bot, and the bot starting fires, much of the station has been damaged beyond repair. I've been relying on the automated systems. Mission Control doesn't know, but I don't care anymore. I disconnected the communications system earlier today. When I went by the med bay, the bot wasn't there. This little fucker escaped again somehow. I've been having nightmares of being sodomized in my sleep and being torched from the inside. In my waking hours, I'm hallucinating much more often too. The shadow people no longer exist in my peripheral vision. They have been looking me in the eyes and approaching me, but I ignore them — the bot is my only priority. I'm so tired. Soon Mission Control will send someone for me. Soon they'll take me home. Soon I can get more stardust. Maybe I'm better off dead.

Day 3034

I don't know when it happened, but one of the thrusters was damaged. I had been spiraling away from earth for only God knows how long, and the comms station was burned down the other day. Nearly all systems are down. Life support is still active thankfully. I found the bot. It was disabled and right where I left it. I don't know what's going on, but I did find some more stardust. I'm violently high now — I'm peaking as I write this. I'm going to go looking for the bot again.

Seasons

Seasons come and go
like human nature,
shifting to and fro—
a past defined, a future unknown.

We change in quiet revolutions,
shaped by time and weathered days,
learning what to let go of,
learning what to save.

The evolution of our character
lies in the seeds it's sown:
some lost beneath the frost of doubt,
some rooted deep, fully grown.

And though no season ever stays,
each leaves a mark, a tone—
we are the sum of what we've been
and what we choose to grow.

The Winter of Her Life

She was a kitten
when her adoptive mother took her in
from the harsh reality of a life lived alone
and the time she spent fending on her own.

It was springtime then,
and she was young and full of life,
yet her upbringing was ravaged by strife
and was filled with the challenging nature of the need to survive.

Not many would have survived,
but she did, and it made her untrusting and unkind.
Her soon-to-be mother saw this, and so she gave her time
defined by love and patience, unconditionally so.

Then came summer
and the heat of the dry valley air,
and the kitten was growing up, learning to trust
and love her adoptive mother, and the care they both shared.

Eventually, the kitten, let her new mother take her home,
a place that wasn't known by walls or a roof
but rather by the love and presence
that her mother bestowed.

Fall came quickly, and the kitten was growing old,
safe and sound, she learned the ins and outs
of her new stomping grounds
with the assurance of always having a home to return to.

Life passed by fast,
as she was comfortable at last,
without the need to hunt and scavenge
like in her old life that had long been past.

And like the trees that stood bare of their leaves, this cat
had entered the winter of her life.
Someday, she would surely go,
leaving behind a life fully told.

To Be Remembered

I want to be remembered
for the love I shared,
for the hands I held
when days felt long.

I want to be remembered
for the time I offered,
for the patience I learned
when weeks felt slow.

I want to be remembered
for the wisdom I imparted,
for the ignorance I quelled
when years felt uncertain.

I want to be remembered
for the courage I summoned,
for the fears I faced
when decades felt intimidating.

I want to be remembered
for the stories I lived,
for the values I modeled
when a lifetime feels complete.

Scarred

“They’re scared to death of it.”

“Of what?”

The silence was an answer of its own —
an answer he wished he never heard,
and so he regretted his question
letting the silence takeover him.

They ventured further into the abyss —
its sepia tones hues over them with questions
that only silence could answer.

Once past the veil
color could reenter the world —
a broken world,
a ruined world —
and it was beautiful.

Redemption

*"I would have burned the world for you," he said.
She replied, "I never asked you to."*

She carried her past in scars alone. Raised in a war torn country, ravaged and raped by the circumstances let on by ungodly men who crusaded in the names of their gods: money, power, and control. At the age of five, her father sold her into slavery to buy medicine for himself. Until the age of 17, she did whatever she was made to do. She served the likes of grotesque men whose wealth surpassed small nations. Their tastes were satisfied until she outgrew them, then she was cast out like garbage to become someone else's responsibility. That did not stop her from picking herself up and making a new life for herself. The past did not define her. She would not let it.

Over the next several years, she worked odd jobs to afford herself an education in filmmaking. She told her story, and many others, through her art — bringing awareness to the issues she grew up enduring. Wealth and fame found themselves attracted to her, and she did very well.

He came from a wealthy family and a stable home, but his mental state did not reflect that. He was innately depressed, and attempted to kill himself countless times, but he was a coward — a coward for never committing and a coward for even trying. At least, that was his way of processing his depression. In his mind, nothing he did was ever the right choice. Drugs and alcohol were a natural progression for his regressing mental state. By the age of 16, he was addicted to heroin — even more so, he was addicted to the sting of the needle piercing his flesh. The high made it easier to cut his legs. The warmth of the blood cascading down was like a blanket that shielded him from the monsters of the world. To him, the world was a cold and dark place, and he made it his sole responsibility to save it. He wanted to be the hero that never came to rescue him, but this was merely a fantasy for someone who lived under a constant state of influence.

They met abroad in a country that neither of them called home. She was there on business, and he was there after having lost himself on the back of a cargo train. He stumbled into the city in search of his next high. The first house he came across without a car in the driveway, or lights on inside, became his target for a quick breaking and entering. He tore the house apart in search of drugs and stumbled upon some pain medication. He took his usual dosage and turned his attention to the house's amenities. He bathed himself in a hot bath and then clothed himself in fine linen. One could confuse him for having been a productive member of society. After leaving the house, he meandered through a nearby park where he stumbled across a professional production for some movie or TV series. That was when their eyes found each other and time stopped. He was too high to care about etiquette, so he walked on to the set with the confidence of an A-List movie star.

He extended his hand to her saying, "Hi. I'm Bryce."

"I'm Michelle," she responded after taking his hand.

Their handshake remained steadfast, and so did their eye contact. A thousand lifetimes flashed before their eyes, but only one mattered to them both — the one where they got to see each other again. One of the production assistants called out to Michelle — breaking them out of their trance. Michelle pulled out a marker and wrote her number down on his arm. Neither one

could understand their mutual attraction, or the speed to which they had become enamored, but it felt natural — too natural to ignore and leave the outcome to chance.

For the remainder of the day, Bryce begged for money on the street until he had enough to buy a fancy meal for two and to make a phone call from a payphone. Later on that night, he called Michelle and arranged a date at the restaurant downstairs from her hotel room (it was her idea).

The date went well and they learned much about each other — their favorite foods and movies, their morals and ethics, their dreams and ambitions (Bryce conveniently left out any details pertaining to his addictions, and Michelle danced around any topic that concerned her past).

“I just want to tell stories that bring to light the kind of atrocities most people try to ignore in the news. If I can make it more easily digestible — if I can make it entertaining, then I can educate people at the same time. I hook them with a few hours of engaging content, then I leave them with a more profound interest in the world around them,” said Michelle.

“There’s so much pain in the world, and too many people think it’s only happening to them. If they only knew that there were others who shared their pain, and wanted to help, then we would all be so much stronger for it. If we just put aside our pride, then we could allow ourselves to be saved, and maybe just in time to save someone else. I’m not sure how yet, but I also want to make the world a better place,” said Bryce.

Their conversations were filled with shared laughter and vulnerability (somewhat). The date went so well that Michelle invited Bryce up into her room. After a whole night’s worth of love making, they turned to a more intimate conversation where they finally discussed their pasts and what had brought them to where they were now. Bryce was hesitant about sharing his story until he heard the horrors of what Michelle had gone through. Hearing about her traumatic upbringing made him irate with the cruelty she faced. He wanted to hurt everyone who had caused her harm, but she didn’t want that. She had made peace with her past. It was already dead and buried; she didn’t need anyone to dig up the graves of her past.

Although she had found peace with her history, Bryce was still struggling with the demons that came along with his. Throughout their time, seeing each other regularly, Bryce continued to wrestle with his drug addiction. Instead of focusing on cleaning up, and getting his life together, he became fixated with cleaning up Michelle’s past. Using resources from a local library, he was able to research Michelle’s life thoroughly. He looked for any thread that could lead him to her father, the man who sold her into slavery, and the men who had bought and traded her like livestock. But this was not the kind of information readily available on the internet. These were the kinds of deals done in the dark — offline. Bryce drove himself mad with finding these tormenters. It became his new drug. On the one hand, he had inadvertently become sober, but on the other hand, he had become obsessed with avenging her youth.

They had continued to see each other regularly, and they were even spending every night together. During the day, she worked and he continued his research until she became free. It didn’t take long for Bryce to profess his love and for her to return the sentiment. On the surface, they were happily in love. For Michelle, everything was right in the world. For Bryce, this was just the beginning of the end. His obsession led him into a dark, underground world where the likes of those who bought and sold young girls lurked. He took it upon himself to torture and kill all who didn’t comply with his questions. This continued for weeks until finally Bryce found someone who implied to have known something about a man who had bought many girls from

the small country where Michelle was from. Bryce would follow this lead, but first he spent one last night with Michelle.

“I’m wrapping up filming tomorrow, then I’m taking a break. There’s an apartment in Monaco that I’m closing a deal on soon, and well, I’d like for you to move in with me,” said Michelle. “We can work out the details tomorrow night when I get home.”

“I would like that,” he said.

The following day, Michelle went to work and Bryce sought out his lead. Later that night, Michelle returned to her hotel room after another long day of shooting. She was in a state of bliss, imagining their life together in Monaco. The idea of moving into a new future together, of leaving behind the shadows that had once defined them, felt more real than ever. She could already picture the sun setting over the Mediterranean, a world away from the pain they lived through. Her phone buzzed — an unfamiliar number.

