The In-Betweens is a collection of lyrical non-fiction essays about the life of Davon Loeb. This collection represents issues a young biracial man faces in the American society that has no category box to check for both races. His meditations about race extends from New Jersey and out to Alabama by retelling stories concerning his family, friends, and community. This coming of age collection is equally narrative as it is lyrical. These essays will ask us how we arrive to new maturities while addressing the liminal spaces in-between them. Davon struggles with being a son, a brother, a friend, a lover, and a man who is seeking his identity through excavating the past and the present. This memoir will leave readers in the footsteps of any American in search of self-discovery.
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Dedication

This is dedicated to all the bodies that became my memoir.
The In-Betweens
Alabama Fire Ants

Nana lived in a blue Creole cottage home in Alabama. It was small and crowded, and bodies were always too close; everything was too stuffed; we all just too hot—and maybe in some other life, we might have been like some ship’s cargo. But here, in this twin-sized space of four twisted boiling bodies, we slept: David, Taquaan, Kyra, and me, all foot-to-face and four in a bed. I could taste swollen feet, like three-day-old wet socks that are impossible to unpeel—like a wetness your skin can’t wash off, because Nana couldn’t afford air conditioning, so pedestal fans oscillated warm air throughout the house. Click. Click. Click. And I counted each click, until the fan cooled my body. My sunburnt body. Its rawness—tight and blistered—and pain thickened each time I tried to readjust. So I just sat, and listened to the stuffed air cycle from room to room.

The stars fell heavy on Alabama; so they say, but I remember the sun, and its lidless glare, staring above me. As if, an all-day fixation, like it knew, and wanted me to burn. My skin was much lighter than the rest of my family—a sandy-beige. And by mother’s orders, I had to wear sunscreen—but no one else, just me—like a blotchy cover-up. And rightfully, I became the joke—my lightness and their heckling—just two words: white boy. I was the white boy in a family of black boys and black girls, of black men and black women, and years of being black in the stoical world made my skin some kind of leprosy. White boy can’t jump. White boy can’t play. White boy go back inside, where white boy stays because white boy can’t take the heat, can’t run the ball, catch the ball, shoot the ball—white boy can’t play.
There is always a winner and a loser—an account of the victory and the untold story of the loss. Our backyard game of catch was no different. There was our captain, Kyra, and the lackeys, us. Kyra was the most loud-mouthed, loose-tongued, disingenuous person I have ever met. She was the two-faced type to tell me I was her favorite cousin, and then, I was white boy who lynched our great grandparents. And yet, she spoke this so well, so sweet—almost in iambics: if you should die we all will be happy—she could sing hurt like a nursery rhyme.

And we’d all listen to her words under some sovereign service as the shadow of a small curly-haired girl like an effigy, stood splitting the sun into bright weaving waves of golden yellows over our faces.

Her right-hand man was my brother, Taquaan. His lunacy was in his inability to ever say no or to defend me or anything else in the marginal zone of unpopular. Though he was my brother, Taquaan and I had different fathers. My father was white. His father was black. We looked nothing like brothers. We could have been strangers from the way indifference occupied his silence. Sometimes when he walked ahead of me, I imagined him holding my hand in a fist of colors—of little bones and knuckles and dark skin leathered around my hand—like the way brothers are supposed to brother.

The other players were Siddik and David. Siddik was the oldest of us but he lacked the physical confidence to be a leader. He had severely crossed eyes, like dark tethering stones. His speech was the shunt of an old train or a scratched Otis Redding record—still skipping and slowed to a very southern-drawn delay. And then there was David, a year older than me, and my rival—an oppositional always,
like two gravities. David and Davon, a sensational fight, by no choice—faced merely because of the humor of it all or the way our bodies blurred browns and tans as if violence was a paintbrush. But who could blame kids—being kids. Nana left us to ourselves—somewhere behind her ears, outside her mind, outside her reach.

Kyra established the rules, two teams: Siddik and David on one, and Taquaan, Kyra, and me on the other. Kyra said the game was simple, in her most euphonic voice: *elect one person from each team to go in the middle and both teams will throw the football back and forth. The lucky man in the middle will win the game, if he catches the ball.* It sounded exciting, especially because I was included. Often enough, I sat on Nana’s stoop watching them play, with my legs crabbed and my glasses sliding down the bridge of my nose. Cousins would laugh and joke like the world and my exclusion was something funny. But now, Kyra turned and affectionately pinched my cheeks, and told me I was the man in the middle.

The brines of their bodies like dark clothes drying on clotheslines, grass was wild and singed, the ground was corrugated, their knees were black, their legs hardened and moved like uprooted tree trunks, their smiles grew large with room to still keep on growing—and I watched the football soar in spirals above my head. My feet wobbled and I tried to get a good position to jump for the ball. *White boy in the middle.* With each pass, their banter like a sagittal scalpel removed the suture that kept me together—my family. Family is supposed to be the stitch between the self and the world, but they furthered my separation. And yet still, I jumped, and jumped.
Between both teams was a monstrous mound of earth: the telltale sign of a fire ants’ nest. Nana had always warned us about them. She’d say that one fire ant’s sting would burn for hours, and that fire ants don’t sting just once, they sting until they decide to stop. And the football continued, like their banter: *white boy can’t jump, white boy can’t jump, white boy can’t jump*—from Kyra to Siddik to David to Taquaan like some chain gang chant. I don’t remember if I was crying or if it was sweat stinging my eyes, but I kept on jumping. And after for what felt like an eternity or maybe just fifty tosses, I caught it. The leathery oval and the white-finger-laces rested comfortably in my hand. I celebrated, and stomped my feet and smashed the earth mound.

I thought the first squads of ants were just freckles sprouting about my skin, maybe the freckles were new or maybe they just had been there all along. I swiped at my leg. The pain didn’t start—there was just movement. And in that moment when all the ants began to scatter like little clumps of rock, my leg was like theirs—my cousins’. It was dark, it moved like soil, it was earth; my skin was this hot changing flesh like some kind of birth or death, and before the firing of all my nerves, and the pain of hundreds of the thousands of ants biting my leg, with each ant’s mandible anchoring into my skin, and inserting a sting once, and again—the pain, for that instant, in that moment, was worth it.

I remember standing, and my right leg was completely covered from foot to up my shorts in ants. I was screaming, a guttural scream—with hard it was almost mute. Someone yelled for my Nana. Her and my uncle rushed outside. I think I fainted then. I remember waking up in the bathtub. My pants were off, and my twig
legs trembled violently. The ants were still biting. I convulsed in desperation to get the ants off. They had risen to the elastic leg-openings of my underwear. I don’t remember blood, just swollenness like an embalmment of the body. My uncle’s big hands squeezed around my ankles to hold me still, and Nana poured bleach over my legs. The ants—like a swampy molasses, started to recede down the drain. I avoided fire ants for the rest of that summer, and spent my final days in bed, alone, with my right leg swollen, hot, and balloonled, and covered in calamine lotion.

The summers after that, when I returned to Alabama, I’d put 9-volt batteries in any nests I could find. I’d wait and watch for the batteries to leak acid or explode. Under the sun and its blanketing suffocation, I stood watch, waiting for the ants to scurry out carrying little chunks of blister-brown earth like survivors who were barely surviving. I came to realize that it wasn’t the ants’ fault when they attacked me; they were just trying to protect their queen. And maybe that’s the strange nature of things: somehow if given the chance, the oppressed will always become the oppressor. So I can’t entirely blame my family, and their mistreatment of me. In those summers, in Alabama, when we all from different parts of America lived together at Nana’s house, the didactics of race and color and its clear and almost honest separation of people affected us all—this thick axiomatic understanding in the way the Confederate flags whipped their arms off front porches, and the way these flags seemed to scream behind the exhaling exhaust of pickup trucks that never stopped as we crossed the roads. And the way a white face looked when smudged behind security glass at the corner store. And the same way the clerk with the tongue touching the red pallet of mouth called us all nigger—like some greeting
while ringing up our bags of chips, and the normality of it all—like racism is weather, and when it rains, bring an umbrella and walk that way—away from the blacks on the sidewalk eating their bags of chips. And this severance, and its salt—this erosion of self—and for my family, I was that constant reminder that between the black and white was gray, where I planted and I stayed, and while segregated in the deep South, at Nana’s house, fist-filled eyes broke bones, and words mosquito-stuck to bruised skin, I was in the middle desperately trying to grab and hold on to something to call my own.
Somewhere in New Jersey

Outside of a hospital in East Orange in the far parking lot of the VA, I sit on my father’s lap and fit my fingers in the grooves of the leather steering wheel and pretend and vroom and roar and honk and I think Mom is still in her scrubs. She doesn’t call you Dr. Loeb anymore. We could be runaways like this. Rations—milk, Gerber, diapers, a bag of Mom’s change of clothes, and from the look of things—we are hideaways—found in some attic, some strange storage, these weekday retreats—lunch break tryst—rendezvous. I don’t know what any of that means yet, and I don’t call you dad or doctor, and maybe just man or nothing, but I think you hold me like I am yours. Or like these pretend sounds, and these pretend moments, of a pretend family. I wonder if you talk about your wife, or Mom’s husband—Mom’s children. Do you talk about a life together like how people talk about the things that they wish they had—and if I was it, if I could change everything?
A Reconstruction of Great Great Grandfather

Some years later, I learned about my great great grandfather, a slave. The story goes that he wouldn’t walk—and couldn’t walk—so he never left the bed, which was probably just a gnarl of rags on the floor with his body tangled, deadened, saturated, and cooking like meat waiting to be salted—by a sun so hot, it could peel-back skin as sharp as it could warp wood. Nana said that one day, along the grapevines of plantations, word of freedom was sprouting. This could have been a year or a day before actual slavery abolition—but words are fire and flint is rumor, and I bet, even the mosquitoes profiting off the black bodies felt the heaviness stick in the air. Lord knows, Nana would say—black skin ain’t what it used’ta. And in some way, I knew what she meant—I could see Great Great Grandfather’s belly breathe into himself in a constant panic, the anxiety like a suffocation—waiting for the wilts to settle—the throbbing warmness of scars being reopened like soil with garden prongs. Great Great Grandfather’s ankles barely visible as hands reached and grabbed—long branch-like limbs dragging the smudge of a boy facedown through the dirt.