It was from Bryce. His message read: *I found him.*

Her stomach dropped. A flood of conflicting emotions surged through her — fear, worry, but also an unsettling sense of calm. She thought they had respected her wishes to leave the situation alone, so that they could move on together. She hadn’t seen him this consumed by anything in the months they’d been together. He was a stranger she no longer recognized.

She paced the hotel room, her mind racing. Could she stop him? Could she bring him back from the edge?

She called him, but the line went to voicemail. The realization struck her that she didn’t want to leave a message. She couldn’t find the right words to reach him. It wasn’t about his obsession with revenge anymore. It was about the destruction he’d been courting, the slow unraveling of the man she loved. Bryce had crossed a line, and in doing so, he was pulling them both back into the abyss.

Another realization came to mind — they had been sharing each other’s locations. She knew exactly where to find him, so she grabbed her coat and rushed to the door. He needed to understand that this wasn’t the way.

Bryce stood in front of a dilapidated building on the outskirts of the city. It was old, abandoned, and seemed to have a history as dark as the one he was chasing. His hand trembled as he gripped the gun in his jacket pocket, the weight of it somehow heavier than the darkness that had settled in his chest. His fingers itched for the trigger, but something else tugged at him — an image of Michelle’s face, her warmth, her voice.

He couldn’t ignore it, but it was too late to back out now.

He had finally tracked down one of the men — a broker — he believed to be one of the many men responsible for the suffering Michelle endured. His heartbeat drummed in his ears, the anticipation of violence fueling him with a sense of power he hadn’t felt in years. The needle was long gone, replaced by this twisted sense of righteousness. This was his redemption.

But as he moved forward, a soft sound broke through the haze — the sound of footsteps behind him. He spun, expecting to find a monster, but instead, it was Michelle.

She stood there, her eyes wide, pleading.

“Bryce,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “Please, stop.”

He swallowed hard, his chest tightening. “You don’t understand. I have to do this. Not just for you, but for all the kids who will just end up going through the same thing as you.”

“This won’t bring you peace. It’ll only drag you further into the darkness — taking me with you,” she said, stepping closer, “Put the gun away. We’ll call the police. This isn’t how we

should fight back. We did our part by surviving. We fight by moving forward, and by spreading the word. We can't do that if we're dead or behind bars for murder."

For a moment, the world stood still. The storm inside him raged, but her voice — a simple plea — was like a lifeline.

"I've spent so much time thinking I could fix things, Michelle. But I'm only destroying us."

Her eyes softened. She reached out, placing a hand on his chest, just over his heart. "You don't need to fix it. You never did. All I needed was for you to be here with me — to let go of the anger. We can't change what happened, but we can choose who we are now."

Tears welled up in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't know how to stop. I thought this was the only way to make it right."

He stood there, frozen, the weight of her words sinking in. For the first time in months, his mind felt clear. He could breathe. He hadn't realized just how much of himself he'd lost in this quest for redemption, in trying to erase her past, his past, and all the pain that connected them.

She took a step back, pulling him toward her. "Come home, Bryce. Come home with me."

The next morning, Bryce stood in the lobby of the hotel, staring at the sun as it rose over the horizon. He had made a choice, one that didn't involve violence or revenge, but love — a love that was worth more than anything he could have ever hoped to find. It wasn't the kind of redemption he'd imagined, but it was enough.

Michelle walked up to him, her presence steady and reassuring.

"Are you ready?" she asked, her voice full of hope.

Bryce smiled softly, a weight lifting from his shoulders. "Yeah, I'm ready."

Together, they walked out of the hotel, hand in hand, ready to face the future — not as two broken souls searching for answers, but as two people who had found their peace. The past would always be there, lingering in the corners of their memories, but it no longer had the power to define them.

They didn't need to burn the world. They just needed each other.

Hands

If the eyes
... are the gateway to the soul,
then the hands
... are the record keepers of the soul's work.

The hands prove what has been done
... by the scars they wear
... and the muscle memory they've learned
... to move forward with ease
... moreover each time —
their craft becomes easier
... because the hands become stronger —
... accustomed to the hardship of real work,
... necessary work, honest work.

What story will your hands tell?
What journey will they mold —
... will they:
..... build a home?
..... hold a loved one?
..... comfort a stranger?
... will they:
..... break bones?
..... abandon their duty?
..... shun their neighbor?

I hope to scar my hands
... with fire
..... by pulling out those I love,
... with blades
..... by protecting the innocent,
... with work
..... by creating something good.

In Every Face

Every face is beautiful because
in every face
I see a mother
and a father.

I see a son
and a daughter.
I see my past
and my future.

I see my wrongs
and my rights.
I see all of the different paths that I could've taken in life,
and in every face, I see a story
of triumphs
and of struggles,
of pain
and of glory.

I see the battles lost
and the battles won.
I see the uphill climb that never seems to be done.

I see the tears shed
and the laughter shared.
I see the moments cherished
and the painful memories bared.

In every face, I see the joy of love
and the pain of loss.
I see the longing for connection,
and the fear of being crossed.

I see the will to live,
and the need to thrive.
I see the hunger for wisdom,
and the desire to survive.

In every face,
there's a common struggle,
a bond that unites us all,
a unity we thread.

For we are all human,
with hopes and dreams,
with flaws and imperfections,
with endless schemes,
and though our journeys may be different,
and unique,
in every face,
lies the same humanity
we seek.

So let us embrace our differences,
and our similarities,
for in every face,
we find
our shared identities.

Sorry

I'm sorry
to every soul I've bruised before,
and to those I may bruise once more.
I'm sorry.

I wish I had never meant the things I said,
but anger rose and reason fled;
in fleeting storms, I made the choice
to hurl the full weight of a hardened voice
that stained a day that should have shined,
and left regret etched in our minds.

I wish that time could be rewound.
I wish I'd kept my anger bound
instead of launching spiteful blows
whose echo struck me as it rose,
revealing, in their cruel return, how sharply my words can burn.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry for the endless plea,
for the looping apologies.
If healing lived in words alone,
I'd carve amends into a trembling tone,
but I know change is deeper than a vow,
and it must be lived, not just spoken out loud.

So let me grow beyond this pain;
let strength replace the old refrain,
and may a wiser future bring a day where I never have to say
this fragile, heavy offering:
I'm sorry.

Love Is

Love is dangerous
as it encompasses all.
It fuels everything,
but even a rocket eventually falls.

A passion as deep
and unbound as love
can make an extremist of every faith
and belief.

It's contagious
and can spread like a virus inflicting people with scary things
like dreams.

It can ruin nations
and it can form the foundations of a singular kingdom.

Its ability to divide two opposing sides
is only made stronger by its true power
to link them.

It flows to and from
and in and out
while making things more real
than the fear we feel from pretending.

Love is dangerous
and danger is inevitable for all things that are capable of ending.

Yet love continues for the sake of the thrill.

It begins again and again
without second thought, or remorse, or guilt for the things done in loves' name
as love is always reinventing itself to fit the molds it longs to fill.

It refuses to die.

Taking everyone down with it every time it meets another demise,
love persists.
It is good and true
and a sense of release for once clenched fists.

Love is predictably erratic.

Organized chaos

with a motive to renew in ways that cut through the static air
of a life not lived.

Like a parent that believes in you

despite all odds,

Love is God.

The Long Way Home

“I am going to take the long way home.”
The usual paths I’ve roamed have become crowded
with the same old faces
and the same old crooked stepping stones
that quiver under my feet
and break, and cause me to slip.

Too many times, have I tripped
down these old familiar paths I’ve walked,
and like those trails, I have become worn down.
The remnants of bruised skin
and broken bones
only seem to compound,

and a mound of anguish
has made these familiar routes
too hard to walk about,
so I turned myself around
and made a choice
to walk an unbeaten path I found.

The unfamiliar landscape was daunting
and the scenery began to gloam
as the sun dipped low,
but with a stern composure
I had already made up my mind.
“I am going to take the long way home.”

As I combed through the overgrown brush
with my fingers, and as I kicked up dust
that had long been settled,
I found a rhythm that seemed random at first,
but it made more sense with every step
accompanied by the occasional curse of:

“What the hell am I doing here?”

I asked myself time and time again
while finding myself in new predicaments.
New problems brought on new solutions,
and despite the constant need for readjusting,
I found myself excited to adapt and learn,
trusting in the tantalizing technique

that made me yearn for more simple pleasures
of unseen sights and unfelt sensations
like that of a tickling fern.

During my walk on the long way home,
I saw new places and new faces
accented by the light of a moonlit night,
and then

I saw you.

Immediately,
I was enthralled,
and without thinking,
I waved and called
with a stuttering speech because
I had no words ready for my first time speaking
to a woman as beautiful as you,

but eventually the letters found their way
and joined together for a simple phrase:

“Hi.”

Before I knew it,
we talked for another 5 hours
and I learned
that you were also taking the long way home.

You said you never take the same route twice,
because it makes life all that more interesting.

We said our goodbyes
and good nights,
and we went on with our lives.

As we parted ways,
all I could think about was how I craved
to see you again.
We said we would, and we even made plans,
so that was nice,
giving me something to look forward to each night.

I walked a little slower on the long way home.
Everything was even more radiant than before,
and when I finally walked through my door,
I sat and I began to brew a pot of tea,

that I would normally never drink,
but today was a day for trying new things.