Nana said—Great Great Grandfather was no fool, as young as he was. No one knew why he couldn’t walk. Maybe something like—oh, only Lord knows why baby was born with broken legs the way they are. And legend writes itself to ear and mind and hope, and Great Great Grandfather became a salvation like Christ in the upper-pews where blacks worshipped for some chance that someone would raise up and walk them to freedom. And it all reminds me so much of the Baptist churches Nana brought me to. These bodies swaying the way trees swayed, and hands like the thunderclaps of summer heat-storms—a unison of sorts; the whole thing entranced
me, like the crescendos of accepting Christ and hallelujahs as the holy spirit enters you. And maybe these tributaries to Christ kept Great Great Grandfather alive—as he was propped up, and something like a bowl was tilted and his throat retched a little, until whatever was soaking in the briny discolored thing, drained like sewage into his stomach—and hands held and heads fell, and *thank God for this food.*

Those who remembered something of their old gods and lands and rituals, might have sang a song that even he couldn’t understand, and I can’t comprehend; but whatever it was—it may have been the only assurance a slave could hold on to. And Great Great Grandfather for ten years did not walk, and some say it was his refusal to be a slave—they say heroically, Great Great Grandfather chose not to walk, and pretended to be paralyzed, and therefore could not slave in the fields, and the bolls of cotton that waited to be picked from the billowy whiteness burnt that day, and the pruned backs that blocked the sun stretched out their wrinkles and began elsewhere—and Great Great Grandfather wiggled his charcoaled toes, and heavy-hand planted his palms, and rooted his heels deep into the dirt floor, and rose up—his knees knobby, thinned, and grayed—and I bet before it all, they all said, *praise Jesus,* and Great Great Grandfather stood erect and walked away as a free man.
You Cannot Date My Daughter

I’m in the school gymnasium. Someone’s daughter asks me to be her date to the Sophomore Cotillion. I can’t stay long here. This is why parents pay high taxes. I am a peppercorn in this salt grinder. With each glower like a 20-gauged loaded barrel, diesel and carousel steams from their grills—waiting for their heads to blow. And I become I as red as a peregrine’s egg—between the crosshairs of broken eyes—squinted then focused—everyone in this camouflage—still at war, somewhere barely above the Mason Dixon Line. Suited in heavy-duty Carhartt jackets, canvas dungarees, thick-treaded high Ankle boots with Kevlar lacing, and I think hatred is a grog, and this room is grumbling.
Shopping with Kevin

Just these bare-boned boys screaming our secrets about the world, loud and below the swollen canopies of the Pine Barrens—and here we grew from out that fertile foliage—as if we were living in that tree house—that warped collage of wood we stole from newly constructed homes in the neighborhood. When we rode our bikes around the cul-de-sacs and passed the one-ways and surveyed the land—we looked for houses that were still under construction. We’d hide in the brush of an adjacent home; our heads were periscopes waiting for the construction workers to leave for lunch. When they left, we’d break cover and make our entrance—always looking before crossing. The workers locked the door, but there was a hole where the deadbolt was going to be installed, so I’d snake my skinny wrist into that hole and unlock the doorknob from the inside out.

The only thing keeping us from falling to our untimely deaths through the framing wood and into the foundation of the homes, were these thin slabs of plywood that dimpled as we walked. They sat horizontally over the beam joists, and every step was measured by the foot before it—heel to toe—heel to toe. And maybe we were always one step away from descending into that world below ours—into the basements of society and deprivation. We became bandits with such suavity, and calculation—and bravado—and preciseness that lit the way with flashlight headbands. Look over there and can we carry that—sizing up the building supplies with one quick glance, and knowing what we could take, what we needed, and if we could carry it back home.
Like vagabonds, we stumbled out, weary-eyed, sun-stung, as if we had just woken up there—scratching out fiberglass and coughing up sawdust. Piling planks between ear and shoulder, stuffing pockets—front and back, with collated coils of framing nails—our necks red, splintered, and hot—our legs abraded and hustling from the scene of the crime. This wasn’t a matter of excitement and danger—for it was about exploring and creating, and making our own by the opportunistic taking—the pirating of life, whenever we could—with whatever we could.

We were soaked in the summer brines, like the sun had just spit us out—these two boys moving through the neighborhood as if we were fugitives—assessing, waiting for cars to pass, ducking and using ferns for cover. The wood and nails felt sharper with more irritancy, and our skin chafed itself with maybe blood and maybe sweat, but we made it back to my house, and were on the way to the deep thicket of pines and fetterbush. And then we heard it—sirens like birds above the tops of trees, and the whirling flashes that seemed to dye everything purple, as if it were all hit with a splatter of paint. Our stomachs dropped, and so did our supplies.

Something in the soil pulled us closer, like it already knew—and wanted us safe, and had all these millipede arms drawing us in—sinking past the sand and the sediment and probably fossils of some old boys who hid just the same. These moments felt scripted, like a reenactment of a Western robbery—two bandits, a bag of gold notes, and the law on our tails—I could draw my eyes and my hat down real low, and say something smooth, like—*you and whose army*—and then the patrol car drove by and we held our breath and counted the seconds. Our bodies might have
twined and rooted and became part of the earth, and under our arms and between our legs—moss might have formed, and our eyes could have been green and leafy and even stemmed out the brush of our faces, and while our bones grew rings and our skin became bark—the fear in our bellies felt magnificent.
Weekend Weather

Under the weight of the toppling sky, and the volume of sharp rains, and the hard yells of my parents shaking the grout between the bricks of our home—on many of these nights, I am dust clung to those shaking corners, while Mother and Stepfather push-pull their iron bodies into each other. And when they speak—it’s of divorces, and it’s like, the weather on weekends, and—maybe it’ll rain—maybe I will leave—and maybe I don’t love you. I watch their four-legged-dance shadowing beneath a crack in the door. He hates when she takes me to see my real father. He feels the threat of insecurities—of a time when she loved someone else, a man much different, and a face he sees everyday through mine. And he reminds her that she is never home, and—you are my wife, and you should be home—and must love me, and always and forever. Those bedroom walls are thin, and if asbestos can grew anywhere—it grew there. And she never hides—she squares up, and tells him—to mind his damn business, and I’m a grown-ass woman, and you can tell me when to be home and where to go, when you make enough damn money for me to not have to work.

My knees glue to my chest. I’m a ball of bones cradling back and forth—somewhere between the door and the doorframe; because when a train shunts, like when bodies crash—there is always a violence—like a control the body will take over its emotions, and possess our movements, and just like the billows that hang low above this house—our judgment too, gets clouded. He bargains for her phone by slamming his fist, and she says, she will give him the phone after calling the police. Her, I-wish-you-would, thunder-talk only tightens his draw and blares his bark, until
her mouth becomes her whole body and his hands become his mouth, and then we all shake—at once, like a family.
When Our Bodies Become Memoirs

L2. I'm not ready to write about you yet—so I’ll start here.

***

I don't know where I went wrong with women.

***

M. I practiced procedures before having sex—trying on condoms, tying knots and then untying knots like they were bras. I remember the first time I tried to have sex. It was with my neighbor. She was a year older than me, and more experienced. We kissed in my basement. I might have been Columbus with no idea what the fuck I was doing and where I was going. We shut the lights. I should have kept them on. I was sailing around in the dark, poking around on her leg, by her knee, her belly button, and finally between her legs. I was so damn scared. I never made it in.

***

K2. My mom knocks on the door. She asks if she can come in, I tell her I'm painting. She says—well let me in. I tell her—I'm lying. I'm not painting. She asks the girl’s name. Girl says—who’s that?

I tell a friend a week later. He tells me—funny, I just had her [same girl] at my house the other day, she was giving me head—I hadn’t showered because I was coming home from another girl’s house who I just had sex with. I fell asleep with her mouth around me.

K2. went to his house right after leaving mine.

***
I’ve never really sat and thought about the double standard in dating, and sex, and how we feel about these things that feel so self-defining. Sex with lots of girls has been a rite of passage. Yes—another notch, another chapter—I’d tell my older brother. He’d say—oh, that’s it?

***

I. You helped me pass Japanese.

***

H. I was desperate for something. I would have easily been happy with really good pizza.

I should have worn a condom this time. It’s like I put my toe in the pool and it didn’t last long.

I walked around Stone dorm a bit after. Bernard tells me you were gangbanged. Washing myself won’t help.

***

Can you imagine having a baby with her—asks Mom.

***

L.W. I bring you back to my house once. I wait till Mom goes upstairs. We watch Purple Rain—I think I’m Prince.

I ask you to come visit me at school. It’s a two-hour drive. You say you’re going to see a friend too. It’s mid-afternoon. L.W. comes here first. My roommates are watching tv. I don’t really introduce you. They’ve them pictures. It’s like showing a new trading card.
We go into the bathroom. There’s a long handle for towels. You holds that, and I ask you to keep her eyes to the wall.

I’m home on Winter Break. I text L.W. You tell me your dad was is—on dialysis. I come over—a two-level home, almost all green yard—a welcome mat. Your father died earlier this week. You’re living alone. I walk in and step over empty wine bottles. They’re lusher than the grass. And I don’t look at anything for long. Your parents’ photos do all the watching, L.W. takes my hand. This house is your grief. I should feel guilty. I should leave. But I need your body the way I need this conjunction—and—maybe I can take away your pain. Toilet paper rolls and tampon wrappers—and I think these things are too much woman for me. You’re naked, and not just because your clothes are off. I’ve never been closer to a woman—and never felt more uncomfortable.