I sat with my drink and I wondered
about the next path I would take
and where I would roam
and what I would do,
but mostly I was just glad I took the long way home,
because that was how I found you.

You

You inspire me.
You live every reason for me to believe
in dreams—
the kind you live, not speak.

You're like me,
only further along the road,
your passion proven
by the work it molds.

You inspire me with your discipline,
your patience with the clock,
the way you move on purpose
as if you've been here before
even when you have not.

You inspire me because you are
the person I hoped existed.
It's an honor to exist beside you,
to learn how you continue
without standing still.

You inspire me
by the machine you've built with care—
so finely tuned it hums
with the rhythm of marching drums.

I don't want to slow you down.
I want to be the oil, the quiet help,
the unseen motion
that soothes what works
and steadies what strains.

You inspire me.
No matter where I fit,
or even if I don't,
if I have to run parallel to you
then I would still be happy
knowing that you're moving forward
and that I am too.

I Have a Question

If you knew a love would end,
would you love half-heartedly?

If you knew a day was coming
where you grow apart,
would you not love that loved one with all you have to offer?

Or would you restrain it,
until it suffocated before its time?

Is the only love wasted
love withheld?

The Way We Walk

“I’m actually going to kill myself,” I said for the 50th time that day and the 500th time that week. Like my memory, my count is unreliable. I had been on a 2 month binge of smoking, drinking, snorting, and fucking; this all started because of a woman that I had gone on a single date with.

We met on a hike after a bad fall — I lost my footing and tumbled at least 15 feet down the side of the switchbacks. I fell from my lane down onto hers. When I looked up I saw an angel with the sun outlining her silhouette. She had brown hair that was highlighted with the golden rays of the sun. Freckles dotted her face like stars and the teeth in her smile glimmered like the moon on a cloudless night. After helping me to my feet, she told me her name — Scarlett.

We talked for the rest of the hike. Several hours later, we were still talking, and at the end of the hike, we exchanged contact information and arranged plans for a proper date.

The date was amazing. I loved learning about her, and we got into deep conversations that made me think she could be the one (despite the red flags I gathered along the way — once again I found myself falling in love with the idea of being in love). We weren’t a perfect match, but I was ready to change my very being to conform to her needs. I was desperate to find my person.

She ghosted me afterwards. The time for a proper bender was nigh anyways, and the timing couldn’t have been better. A close friend of mine, Tomáš — or Timmotee, as he liked to be called — invited me to spend three months in Prague with him. He paid for all of my expenses. It wasn’t long before I boarded a plane and flew to him with nothing more than a bag full of clothes and condoms.

Most days were the same: I’d wake up around 2pm and I’d spend some time on my phone, then I’d wander into the living room mostly naked and I’d smoke a cigarette and drink coffee with a little whiskey. I would alternate between snorting coke and smoking a joint followed by another cigarette and more coffee, and then I would finally get to the only healthy habits of the day: reading my bible, and journaling. Afterwards, I would try to write something — anything — I am a writer after all. After failing to do anything truly productive, I would go for a run and then a lame excuse for a workout.

Being that I was too lazy to get a gym membership in a foreign country, I utilized the park nearby. It was a beautiful park in the neighborhood of Letná with miles to roam and equipment that barely maintained my body. After bearing the cold for an hour or so, I would go back home to my friend and host, Timmotee. We would resume our day of drinking and smoking, and partaking in various drugs through various mediums.

“Timmotee,” I would say when returning home, “Babička?”

The question literally translated to “Grandma,” but it was our way of saying, “let’s roll up a 20 crown banknote, and powder our noses.”

Once the lines were cut and the bills were rolled, we would stuff our noses and smoke and drink and talk. Timmotee was doing most of the talking as I was fascinated with his ability to tell stories. The only shame was that his accent got thicker the more intoxicated we became.

He would say something like, “I have no idea what’s going on in the news, bro. There could be a zombie apocalypse — a worldwide catastrophe, and I would still step outside to smoke every day completely unaware that it is the end of days. Two days would go by, and the government would have quarantined the city, and I would still have no idea. A zombie could

walk right up to me while I smoked, and I wouldn't be scared — I would push him away thinking he is a bum trying to steal my cigarette.”

Eventually, the conversation would veer into another direction, and he would say something like, “If I were to become president, I would sell this country to America, and if my country refused to be sold, and they tried to stop me, then I would build a nuclear warhead and threaten to them that I will blow this whole place up. Then I would sell this country with no problem, because no one would want to be blown up, and the Czech Republic would become a state of America. And if they try to kill me, my people — they will likely try to kill me, but I will already be gone. I will have my own island where I will build my own country! — with an army of pirates in submarines. I just need billions of dollars, so it is necessary for me to seize this land and sell it. I just want the island, bro.”

I would often struggle with understanding something he said. In my inebriated state, I would find myself stuck in the past of what was said, rather than being in the present of what was said at that moment (and the cycle would continue). I'd stare at the ground pretending to listen and pretending to not look as confused as I really was. A few moments would pass, and I would be completely lost, so I'd sit patiently while attempting to find a thread of words that could lead me back into whatever topic we were discussing. Finally, once the thread was found, I would be able to interject and reestablish a foothold in the conversation until the next wandering thought stole my attention.

Days and days of this ritual went by. It was always topped off with a night out from 10pm to 7am, and then finally bedtime after copious amounts of socializing with the locals and sweaty sex with the women who followed us home. The lifestyle had its wears and tears caused by the overindulgence of drugs and incessantly intrusive thoughts. I carried a lot of doubt and anxiety because of my unrealized potential. I came to this place to be with my friend, but it was also an opportunity to create something without the burden of a nine to five. This trip turned out to be the epitome of the tortured artist's lifestyle, and although there was plenty of torture, there was no art. Every moment spent living the rockstar lifestyle without the fruits of a rockstar's labor made me more and more dreadful of the future to come.

It didn't take long for the suicidal thoughts to kick in. They had always been there, but they only held meaning when reality supported their claims.

You're not doing anything, I would think to myself, *You should kill yourself... I should kill myself.*

Writing was to be my escape - a savior from the dread of a life without meaning.

Timotee wanted to make music, so I compromised by focusing on songwriting. He was the guitarist, and I was the drummer of songs sung amongst the smoke of our lonely apartment. Despite the hours of riffing and writing lyrics, we had nothing to really show for it. Everything was empty — our words, our music, our hearts — and soon our souls would be emptied too.

On this particular day, after my 56th “I might kill myself,” Timotee asked me to leave the apartment for a few hours, so that his favorite nymphomaniac could come over and terrorize him without any witnesses. Being the good friend that I am, I agreed and packed the guitar into a case, and then I went on my way.

My first stop was the local market where I bought cigarettes, a hard cider, and a 50ml shooter of their cheapest vodka. As I walked to the park, I took a big swig of the hard cider before topping it off with the vodka. A few sips and a cigarette made all the difference. I was feeling good and warm — good enough to walk a few miles in the snow despite the below freezing weather. Peeking over a ledge came the lights of downtown Prague, and like a moth to a

flame, I drew closer to its beauty. As I neared the guard rail, the Vltava River became visible and it glistened in the light of the night. Seeing sights such as these were reason enough to live a little longer on this earth. I sat on a nearby bench overlooking downtown and Prague Castle. It was quiet — peaceful beyond measure. Even the birds sat in silence before the glorious spectacle of life in motion.

The rich ambiance sank into my heart and beckoned me to play my music, so I finished my drink and then I cracked open the guitar case with a cigarette in my mouth and four more tucked away into my beanie for easy access. I had some powder in my pocket that I sniffed as well. I wasn't sure what it was exactly, but it looked like my ketamine got mixed up with my cocaine. In most cases, it wouldn't be a good idea to mix uppers with downers, but I was professional.

With one strum, the guitar told me it was tuned to perfection. After picking at the strings with varying chords, a rhythm found me. Later came the proper chords conveying a tone of a beautiful misery — a necessary tragedy laced with the calamity of suicide and spiked with the necessity of hope.

A solid beat — made with the banging of my palm against the body of the guitar — created the landscape on which my words would paint the finer details. I sang what came to mind:

*With these words
I paint my life
With these notes
highlighting strife*

*And the doom
that swells inside
forms a storm
where light dies*

*And yet here am I
I am still alive
I still breathe
I still sing*

*The storm
that tried to kill me
taught me more
than the life that numbed me*

They weren't great lyrics in my eyes, and yet a wave of relief rolled over me as I wrote down the words and the accompanying music. I packed up the guitar and continued on my walk. The paths ahead of me were lined with many more beautiful sights to witness.

Deeply in Love

a beautiful woman sleeps on my arm
and it has become numb.
i am exactly where i want to be

i admire her face as she sleeps
her soft lips, her pretty mouth relaxed
and open.
i breathe in her breath
so i can have more of her—
i want all of her

she shifts in her sleep
pulling me with her
and i follow like a shadow
accenting every posture
with a longing to become one

my sleep is only made better
by moving to her rhythm—
her song has a voice
that i can't ignore
her body
dances a dance
to which i look forward to learning
every step

i watch her and
every time i look
is like the first time—
full of awe and wonder

i never want to lose sight of her.

As long as I breathe, I won't look away.

Voyagers

She tosses and turns
... like a ship lost at sea
in the midst of a storm
... his arm finds her
and weighs her down
... anchoring her
parting the clouds
... calming the storm —
all is well again.

They began their night entangled
... with intention;
he waited for the sign
... to make sure she fell asleep first
the sign:
... her deep breath,
the occasional snore,
... but he fell asleep somewhere
in the wading —
... in the waters
of a perfect sleep
... they drifted in search of comfort;
she made grooves in the earth
... and he followed suit
as droplets of a singular stream would do
... (constantly chasing themselves —
each other:
... themselves).

Even in their sleep
... they look for each other;
even in their sleep,
... they find one another.

The Lover & The Fighter

What love exists without a little fight —
... it is human nature to struggle
... for all that we have and all that we want;
... we struggle with our own reasoning —
... our own understanding —
... that becomes the basis
... for loving,
... that becomes the basis
... for loving unconditionally.

A God that loves unconditionally
would do so by understanding
why it is we do what we do
... (I assume presumptuously
... and with hope that I can be understood).

I hope to mimic a fraction of that love.

A fraction of that power
... is mine
... because I fight the urges
... that compel me
... and pull me into ignorance:
... an understanding of my own making,
... a massacre masquerading as tough love
... aimed towards dragging others
... into the black hole
... that does not understand
... (where conditional love dies
... and unwarranted fear lives).

It takes a fighter to love properly,
... to leap head first into that black hole
... and pull out the ones they love
... because real love never dies
... it burns hot in the cold,
... and cold in the heat,
... real love fights the battles said to be
... impossible to win
... yet it wins,
... because it perseveres.

Real love loves hard.

A true lover fights when they need to,
and a true fighter fights for what they love.

Sometimes

Sometimes I say the things
... that are hard to say
and I ask the questions
... that are hard to ask
then I have the conversations
... that are hard to have

and sometimes I bruise,
... sometimes I bleed,
..... sometimes I cry,
..... sometimes a cancer manifests,
..... sometimes a cancer is terminated.

Every time
... I come out the other side glad
..... I said what I said
..... and asked what I asked,
... because it was honest —

every time
it is a grand unveiling
... of myself
..... before myself
..... for myself
..... by myself.

The Hero

And he died a hero,
but he wasn't born as one.

The kid was born into a typical family
that loved him, and this was proven by
the food and shelter they supplied
and the morals and ethics they instilled.

Under the wings of their community,
the kid grew into something more befitting:
a man who had a role to play in the world.

He was surrounded by happy and simple living,
and that is what he had imagined for himself
until one day everything came burning down
and the ground around him became paved with ashes of his hometown.

The man wanted revenge
and he did everything he could
to make those responsible pay
for the hurt they caused him,

but he was from humble beginnings.
His newfound role in the world
made for a complicated and confusing path
toward the duties of a violent wrath.

The man lost more and more as he sought his revenge,
so much so that he had more scars than reasons
to continue in this crusade for vengeance,
but the pain of loss only angered him more.

The man became old and bitter throughout his years
especially after never having found
the evil that burned down his hometown,
but what was lost became something more.

The old man began to realize how his anger never served him,
how a failed attempt at retribution only made contribution
to his ailing state and prolonged suffering,
so the old man began to forgive.

The old man decided to live again,
as his people once did;

first came the simple living
and then happiness made its way in.

He became a pillar for his new community
and helped the village in raising their kids;
all the while, unbeknownst to him, the old man
had been raising the young of one who had hurt him long ago.

The one who hurt him, a villain of the past, was a father now.
He was a young man back then,
and he was one of many
who had burned down the old man's hometown.

Like the old man, this former villain sought a new life
free from the strife he had accumulated throughout his past
and he sought redemption that could be everlasting —
he sought to become a new man.

One night, by the fire, after the kids went to bed,
it was just the two of them.
They shared stories of their youth
and the trouble they got into.

Their stories reached further into the past
until finally it reached a climax,
and in a drunken stupor, the new man confided in the old man
with the sins of his youth.

The old man recognized the new man's story,
as it matched up with his own troubling origin,
and the old man looked into the eyes
of his vengeance's prize,

but the old man did not feel anger.

He watched
as the new man told his story
while choking
on tears and regret,

until finally

the old man
reached out a hand
and comforted
that new man.

Half Awake

Ewan was narcoleptic and that meant he would fall asleep quite frequently and randomly. Instantly upon sleeping, he would dream. For all his life, his dreams revolved around being “Noah” — his alter ego, it seemed. Most of his dreams started the same way: Noah would wake up, take a swig from a fancy bottle of whiskey, and go about his day drinking and smoking and eating pills like candy, and then into the night he would go on partying and having frivolous sex.

In his dreams, Ewan got to live as a spoiled brat with no responsibilities and not a single care in the world; he got to experience what he had worked for every waking hour; he got to enjoy the splendours of his work.

In his dreams, he never worked — occasionally he wrote, but he was never sober enough to get more than a few words out. If he was lucky, then he could write a semi-coherent paragraph that inevitably was forgotten about by the time Ewan would wake up.

Even in his dreams, he was a narcoleptic. When Ewan fell asleep as Noah, he would wake up as himself, as Ewan, and the life of Noah felt like a distant memory (not that Ewan would care to remember anyways — he had too much going on in the real world).

In both lives, Ewan was a writer. As Ewan, he was a published novelist who was working on his third book. His first book garnered a cult following that practically forced his hand into writing a trilogy. He often felt tied down by his work, but it was always the dream job for him to be a storyteller. He hoped to have a more diverse catalogue of stories, but his publisher demanded more of the same content. He hated feeling limited to a singular voice. In reality, he was afraid of trying something new and failing, so he never truly fought for his other ideas (of which there were none), but there was hope in the form of a new story that he had been dreaming about.

In his dreams, as Noah, he was an aspiring novelist. Despite all of the partying and abusing the various substances, Noah still tried to write. It had never amounted to much until recently. In his dreams, he became fixated on completing an outline for a fantasy novel, which was far outside the realm of contemporary fiction that Ewan had become known for. Just when he finally felt himself entering a flowstate, Noah would fall asleep and he would wake up as Ewan once again. He tried so hard to remember the story, but it was all so foggy to him. He had been able to remember bits and pieces, but at a rate so slow that he wouldn't have an outline ready for another year.

With each dream, Ewan was able to bring back more and more of the outline with him. Over time, with the help of keeping a dream journal, the story revealed itself to him and it was full of so much more potential than he had hoped for. Even in his dreams, as Noah, he was becoming more and more inspired — he cut back on the drinking and the drugs and the women, and he had fleshed out the entire outline to perfection. By doing so, with such a clear head, he was able to bring it all back with him into his waking reality.

Ewan finished the outline 3 months after its inception, and he got to work immediately. He was so excited and pleased with his writing that he actually stayed up for days on end. His narcolepsy was becoming manageable, so he decided to not waste another waking moment. Within 2 months, Ewan finished the rough draft, and after another 2 months, he finished his revisions. Roughly 200,000 words later, his latest creation — the key to a new life — was complete. He reached out to his publisher and they loved it.

The book was an instant best-seller, and all his fears — all of his self-perceived inadequacies evaporated like dew in the morning sun. After all of this, his dreams became hazy once again. The dreams consisted of him, as Noah, becoming frustrated over something that Ewan could not recall upon waking. In his dreams, the drinking and abuse of drugs became an issue once again. He would wake up angry as Ewan, but he never knew what for. The haze thickened over his dream life to the point of total obscurity. Eventually, he would wake up with no recollection whatsoever of his life as Noah, and despite enjoying the dreams for its entertaining and lavish lifestyle, Ewan was happy to no longer be clouded by the stress of living two lives.

Days went by without a proper dream — only fragments persevered through to his waking thoughts. One moment in particular stuck with Ewan: in his dream, as Noah, he was holding a copy of his latest novel, but Noah hated it. Ewan woke up confused. This book had changed his life and his trajectory as a writer, and he was happy with it — but in his dreams he seemed to hold animosity toward his writing.

One day, Ewan's lawyer reached out to him about a man who asked to meet with him. Apparently, the man claimed that Ewan stole his work and that he had the paper trail to prove it. Speaking through lawyers, the man demanded Ewan to meet with him, or he would sue him into oblivion. Ewan agreed to the terms, and they were set to meet at a hotel upon the man's arrival. Ewan received the details with a time and place to meet.

Ewan arrived at the hotel early. He was nervous, so he went to the bar and had a drink. "I'll have whiskey, please, something from the well, and make it a double."

Ewan swallowed that drink as fast as the bartender had poured it — this went on for a few more. Two big men in all black suits sat down at the other end of the bar. When they noticed Ewan, they looked at him with confusion, and then approached.

"Sir, your guest should be arriving soon. Shouldn't you be waiting for him in your room?"

Ewan was as confused as he was drunk.

"Noah," said the man in black anticipating a response.

Ewan thought for a moment, *Am I dreaming? I must be. They called me Noah.*

Ewan looked at his hands — they did look like Noah's hands, but then again, Noah and Ewan were identical. If Ewan was dreaming, that would explain his unquenchable thirst for liquor. In his drunken state, he accepted the idea that he was dreaming.

"I lost my key," he said.

He didn't remember having a key, but if there's anything Ewan remembered about being Noah, it's that he was always drunk and forgetting things, so it seemed entirely possible that he did have a key at some point. *When did I fall asleep*, Ewan asked himself, *I guess that's the issue with narcolepsy — you never know when you'll fall asleep.*

The man in black gave him a keycard, and Ewan went on his way. Inside the elevator, he had to tap the room key to access the top floor where the room was. When he reached the top and the elevator doors opened, he realized that the room was the top floor in its entirety. Noah was a rich man after all. Ewan made his way in and began exploring the place, and then he saw him. Noah was there — asleep on the bed. Ewan stared at him as he tried to make sense of what was happening. It made no sense. *This is the strangest dream I've ever had*, Ewan thought to myself.