***

S. I tell my friend to call me and say he is at the train station so you will leave.

***

K1. You work at my gym—take my member number, and I like to think you watch me work out. I see you at Bed, Bath, and Beyond. I’m shopping for L2. You could tell I am lost—just like I was then. You were only 19. I tried to show you what 23 would feel like.

***

C. You and K. have the same name—but are very different besides first letters. I see your sports bra on the floor once. I spend a semester thinking about it. Eventually you break up with you boyfriend, and I run for candidacy.
I “convince” you to sleep with me by calling you a lesbian. I’m convinced the reverse-psychology will actually work. We leave a party. You push me against the wall. It feels all college-cliché.

I might I have an STD. I’m showing it to my friends—like—have you ever had this? College is a different world. We’re all breathing the same air. K. wants to have sex. I show her, and ask if she thinks it’s anything. I believe you. This is the kinda girl you are. I could believe that.

But I do go to the doctor anyway. He gives me an ointment—says it’s just jock-itch.

If you weren’t off getting your doctorate somewhere—I’d try again. You’ve sent me pictures since then. That might be another reason why, but I haven’t seen you since 2009—and I don’t think I ever will.

***

Mom shows me a medical book of sexually transmitted diseases. She shows me the very graphic pictures. I try to flip the page but she won’t let me. My memories are footnotes to Chlamydia. I haven’t even kissed a girl yet. But Mom does buy me condoms in bulk when I’m 17. However, I split the cost for Plan B once.

***

T. I have sex in my F-150 with the condoms Mom bought me. She’s more my first than any others. I tell her I’m not a virgin, and push the center console back. It becomes a three-seater—and just the two of us.

I’m not her boyfriend yet. I always stall. But I do ask her out because I want to keep her body close—like sometimes in cars when I drop the condoms out the
window as if they’re cigarette butts or sometimes at her house—when once her uncle comes home and we pretend to be doing nothing—and I remember when the condom was still on—trying not to stay too hard. She teaches me about our bodies—just because we attach whenever we can. I know one day something I’ve learned will make me a better lover. I just need more of this.

T. is troubled. She steals her uncle’s car. He’s a federal lawyer. She lands in a ditch. They send her back home with her mother. I’m an addict. I chase her to Cape May. Two hour-long drives for my fix. I even teach myself words like—*love*—out of desperation. It’s my body’s way of saving itself.

We don’t make it through the summer. I punch the dashboard—I scream—I cry—I’m going through withdraw.

Today I’m sad because your baby is sick. You told me you’d never stop smoking, even if you were pregnant.

***

I’ve cheated on every girl I have ever been with.

***

I remember my brother and his friend waking me up one night. It was probably after midnight. My brother stumbled into my room—unpeeled my eyes with beer-breath. He said—go to Mom’s room and get Vaseline out her cabinet. I asked him why. He punched at me and told me to go—Mom wouldn’t wake up if it were me. So I got up, and splintered through the door—smooth as my shadow. Creeping into the bathroom and took the container. I tip-toed out, went back downstairs and gave my brother the jar. He told me to stay inside. I watched him from the porch. Him and his
friend were with a girl in the backyard. She was just as hazy and stumbling. His
friend took the jar, opened it and put his hand in it. She squirmed around behind
him. He put his hand into her pants and wiggled them down. He moved with
frustration.

***

It’s a strange thing our bodies can do.

***

E. Sure I’ve had very drunken sex. We have a party. Jungle juice in a storage bin—
filled to the top, used a ladle—and fell into a grog. E. you’re here and everyone can
see everything you have. Your dress is like a bath towel. You’re fucking someone
tonight. L. is at the party. I will eventually date L. for 5 years. But I don’t know L.
then. I can only see E. I’m vulnerable. You pull me into my room. With ease, not just
because I’m drunk—but you’re bigger than me—and who the fuck cares.

You leave your underwear. I pretend I’m hang-gliding.

***

I’ve never really sat and thought about the double standard in dating, and sex, and
how we feel about these things that feel so self-defining. Sex with lots of girls has
always been my rite of passage. Whenever I told my brother my new numbers, he’d
say—oh, that’s it?

***

We have a terrible degrading system for women sometimes. We called them
Slampigs of the Month— or a female who did not meet the typical standard of
attraction—on the scale of pretty or symmetry, and not that we used a ruler, but
there was some linear quality about her eyes to nose to lip ratio that did not match. Indeed, this slampig was unsymmetrical—always something off, visually—something that’d qualify her for lower self-esteem and inhibition. She wouldn’t mind being a slammed pig, maybe even honored. And if beauty were a quantification of balance—she would be unbalanced. The incongruence would of course be physical. Maybe large breasts but a small butt or a belly that plunged a bit too far over waistline—a little too much here or a too little there—an off-ness about her that she knew better than we did. And in conclusion, we thought were doing her a favor.

***

B. I almost made you my girlfriend. I wish you never gave me that power. You should have stopped me long before. I did meet your mom. But I like to close my eyes and walk forward—just to see how far I can get.