Ewan never dreamed of being anyone other than Noah, but now Ewan was staring at Noah — or was he staring at Ewan. He rushed into the restroom to splash water on his face in hopes of waking up. In the mirror, he saw himself. *What's happening? Who am I?*

He returned to the bedroom and studied the face of his doppelganger. From head to toe, they were identical in every way. They even had the same taste in clothing despite the obvious wage gap. The only difference between the two was that Ewan was a talented writer and Noah was an alcoholic undeserving of the trust fund he lived off of. In his dreams, Ewan loved living as Noah, but now seeing him separate from himself, Ewan began to hate Noah.

He pinched himself to see if he would wake, but nothing happened. He slapped himself repeatedly hoping that this was just a dream, but nothing happened. He grabbed a pen from the bedstand and stabbed himself in the leg, and he bled.

Sobbing, and with a broken voice he asked himself, *Am I losing my mind?*

Seeing Noah lying there, Ewan came to an intoxicated understanding of the possibility that Noah had always been real. It caused him to stumble into a cesspool of emotions — each one tied to another question. Ewan mumbled to himself (and to Noah), “Do you dream of my life while you sleep? Do you see yourself now — through my eyes?”

Ewan became sick with the thought of having his privacy invaded, and in a drunken rage, he grabbed a pillow and began to smother Noah with it. He felt an intense urge to fall asleep, but he fought through it. The entire moment felt like a dream. The next thing he was aware of was lifting the pillow from Noah’s lifeless face.

There was a knock at the bedroom door. The adrenaline was already beginning to wear off, and he could feel the pain from having stabbed himself. The pen still jutted out from his leg, and his blood had made a puddle at his feet. He limped to the door and opened it to see the two men in black.

“Hello,” Ewan said upon opening the door.

The man who had spoken to him at the bar led the way into the room, “Is he here?”

Ewan pointed to the body lying on the bed.

“Fucking hell! Not again, sir,” said the man in black. After nearly slipping in the puddle of blood, he asked, “Who’s blood is this?”

Ewan pointed to the pen sticking out from his leg and said, “I — he stabbed me.”

“Take care of that wound and get him back on the plane,” commanded the man in black to his associate, “We’re leaving now. I’ll clean up.”

The associate bandaged Ewan up, then he escorted him out of the hotel and onto a private jet — Noah’s private jet. They waited a few hours before the other man in black was able to join them.

“Sir,” he said, “that man looked exactly like you. Who was he?”

“Nobody,” Ewan said, and they never spoke of it again.

He slept for most of the flight, and for the first time ever, he dreamt of being himself — it was a nightmare.

XXX

I know my wrongs
that I know
and I know them well.
I pray for a holy interference,
..... then I drink and smoke
..... and stuff my nose.

Will I
won't I
can't I have peace
..... that doesn't bite
..... with every sip.

Life is
complex.
..... At least it's never boring.
..... At least I get to live stories
..... worthy of the theater.
..... Is it a comedy or a tragedy?
..... but then again,
..... when hasn't one's own misery been funny?

I laugh all the time.
It's all a joke.
..... I laugh until I cry —
..... what a sad joke it is,
..... but that is life
..... and I kinda love it.

I love my wrongs.
..... They bring my closer to God.

iii (eyes)

Watchful eyes
guard me from a distance —
i feel their warmth
..... like a spotlight

..... I am illuminated
..... everywhere i go
..... everywhere i've been

fear avoids me —
and the dark
..... cannot hide itself

mal intent wages a war that was already lost.
With endless sight over all things, the eyes have seen this
..... they have known this
..... they made this
..... for reasons i may never truly understand
..... but i do know
..... I am stronger
..... because of those
.... watchful
eyes

Wildfire

The Word burns through me
like a wildfire clearing the brush —
dead and dry —
along with the other waste
to make room
for new growth to take place.

I am like the tree
who survives and is strengthened
by the flames
thought to destroy,
but instead it justifies my reason for being.
To the blaze, I say, “Do your worse,”
and it did its best
making me the kind of man
that I’ve always dreamed of being.

Instincts

Our instincts come from a divine connection—
a holy intervention—
meant for our prosperity and our protection.

The thought that comes after is our ego.
It is the downfall for most people
as it has no concern for good or evil.

The final thought is a devilish deceiver.
It tries to convince you that your ego knows better
than the divine instinct which is unfettered.

Everything after is noise.
If you've hesitated, then you'll lose all poise
and become susceptible to the deceiver's ploys.

Trust your initial instinct.
It whispers truth before you can think.
It is quiet, yet succinct.

Let it anchor you when doubts arise.
For the first voice is the one that never lies,
and through it all, the divine still replies.

You Love Me

Like the sounds of waves crashing on the shore at night,
like a seeing eye dog who guides a man without sight,
like a switch that effortlessly takes us from the dark into the light,

You give me comfort.
You make me happy.
You set me free

from the insecurities that try to conquer me
and from the negative thoughts that find their way into this mind of mine—
from the only thing that can get in the way of me being myself:

me.

You set me free, My Love,
because You love me.

The real and genuine me.

Not the facade so realistic that even I have been fooled.
You love me,
and in doing so,
You have taught me to love myself,
and by loving myself, I have learned how to love everyone else.

It's not easy to love,
but if You can love me,
then maybe it's not that hard.

The River

I want to fall in love with the process
and develop my own relationship
with the things I do,
the things I say,
the things I believe.
No longer will I allow
the outsiders to persuade and manipulate
the currents
of my spirit's waters.
I am beginning to understand the flow.
I am learning what it feels like to let go.
Like a river,
I am a channel,
a vessel,
for the currents that feed life
amongst its shores.
Forever flowing from its source,
the mountain tops,
beyond the clouds.

I prayed to be here
coasting through the surreal
and experiencing the cold reality
underneath the ripples
of time
and space.

Everything I need is in the waters
with me.
Everything I own can be cast aside,
because I know
the river will supply me.

Don't Rush Me

I AM never late.
I AM never early.
No matter who you ask, or what they say,
I AM always on time.
You may never understand Me,
or My reasoning,
you may not even like Me for what I do,
or what I deem necessary for you,
but you will see, come time,
when you look back on your life,
without turning a blind eye,
that everything that has happened to you
had actually happened for you.
When you consider that even the hardest trials
and tribulations,
were designed with your configuration
and holy transformation in mind,
then you will find the solemn truth
that has been bred from the depths of your heart
and made tangible by the results that I believed you would achieve.
Not to break you, but to shape you.
Not to wound you, but to weave purpose
into every moment you once begged Me to relieve.
You may think that I have forgotten you,
but you will always be known to Me.
I love you so much.
You may think that I AM tough on you,
but everything I do
is for you.

Trust in My timing.

Parable of the Light

A light hides behind a veil,
dimmed by a film of doubt,
yet it glows still. Its radiance softens,
edges blurred — its attraction deflected
by the darkness circling it like a patient predator
crafting illusions from the shadows.

From the corners of my vision,
the darkness begs for attention
with rehearsed and childlike screams
of one who lies and expects everything. Yet the light remains
quiet, humble, confident in its own truth. Gently,
it sits there
in the goodness of its warmth.

When I focus on the light, the darkness groans
and swells around me, choking me
while crying out with a selfish hunger
to reclaim the throne of my attention.

The light never competes. It never bargains.
It simply waits — a patient witness —
for the moment my gaze returns and I remember
the hope it shelters in its glow.

Because the only real thing
is the light.
It does not weave illusions to lure me back.
It speaks only in clarity, in the quiet honesty
that darkness cannot imitate. For the shadow survives
only by pretending that the light is small,
but the shadow is quick to forget
it only exists
because the light made it so.

Infinity

I hold infinity in the palm of my hand.
Unrestrained, yet linked by a common plan;
like a voyager, each possibility has set its course
with infinitely more paths leading from a single source.

I am the one who knows
where every piece of this puzzle will go.
They are crafted with you in mind,
so that they may fall in place and right on time.

You are a thread within an everlasting tapestry
with more reason for being than you can see.
These threads differ in their length, their shade, their tone,
yet each one strengthens the design I've sewn.

I am who I am, bigger than infinity.
I am all encompassing which makes you a part of me,
and as your story reaches its final part,
you'll understand the purpose I placed inside your heart.

The Wandering Poet

A wandering poet moved from city to city and country to country — he made his money by offering “free” poems in exchange for donations. One year, he found himself in the city of Rome. *A beautiful city*, he thought, but it also reminded him of the Vatican, then the Catholic Church, and then of course religion — all religions — and his hatred for them. He hated their wealth and their power, and when reminded, he would think, *and yet, there is still no cure for cancer nor an end to all wars and famines — what a scam*. He held all of these institutions responsible as the cause for all things terrible in the world from parking tickets to nuclear warfare, and he held his stance firmly and confidently.

He approached Rome by bus, from the city of Civitavecchia. It was his first time in the city — *and my last*, he thought. Despite his hate for the church and its presence in Rome, he enjoyed its beauty very much. The sun was out and the sky was clear. A blue hue covered the city like a blanket, and the body of the city radiated a beautifully enticing warmth. The numerous churches sprawled out across Rome were of no interest to him. All this city had to offer him was its rich history and food, and the countless tourists to sell his poems to.