***

F. We meet at the bar. You’re dancing with my friend. He goes to the bathroom. I swoop in. You ask me for my number. We text. You have a son. Once, we get snowed in and him and I play catch. And F., I keep you at reach for a couple years. Sometimes you send me a picture. I tell you that you’re a great mother. This is our exchange. You tell me about your mother who is a drug addict. She dies. You tell me that too. I compare you to my mother. She had a baby young. I hope one day you’ll find love. We both know that it’ll never be me.

***

J2. & C. I write you workouts. I do your measurements. I check your BMI. When I myofasical release your shoulders, I’m not sure how hard I’m actually pushing.
L1. We’re in my closet. My parents recently bought me new furniture. It hasn’t arrived. This is the only closed space we got. I definitely think I’m a virgin. I roll the condom down. It’s ribbed. My heart is a trumpet. For a second when were having sex, I think I’m dying, but then Mom slides the closet door open—my house is not a brothel. I don’t really know what Mom means, but she does close the closet. We never try again.

***

L.M. You’re a lifeguard at camp. I work with special-needs campers. I feel terrible writing that. We keep tally after how many times you look at me. I know you’re at least 18. After the Phillies game, I take you back to my parents’ house. We lay down. You tell me you’re not tired.

***

M. I could have loved you if you didn’t move to New York.

***

B2. I write a poem about you once. It’s about your freckles. I say something like—I want to take your freckles and make graffiti in the sky. I’ve known you since you were teenager. We live in the same neighborhood. I paint pictures of you once. I think you’re far beautiful than you realize yourself—but I’m embarrassed by this. You don’t fit the normal mold for girls I like—or girls my friends think I like. But, I see something beautiful in every woman. You remind me of this. I wish when we’re naked; I could do a better job at showing you. You make me nervous. I tell you this. You live in D.C. I’ll never stop painting you.
C2. I try to reach a quota every year at camp. I should thank you.

J. Your mom is my boss. She tells me you “had” a drug habit. Everyone at work thinks your mom crushes on me. She does—maybe this is the only way I can respond. I bring you to my apartment, and we have a little party. I’m not supposed to let you drink. You kiss my friend. I feel like something I bought has now been stolen. But, you might know this too. So I don’t smile during it.

K.Z. You have red hair. I barely made it to the drapes. You fall out the bed. I try anyway. I’m not sure if I can even add you to the list. I do tell L2. about you. You were the only one.

Mom catches me in the bathroom touching myself while flipping pages in her Victoria Secrets magazine. I’m five.

K.I. You let me drive your Beetle. It’s a manual. After a movie, we stay in the car around the corner from your house. At our next movie, I don’t hold your hand until the trailers start.

I’ve never have much trouble dating. I can always find a girl, but it takes filtering. I can’t just be—handsome. On Match.com, you can search in preference to which race you want. I never know if I want to check the box for black or white. I can pretend
I’m a different race—but I feel an obligation to being black. And that means I will probably get less messages.

The town I grow up in is predominately all white. I predominately dated white girls—just out of proximity and approximation. For a white girl to date me, she had to been into *that kinda thing*. But no one really wants to be fetishized. We all just want to be loved for whoever and whatever we are. And of course, I’m a hypocrite. I search for a uniformed beauty.

_You’re going to have to pick_—a line we’ve asked hundreds of time, and they always do. My best friend and I are both biracial. This plays a role in our attraction with and to women. And ethnicity can be a funny thing. Though race is a social construct, our racial position in the world was totally ambiguous. Being biracial in America meant how we looked in comparison to how we were supposed to look. I look everything but my actual race, which is typically determined by my different haircuts, facial hair, and time of the year, and for something that is so inexorably fixed in the world—my race is an always variable. My best friend and I share the same narrative—both our mothers black and our fathers white. I’m a Black Russian and he’s Black Greek.

But **Between the two of us, girls often picked him. I’ve always thought he was the handsomer one. He had the quintessential manly beauty thing going on—sharp cheekbones, brawny shoulders, thick-palms, clearly defined abdomen, and taut posture. He looks like a Greek sculpture with a black man’s facial features. And he can pass for being white and I cannot. There’s a tightrope he can walk on, and I am indefinitely to the right.**
I’m insecure about a lot of things—but I’m confident about even more.

R. You’re from New Jersey backwoods. You’re too caring, but you’re curvaceous—and so tenaciously enamored with me. You tell me about the all-white school you went to. She felt odd, though you’re white. But you do like rap music and Phat Farm. You date Puerto-Rican once—which is basically the same thing.

We go dancing. You could sex me straight with this music. You know all the songs—oh you prove your blackness to me. And the black guys are hounds around us. But thanks for the props, because I’ve landed me a white girl.

I see a picture of your father. He is the standard racist. Close your eyes and imagine what The Racist looks like. That’s him. I tease you about it. I know it makes you sad but it’s my way of dealing with it. You cry so hard once. Right after sex. Your dad sends you a text about interracial relationships—and how it’d break his heart. I think you told him I’m Italian. I wished you’d tell him the truth. I want him to see how beautiful we look when we’re naked.