Near the Colosseum is the Arch of Constantine, and near that arch, the wandering poet set up shop. He posted up his sign against the fence and it read: FREE POEMS. DONATIONS WELCOME — then he sat down with his pen and pad, and he waited.

It didn’t take long for tourists to approach with requests, and the requests were usually the same no matter where the wandering poet was. In one way or another — despite one’s status — nearly everyone wanted a love poem. The only difference was how they wanted that love expressed — whether it was a love for adventure, materials, people, or one’s self. Sometimes the love came in the form of greed, wrath, or even envy — love knew no bounds for the forms it could take. The poet saw that everything was love — everything beautiful and everything terrible. He could tell from one look what kind of love someone would most likely request. Most of the time, he would pull something from the archives and reuse or refurbish an older poem, because most of the time he found people to be quite similar. Every now and then, he created a new poem from scratch. He continued at this for another two hours before making enough cash to buy enough food and lodging for the week.

A tourist had given him information about a cheap hostel that was a 30 minute walk away, and that’s where the poet would settle in for the night, but before then, he would try to make as much money as possible and so his day went on. It was as beautiful as a day could get, and it continued on without a cloud in sight. The poet was making good money with his poems. In fact, it was the best day he’s ever had. By sunset, he had made over 2000 euros (thanks to many generous donors), and he wrote his new favorite poem for someone who was struggling with depression and wanted to love life again. It read:

The Grey Before The Day

*In the earlier hours,
between dusk and dawn,
where everything is quiet —
even the flowers and their beauty
sing their song in silent harmony.*

*Then the birds join in
and the world is alive again —
truthfully,
it never died, it was just at rest.*

That night in Rome was as beautiful as the day, and the poet figured it would be a good time to pack up and settle in at the hostel. As he packed up his sign, a voice from behind him asked, “Do you have time for one more poem?”

The poet turned to see what looked to be a fellow drifter with a bandage tied across his eyes. His face and clothing were tattered and wrinkled, and the drifter’s overall appearance was filthy yet he smelled clean. The poet hesitated for a moment, but he eventually replied, “And what kind of poem would you like, sir?”

“I would like a poem about your life and all that has brought you here. Tell me your ‘why’.”

The poet laughed. “Why would you want a poem about my life? Wouldn’t you rather have a poem that was more personal to you? Tell me: what do you love?”

He began looking through his bag in search of a poem that could be recycled for moments like this. “Perhaps adventure? You look like someone who has been through a lot — how about a poem about resilience?”

“But what good is resilience if it makes one hateful?”

The poet shrugged off the drifter as a crazy man babbling nonsense, and pulled out a random poem that read:

The Tides of Waters Unknown

*Nothing
is familiar,
yet it all looks the same
and the pattern repeats.*

“I must leave now,” said the poet as he handed off the poem, “This one’s free.”

“I thought all of your poems were free. That’s what your sign said, right?”

The poet smirked and snickered, “Right.” He turned away and began to walk.

“Can I have some money? I am poor and hungry, and I have no bed to rest my head on tonight.”

The poet looked at all the money he had made. He was hesitant to spare even a single euro, but he recognized his greed and sought a compromise. He removed a 10 euro bill from the wad of cash he collected, and he held the drifter’s hand as he placed the bill into it. “Here,” he said, but he knew that the drifter would be lucky to fill his belly let alone sleep in a proper bed if anyone would even serve a man as dirty as him. *It’s not my problem*, thought the poet.

The drifter smiled at the poet. “Thank you,” he said, “May God bless you,” and the poet walked away without responding.

After a comfortable night in the hostel, the poet took a bus to Sabaudia. He wanted to enjoy the beach with the extra cash he made — perhaps make more if he could. He set up his sign on the beach in plain view of the people coming and going, but he didn’t really care to work this day. He wanted to enjoy the fruits he reaped from the day before, however the beach was

crowded, and many people wanted a poem from the wandering poet. Two hours and 1400 euros later, the poet took down his sign and walked to the nearest restaurant to buy a bottle of wine, then he made his way to the shoreline. A spot had just opened up with an unobstructed view of the horizon, so the poet laid himself on the sand with his sack of cash, and wine, and pens and pad. Half a bottle of wine later, a shadow overcame him as he laid with his eyes closed. He opened them to see the drifter standing over him.

“Hi,” said the drifter.

The poet was a little drunk and confused as to why the drifter was there (or how he even got there). He tried to brush him off with an unfriendly, “Hi,” and then he closed his eyes again.

“I’m sorry for interrupting. Could you perhaps write me that poem now, or perhaps you could give me some more money?”

The poet reached into his sack, and without looking, he handed the drifter a fistful of cash.

“Thank you,” said the drifter, “That is very generous of you,” and he left.

The poet finished the bottle of wine and slept on the beach until the sun rose on a new day. The morning birds chirped in their trees, and the waves gently crashed with elegance and grace. The poet turned onto his side and opened his eyes to see a couple of early risers running on the sand with the sounds of nature scoring their life. He turned over to see the drifter lying a few meters away — his eyes were already open.

“Hello,” said the drifter.

The poet rolled onto his back and stared into the sky.

“Could I trouble you for a poem? I can pay you,” said the drifter holding up a wad of cash.

The poet gave the drifter a quick look over and went back to staring off into the sky, “That’s just the money I gave you yesterday.”

“Does it matter?”

The poet was too hungover to be annoyed, “I’m not writing you a poem about my life.”

“I’ll pay you.”

Finally the poet became frustrated, so he pulled out his pen and pad, and he scribbled: “*FIGURE IT OUT*”, onto a page before tearing it out and flailing it in front of the drifter.

“There’s my life story,” said the poet with a dash of pent up rage, and he dropped the poem at the drifter’s feet.

“What’s this?”

“It’s in the name. Figure it out,” the poet reached into his bag and pulled out more cash to hand over, “Take this and just leave me alone, please.” He waved the money in the drifter’s face, but the drifter did not take it. Instead, he got up with a disappointed look and walked away.

The poet sat there with the intensifying sensation of a hangover flooding over him. He shaded his eyes with his shirt and fell asleep. The world moved on around him — crowds gathered all around, up and down the beach by the time he woke up again. The hangover was still there, but it was bearable now.

The bus ride back into Rome was an entirely different beast. The whole world spun around the poet. He needed to get off and throw up, but their destination was still so far away. The urge overtook him a few kilometers away from his stop and he threw up out the window. The bus driver kicked him out shortly after, and the poet continued to yack and gag and vomit on the side of the road before regaining his composure. By then, the bus was long gone, and his worst fear was realized — he left his bag on the bus. His pen, his pad — his money was gone.

Rome was about an hour walk away, but the constant pitstopping to vomit slowed him down. He took some grapes from a nearby vineyard to provide the energy he needed to push on. After 3 hours of walking and purging his stomach, he finally made it to the city. It was dark by the time he reached the main bus station. His hostel was now only a few minutes away, but the poet wanted to inquire about any missing bags turned in. Unfortunately, nobody turned in a bag full of cash.

The night was still young and there were many people walking around, but someone caught the poet's eye. It was the drifter.

The poet yelled at him, "Hey!", and chased him down.

The drifter looked pleased to see him, "Hello! Did you change your mind about the poem?"

"What? No — I need my money back. I lost my bag on the bus, and it had everything in there."

"You want me to return the money you gave me?"

"Please. I just need some money to buy a new pen and pad, and some food, and I will be all set."

"I'm sorry. I would, but I gave it all away."

The poet froze. He didn't know how to respond. The only thing he could think of doing was screaming in this drifter's face, but he did his best to remain calm. "Why would you do that?"

"Because some people asked for help."

"But why would you give it all away? Look at you. You're a filthy fucking mess. You could have gotten a room and a hot shower and some new clothes. Why didn't you save any for yourself?"

"What point are you trying to make? Are you calling me an idiot for not saving any cash for myself, just to have it taken away by you? If you recall, you bribed me to leave you alone."

The poet raised his voice and took a step closer toward the drifter, "I don't understand why you are being combative with me. I gave you money. You should want to help me."

"I'm not being aggressive, and that was your choice. I would have preferred a poem, but you gave me money and it has gone to a good cause."

The poet's fist balled and his face turned red.

"Maybe I can get you a pen and pad. Will you write me a poem of your life then?"

The poet took a step back and pushed all of the air out of his lungs. He closed his eyes and took a slow breath in. After calming himself, the poet said, "Sure," he looked at the drifter briefly before feeling the rage fill him once again. "When can I get it?" he asked as he turned his eyes to the distant dark.

"Meet me back here at sunrise."

The poet went to the hostel and tried to sleep, but he couldn't — so he decided upon taking a long walk instead. The brisk air worked wonders on calming him down, and as the morning twilight crept over the city, he made his way to where they were supposed to meet. The drifter was waiting patiently — leaning against the outer walls of the station — with a notepad in his hand.

Tired yet relaxed, the poet asked, "Have you been waiting long?"

"I never left," said the drifter.

The poet's calm demeanour began to wear off. "What do you mean you never left?"

"I've been here since we last spoke."

“When did you get the notepad?”

“I’ve had it.”

“Since when!?” He was losing his patience and was ready to fight the drifter.

“It’s my lucky notepad — I’ve always had it.”

The poet’s face twitched and his hands itched to feel the drifter suffocate between them.

The drifter continued, “It was full of my writing, so I had to prepare it for you.”

The drifter handed over a bag with the notepad and a pen clipped onto its worn down cover. The poet flipped through the pages and saw that the pages were untouched as if brand new. *Surely he’s fucking with me*, he thought to himself. He got what he needed and was ready to rid himself of the drifter once and for all.

“Thanks,” said the poet, and without waiting for a response, he walked away.

The drifter yelled after him, “What about that poem? You said you would write it.”

Without breaking his stride or looking back, he replied, “I’ll get it to you the next time I see you!” He had no intention of writing that poem.

His first task was finding a piece of cardboard to make his sign. The new sign read: POEMS FOR DONATIONS. The next stop was a popular destination nearby with lots of foot traffic: the Basilica Papale di Santa Maria Maggiore.

He waited there for about half an hour before someone finally approached him. No one else approached him, and by the end of the hour, the poet had only made eight euros. He sat with his head down — defeated. The weight and feeling of a hand on his shoulder turned his head, but no one was there. He looked around to see the drifter approaching from a distance. *This fucking beggar won’t leave me alone*, he thought. The poet got up, and ran away.

The next destination was the arch near the Colosseum. He had done well there before, so he thought it would work in his favor again. This time was better than at the basilica, but he only managed to make another 57 euros — it wasn’t terrible, but he had gotten acquainted with the idea of making a month’s wage in a few hours. Something drew his attention to the road leading to the arch, and he could see a man walking towards him — it was the drifter again, and again the poet ran away. He was paranoid and wandered the city for hours before settling near the Fontana di Trevi as the sun was setting.

Even though it was getting dark, the crowd around the fountain remained lively. The poet had posted up his sign, and before long, he was writing again. Several more hours went by with the moon becoming ever more radiant. By 2AM, he had made another 629 euros, and he was feeling hopeful again. He counted his money with greed in his eyes and an insatiable hunger in his loins. The night was still young and the crowds were still out — drunk crowds, and drunk crowds would mean easy money.

In the distance, the drifter could be seen making his approach again, and without hesitating, the poet grabbed his belongings and ran. He had the idea of going to Trastevere, but he wasn’t sure of the way there. He ran through the streets, and sought a darker, quieter road in an attempt to avoid being seen by the drifter who had been following him somehow — the poet was set on making that impossible for him to do it again.

Not before long, the poet had gotten himself lost. He had run in the wrong direction and had found himself in a park somewhere. The park was dark and empty, and the poet was tired from all the running. He decided he would rest his legs and sit on a lonesome bench surrounded by darkness.

From the shadows came rustling — a figure emerged, followed by two more. The poet had a bad feeling in his gut, and his body had become frozen from fear and fatigue. The three

men surrounded him with only one facing him. His face was scarred — likely from a fire. On one side of his mouth, his lips were melted together which made understanding his speech difficult as only the left side of his mouth was able to open.

The stranger spoke first, “What’s in the bag.”

The poet looked at the men surrounding him. His heart was pounding and his breath became short like he forgot how to breathe.

“I’ll just take a look,” said the stranger before snatching the bag from the poet’s hands — he could hardly react.

The stranger’s face lit up as he saw all of the cash. He reached into the bag and pulled out the notebook with the pen clipped onto it and he tossed it onto the poet’s lap along with his cardboard sign. “Consider this a donation,” said the stranger, and they all left.

The poet wept.

Sometime later, he felt a hand rest on his shoulder again, but this time it was a real hand and it belonged to the drifter. The poet looked into his calm eyes — they held compassion for the poet, but the poet did not want compassion. He wanted to kill this drifter. In a flash, he sprang to his feet and tackled the drifter onto the ground. The drifter’s body jerked around as the poet strangled him with two hands around the old man’s throat. Despite the life slowly leaving his body, the loving expression in his eyes never changed. The poet choked the drifter until he stopped moving, and then he choked him some more. He was finally dead. The poet ran away.

He woke up the next day around noon realizing he had left the notebook behind, but it was no longer there by the time he returned. He feared that the police would have found it, but there was nothing incriminating in the book despite his fingerprints (he wasn’t in the system anyways) — there was nothing in there that would pick him out of a crowd. He went about his day — paranoid, and frantically writing poetry around the park for passerbyers. Within a couple hours, he was able to make 236 euros, and that was enough for the day. His paranoia had subsided and had turned into a sort of guilty pleasure. He rejoiced in his work and decided to treat himself to a proper meal.

He sat down at a restaurant and ordered everything that caught his eye — filetto di baccalà and supplì, and pollo all’Uccelletto and Baccalà alla Romana, and so much more. The food kept coming and the poet kept eating and drinking wine. Hours went by and he grew more bloated and drunk as time ventured into the late evening. He was enjoying himself until a silhouette on the horizon caught his eye. It looked like the drifter. *But it can’t be*, he thought. The figure drew closer, and the poet swelled with anxiety. His drunken eyes followed the mystery man in anticipation of either a miracle or a curse. The man walked by and his face was shown in the light for a brief moment — it wasn’t him.

Every bit of cash was spent by the end of the night on food and wine, and a lot of expensive whiskey. In a drunken stupor, he tried to walk home, but everything was a blur. He rounded a corner and saw a figure huddled on a stoop. He thought it was the drifter so he grabbed the figure by the shoulder, but it wasn’t a person at all — in fact, there was nothing there at all.

The next thing he remembered was waking up on the bench he had sat on the night before — the night he was robbed — the night he killed the drifter. He woke up with a hangover like no other. His body odor had become pungent enough to where he could smell himself. It had been more than a few days since he had properly cleaned himself. If he ever looked in the mirror, then he would know that he looked to be in a poorer state than the drifter ever was.

He set about on his new day to make more money and to eat and get drunk like the night before, and that is what he did. He made 430 euros, and ate so much food and drank so much vodka that he had to be threatened with police to leave many different establishments. After accidentally tipping, he was left with only nine euros by the end of the night.

On his way home — trying to find his way home — he became lost again and found himself sitting next to a woman who took his last nine euros in exchange for her drink and a cigarette. The woman asked him about his time in Rome as he drank and smoked. He told her about his poetry, and that prompted her to plead for a poem.

“I’ll give you 20 euros for a poem.”

“About?” the poet was barely holding himself together.

“Forgiveness.”

He laughed in her face. His eyes were red, and his face sagged, and his teeth were stained, and his breath incited fear, “Easy. Watch this.” He wrote a poem with a single word and it said: “*Don’t*”.

He laughed and swiped at the 20 euro bill with the athleticism of a sloth, but the woman slapped him out of his seat. He spilled the drink, but he saved the cigarette.

“Watch yourself — I want a real poem. Not whatever you call that.”

“Okay. Sorry... I’ll write...” He tried to sit up, but instead resorted to lying on the floor and writing from there. He wrote a short poem as good as seeing in threes could allow:

FORGIVNES

*It's lik a thng tha
waivers — a flag.
a flg flying for a land
longfrogottn*

The woman read it, but she wasn’t pleased. The poet didn’t understand, but he took the poem back and wrote:

FORGIVNES

*It's lik a thng tha
waivers — a flag.
a flg flying for a land
longfrogottn. The land
I speak of my lan
I m its mster
its cretor*

*my land
has forgotten me*

*but i cannot
forgt —
i*

ea wish i could

The woman took the poem and gave him his 20 euros. He woke up the next day on the same bench with empty pockets — no money, nor pen, nor pad.

A Letter To Myself

Dear past me,

I am writing to you from the future
and I just wanted you to know that it doesn't get easier.
It, in fact, only gets harder,
but on the bright side, you get better.

Your ability to handle stress,
and make light of heavy situations,
will become the armor you didn't know you were forging.
Each trial will tailor this suit
and experience
will be your measurements.
Don't get ahead of yourself.
You will still feel pain
and you will fail—
a lot.

You will fall flat on your face so often,
that your body will memorize the earth
and your skin will be marked with the stories
of reality's unkind hand.
Don't be scared.

Actually, I take that back.

You will be scared,
so be brave.

You will step into another ring
fighting another fight,
a fight that looks too big,
too tall,
too far outside your weight class,
but you'll go anyways,
because that is who you are.

You will lose
a lot,
but it won't be because you stayed down,
it won't be because you refused to swing back,
it won't be because you lacked a chance.
You will lose, because you are meant to.

You're arrogant,
so you will be humbled.
You're naive,

so you will be taught.
You're impatient,
so you will be stilled.

You're reckless,
so you will be checked.
You're greedy,
so you will be emptied.
You will be broken down,
and you will learn to love it,

because each time you rise back up,
you will stand taller,
stronger,
wiser,
and you will be grateful in ways only the fallen understand.
You will lose everything that once made you who you were,
and in the dark that follows,
you will find a light
that leads you toward grace,
toward clarity,
toward a faith you didn't know could bloom in ruins.

Despite everything,
you will keep that faith,
and with faith,
no matter how small or flickering it may be,
you will never truly lose.

So keep your head up,
because the world will try to bow it for you,
but you must remember
it belongs to the Heavens.

Love,
Yourself.