I also use him as an excuse to break up with you.

H2. I’m on the toilet. H. climbs on top, and saddles herself. My legs are damn skinny. We turn into a creature like this. And then toilet lid pings.
C. I am patient with you. You’re my high school sweetheart. My dad walks by my room every time we’re almost bonded. Then you freak out a little and push me. It takes us 8 months. I’m okay with that. We date for 2 years. I leave you at home when I go away to college. I tell you I have a hard time being faithful. You think sometimes it’s better to lie.

Your mom says I’m not good enough to date you—and she’s probably right.

I wish you a happy birthday every year, but only when I think you’re at work. You’ll respond until you’re at home with your husband. Him and I knew your body at the same time. I doubt you’ll ever tell him that.

***

My brother and his friend didn’t rape that girl. They got drunk, and she “wanted” to have sex. My brother scripts me—just in case. I remember being mad at him. I didn’t understand the implications—but I understood the things I wanted bodies to do. And I think I envied him. I’m disgusted to write that.

***

I want to know at what moment did bodies just become memoirs.

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J3. I’m going to stop here. I think I’m in love.


It’s Bath Time

When our hot water is cut off, Sister boils large pots of water in the kitchen. She turns down the eye of the stove, and cautiously lifts the almost overfilled pot with
two dishrags. I stand next to her, walking the whole way; I am always next to her, trailing what’s left of her shadow. It reminds me so much of Sunday mornings—when Sister pulls us from our beds. Wrapped in sheets, we are little ghost booing all the way to the bathroom. Where Brother and I shoulder for the sink, and brush for three minutes, because Sister always counts. And then the tag-behind, fitting our feet in the wet pivot of her arch—like baby ducks: one-and-one-and-one, and together.

As the water steams, Sister looks away and briefly down at me. She can be Mother. I’ve seen her in the kitchen. She dresses me for school. Ties my bit-sized oxfords. She wears a gold ring that attaches two of her fingers. It says—beautiful. She is beautiful, even when her side ponytail of fire and hairspray brimstone sets our world aflame, and with one look, with one sharp furling glare, we are stones and snakes hiss all over her head. And even after the Silent Treatment, or the missing nightlight, and the tickle torments, and transform-less Transformers, when we steal her things: Troll Dolls, cassette tapes radio-mix, scrunches, earrings, and everything else that looks fun and foreign—I know sister will still carry this weight that is always brimming over.

And in the bathroom, she says—it’ll cool off fast, and I look at her like I’ll never forget what dependency feels like. She starts pouring the water in the bath. Maybe this time the water is too hot, or the bath is already too full, but whatever it is—the hot water splashes everywhere. Sister pushes Baby Brother out of the way, and drops the pot—and it empties, and the water is a red ocean. Her body screams only in the way our bodies can react to shock—something guttural and
uncontrollable—a primordial loss of language—and she tries to unpeel the pink corduroy pants, but the thick cotton comes with layers of skin. Sister goes to the emergency room. Sometimes, I think the only real thing we can offer each other are our bodies. She has third degree burns covering sixty percent of her leg. She is forever scarred, but at least I know I will always be loved.
Something About Love

What do I know about love? I know my father-kinda love. I know the paternity testing—the 3 tests later—99.9 percent chance, you are the father, love. I know that. I know it as well as I know when I should turn left, at least I can trust Google Maps.

I’m somewhere in Pennsylvania with my [ex] girlfriend. I know this drive take 3 hours—and that is not why I do not want to go. This is their idea—Mother and [ex] girlfriend. Mother says—no one wants to die alone.

Father is old. But love is not. I think it is something he just forgot about—I am his afterthought, a bastardized emotion—maybe I should have forked the other way—Dad thinks while paying child support. Mom says—Dad does not know how to love—he never learned. I guess love is a learned behavior. Through conditioning and experience, you can differentiate between emotion and instinct. I think Dad loved his other sons—from his marriage with his wife. I think they played tennis and he hugged them, and said good job. They probably ate together, and talked about school—oh, how was your day.

Maybe love is reliability. I do love the sun. But Dad and I go to the movies. We talk all the way up to the trailers. We talk a little after the credits. We go to the diner. He passes the syrup and I pass the creamer.

Maybe [ex] girlfriend thinks I will love her. She could teach me how to love. We are bringing Dad Thanksgiving dinner. We made a turkey—named it Carmelo. It splashes around in an ice tray. [ex] girlfriend sleeps the entire ride; I watch her. I think I hate her face—not because she isn’t pretty, but because she’s sleeping and is happy. Her face reddens and looks like the tips of foliage; her breathing is heavy and
nasally; she even sweats a little, and I tickle at her fingers until she holds my hand.

This is what I’m supposed to do—right?

Mom tells me Dad’s first love died. She drowned in a lake. I think about her when I look at [ex] girlfriend. But when she wakes up, I look into her eyes, and they’re the color of earth—the type of hazel that makes me want to pick up all my things, pitch a tent—and just live and retreat from everything. But this doesn’t mean I love her. It means I am observant, and good with words.