Grace in Draft Form

I consider myself a disciple of Christ.
I read the bible,
the new and the old testament,
but really it's the words of Jesus that resonate with me.
I like to write in a way that reflects
the kind of open-minded love that I believe He would endorse.
Though,
I still curse,
I still sin,
I still live misaligned,
but I never did say that I was a perfect Christian.
Most days,
I hesitate to wear the word:
Christian.
It's been tainted by too many people
who judge and condemn others
for not following the Word as they do,
and I'm no exception from their persecution.
I may require correction,
but the way they speak to me,
with a sharp tongue
and blunt words,
turns me off from their religion.
Maybe it's my demons
being disturbed,
or maybe it's the hypocrites—
who dress themselves as judge and jury—
who disturb me.
Maybe it's both.
Either way,
I don't like it.
It reminds me of myself.
I am far from perfect,
and at times,
I don't think I'm ready to even try.
At times,
I want to be sinful
and indulge in the behaviors that do not serve me.
The behaviors that turn my servitude from Christ
to slavery toward sin.
I want to be better,
but I don't want my nose rubbed in the filth of my own making.
Let me fall.

Watch if you must, but please—
shut up.

You're not the one I'm trying to hear,
and if you are,
then I pray I hear you
talking like Christ.

Just Another Poem

Poisonous thoughts of the mind seep into my heart
like radiation
that contaminates the soil upon infiltration.

Should I expel these thoughts through verbal exhaust
with words that billow smoke and pollute the air?
Or should I allow words left unsaid
and feelings left unfelt
boil within?

It's not fair for others to suffocate on the ideas of a stranger
who couldn't bear the labor of filtering their worries
to make the air we all breathe a little safer.

But I too am a victim,
of invasive ideologies and unwelcomed thoughts

from within and without.

They have tainted and confused my mind
into the addictive hatred it indulges in
causing pain and suffering to spread throughout my world.

Maybe I'll stifle the feeling and lock it away
while I die a slow and quiet death
and the depths of my soul suffer the consequences
of these words left unsaid
and these feelings left unfelt.

Or maybe I'll work harder

and I'll drown these sorrows in sweat
with a trip to the gym,
or a late night in my work space
and distract myself for 20 hours a day
until I drop

from exhaustion
and forget what it was that possessed me in the first place.

But a wearied body and a fatigued mind only weaken the defenses meant to keep me alive.

Maybe I'll just eat something

something sweet,
like rocky road ice cream.
A childish antidote to nuclear thoughts.

As much as I would like that,
this is just another poem,

I'll eventually have to talk things out,
or sing,
or write something like this,
and have it heard by someone who cares,
someone who can handle the exhaust.

With hazmat suits on,
we could navigate the fallout together
and reach ground zero.
As we carefully
and methodically
poke away at the source
with long prongs to see how it may react.
How long could it stay intact
as we chip away at it?

Only dust in the air would remain —
dust that would inevitably find its way back into our lungs,

and we'd still carry it around for the rest of our lives,
but at least we'd carry it together.

At least,
we could share this burden.

There's no chance of me doing this alone
and making it out alive, so
thank you.

I hope you know I'd do the same for you.

A Letter for the Unborn

To my unborn children,
I hope I make you proud.

I've lived a life of mistakes—
none of which I truly regret,
because they made me
(a hard lesson you will experience for yourself—
mistakes of your own that will teach how to walk).

I've broken hearts and I've squandered precious dreams;
I've hurt people who I called lovers, who I called friends;
I've stolen, I've cheated, I've lied, I've killed with my heart—
a heart made for loving and caring,
(twisted by corrupted flesh)
and misused for evil.

I've also done some amazing things:
I've created, I've loved, I've cherished,
I lived,

and I just know that the greatest thing I will ever do
will be making you.

I hope to make every mistake possible before that day comes,
so that I am properly equipped with the tools necessary of leading the way
until you are ready to walk on your own.

I hope you will be proud of me.

Don't let this sway your opinion of me:

I will always be proud of you.
Even when you fall
(and I pray that you stand back up),
I will be there with a helping hand
and with an able body to lean on, for as long as you need,
until you are ready to walk again.
I will love you forever,
and all though I don't need you to love me back,
I hope that you will.

Signed,
Yo Daddy.

You'll Grow Into It

When I was young and broke,
my mom would always buy pants and shirts two sizes too big.
“You’ll grow into it,” she would say,
and sometimes I did, that is, if I could hold onto it long enough to make it fit,
and sometimes I simply never grew that big,
never fitting into the expectations that had been set for such a little kid
to grow into and fill out the spaces of a 36-inch waistline, or a double XL shirt,
but I always had a belt on hand to cinch that waist, and baggy shirts had always been a look,
so it never bothered me much, I was never much of a fashionista anyway,
but when I was 15, or somewhere around there, there came a day where my older brother got married,
and my younger brother and I had to walk our mother down the aisle, but before the wedding,
our mom bought our clothes,
my younger brother and I looked at our pants and white button up shirts and
we couldn’t help but notice how they were too many sizes too big
again, she said, “You’ll grow into it,”
but the wedding was tomorrow and there was no way I could reasonably grow in time,
not overnight, and be ready, be fit, be confidently presentable, for my brother’s wedding,
and this was a special occasion, worthy of clothes that fit,
but instead I had to try and look dripped out with a shirt that was billowing up into a bubble gut
and sleeves that went past my fists.
I hated how I looked that day,
and walking down the aisle, all I could think about was how stupid I looked,
I was already self-conscious, but even more so when people took pics when I wasn’t feeling it,
and when the clothes don’t fit, and you’re 15 and kids are mean, you’re just never really feeling it.
That was when I finally realized the importance
of buying clothes that fit.
It mattered to be prepared, and have something to wear,
that drapes you like silk,
so you can look and feel like a million bucks,
no matter the cost, cuz
buying a pair of pants and a shirt that fits
cost the same as trying to predict
what may or may not fit a year, or seven, down the line,
and that’s to say that you’ll even have the same taste then,
or that you haven’t ruined your clothes,
or that you haven’t lost them while shedding layers during track practice,
or most importantly,
if you would ever grow into them.
These days I have my own money, thankfully,
and the ability to buy clothes that fit,
even a gym membership.

Sure,
for a time, I had to buy clothes more often than before
because of how I grew,
but not so much anymore
cuz I grew into who I am today,
and sure I might put on or lose some weight,
and my face might change a bit,
but I've grown into it,
myself that is.

I've grown into myself,
and I continue to treat myself
like every day is a special occasion
and perhaps my last.
Best of all,
after I wake up,
thanking God for another day,
I shower and I get dressed
out of the closet I've built
with the clothes that fit.

A Poem for My Mom

A poem could never contain the magnitude of my love for you.

The paper is too thin—
it would drown in ink—
and so frail
that it would tear under the pressure
from all the things
in all the ways
to say I love you.

No building or structure
could contain the abundant
amount of words
that I could fill pages with.

No city, no landmass could bare the weight
nor could the earth's inhabitants perceive it
because there would be no room for them—
a single page or one million,

it wouldn't make a difference
in what I mean
when I say
I love you

either way
a simple poem's length of paper
is all I really need to say
I love you

you brought me into this world
and you fed and you sheltered me
and you clothed me
and you showed me how to explore
and you love me.

I wouldn't be me
if it wasn't for you
and I love me
so thank you
for being you.

I love you, mom.

A Prayer, Edited

Praise God!

Another year has gone by,
and there is so much to be grateful for.

Thank you, God,
for the abundance of life,
for the love of living,
for the glory of faith.

Thank you, God,
for the serenity of trust,
for the strength to endure,
for the peace of letting go.

Thank you, God,
for the wisdom gained along The Way—
for everything.

In Jesus' name,
I pray.

Amen.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This is the prologue to my upcoming novel *The Daydreamer*. The novel is obviously still a work in progress, so the prologue is susceptible to changes in the future.

The First Dream (Prologue):

Knock knock knock

I'm driving a taxi cab on 79th street in the Upper East Side of New York City. The streets are packed with abstract personas and rats and cars — mine reeks of a street dog with an excessive amount of mustard and relish. A man in all black — boots, trousers, turtleneck, beanie, and a bandana to hide his face — stands outside my cab knocking on the driver side window with a glistening silver colt .45. His eyes are full of fear. They're the eyes of a man ready to act rash. He wants my cab, but why me? Why my cab? I'm in gridlock traffic and we're not going anywhere anytime soon. I'm scared. I don't know what to do or why I'm here or where I'm driving. All I know is that I need to return to you. Where are you? He raises the gun to the window again and I close my eyes —

Knock knock

I open my eyes to see a man standing behind a counter. He's been trying to get my attention. I must've been sleeping. I'm a receptionist?

"Hellooooo? Hey buddy! You awake now," says the rude man pretending to ask, but he's not asking. His tone irritates me — I don't like him.

I sit up and wipe the saliva from my chin. Since when did I become a receptionist? Was I dreaming? Where are you? The man knocks on the table again.

Knock knock knock

I'm finally back in bed with you again. We're naked and tangled together like one of those pictures out of the *Kama Sutra*. You're still asleep, but I've been woken up by the knocking at the bedroom door — it's mostly made up of glass panels like that door in our apartment in Prague — we're in Prague, so this is 3 years before we moved to LA; this is before I relapsed; this is before the accident. Maybe I can stay. Maybe I can change things. Maybe if I find my phone I can delete Derek's number, so I'll have no way of reconnecting — no way of shooting up that junk and ruining our lives. I look around for my phone erratically. I scramble around the bed trying not to wake you. It's on the counter. I hop out of bed, but my foot is caught in the blanket and I trip and hit my head on the floor — it's a nasty fall (bad enough to split one's skull).

Knock

My head rises from the ground with a mouth full of sand. I'm in a desert. I don't know where I am or how I got here or where I'm going. I can't remember who I am. All I'm thinking about is how hot the sun is beating down on me. I get up and I walk. It's going to be a long way home — wherever that is.