_Davon, how is your mother? Davon, how is school? Davon, you should come visit more._ And I answer—just this kind of press play on life, and let it stream. The architect, Coubly Dunn, won an award for these prow-style log cabins. Dad has over three acres, and the house is about 1,500-square feet. One day this house will be mine. I refer to it as The Chateau. This is the second house in the same spot. The first one burnt down when his cats knocked over a lamp. They died in the fire.

Mom reminds me—_your father is up there, all alone in that big house, and he doesn’t have all the time in the world._ Sometimes you can’t wait and you have to pull the scab off—sometimes you need closure not to be slow and natural. I imagine Dad on the floor, surrounded by his cats—they’re licking and he isn’t moving—he could be dead drunk or just dead—but at least they have offered un-refuted love. I don’t know what that means. I never had pets.
Tire Spokes and Ice Cream Cones

We shook Mom’s work-pants. We freed copperheads and silver dollars. We chased the sun. It swallowed by the sky like our eyes nesting in our sockets. Teetered shoelaces dragged and followed, like the loose Band-Aids that swung from off our dirty knees. Our names were abbreviated by single letters, and then howled through laughter and the sounds of cards taped between tire spokes.

We peddled swiftly through the deep-wooded wilderness. With the fidelity of childhood dares, we were hawks, cutting air with our arms. We peddled all day, and when the sirens screamed from the frozen-custard truck, we ditched our bikes. Left them like bones in the dirt. We shook our dingy dungaree shorts, and wrestled in our pockets. Peeked through holes with hungry fingers. We freed copperheads and silver dollars—and ordered the clay-colored cones and shared zealous licks. And then when the reluctant nightfall came, it carried us home—back before cell phones were ringing.
Retirement

It’s tragic seeing a man fall apart the way he did. In every sense of falling—him pirouetting above the school and the sagittal-tightrope walk across the edge of roofing, and each student and teacher—like hundreds of fingers—pointing and all saying something like—*jump*. And though we all have a human responsibility to each other—some empathy and charity of the heart, we still watched the tension cut from under his feet, and waited for his balance to falter. Maybe he would fall safely into retirement or maybe he’d teach till bone dry—or maybe he’d drift into a purgatorial forgotten—and his school picture will fade, and people might say—*do you even remember him?*

I remember his classroom like this very living artifact. Historical antiques of what he thought was American Social Studies—something strictly and undeniably American—like jazz, and the Black American—the Black Experience—the transitional process from Africa, to slavery, to freedom—his America when given the chance to narrate history. African tribal masks, pictures of Malcolm and Martin, replication of the Proclamation, things for coloreds only, Jim Crow, Mancala, Paul Collins’, “Underground Railroad”, and McBride himself—somewhere between telling history and taking on history, like these quantum leaps into bodies and tongues and stories only footnoted in textbooks. Walking by his classroom once, I overheard him recite a Frederick Douglass speech. It gave him this new restorative quality—a flash of life—like he himself became Douglass—*fellow citizens, pardon me, and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today*. He walked around the room, speaking to each student—the 24-percent non-white and the 76-percent white
student population. He memorized the speech; he might have actually became Frederick Douglass.

And yet, he slept during department meetings—*William, William, William*—one of us was delegated to say, and each, *William* became more irritating and assertive until his shiny bald brown head languorously wiggled, like a turtle—briefly and attentive, and then back into its shell of a suit collar. The exhaustion in their faces had been brimming for years. This was only my second year, unlike everyone else pushing 20 years and over—those who worked with McBride all their career—whose frustrations were always moments away from exploding. Once McBride left the room, the babbling critics let loose—*He should retire. He doesn’t even teach. He slept through the whole meeting. Those kids don’t learn.* And I never defended him. But why should I? He was a bad teacher—forgetful, unorganized, stubborn, temperamental, negligent, subjective—and often hateful to students he did not like. So it was all justifiable—maybe everything they said was deserving—maybe McBride really was the big problem with education. And even so—even if he was a disservice to hundreds of students’ learning, I still felt some civil responsibility to the man.

I’d like to think I was compassionate because it’s the right thing to do—like holding the door or helping with groceries—there’s just this certain level of respect for elders, and McBride pushed into his late 60’s, but my empathy was rooted somewhere deeper than the human responsibilities to each other. McBride and I were the only black male teachers in the entire school—the only black men in this community within a community, and in this way, I felt accountable. His behavior
was a reflection of me. And in the same way—I felt an unwritten bond of brotherhood with McBride just because of that reason. This created an expectation from the staff and students and even from myself that McBride and I were a constant comparison—juxtaposing—*you don’t act black like him—sometimes I even forget you’re black—you worked hard for your job, his was Affirmative Action.*

William and I didn’t speak to each other much, more of passers-by in the hallway or faculty lounge. I tried to always be judgment-free—*good morning Will—enjoy your day Will—thank you and you welcome.* I was always polite and welcoming, and so was he. Maybe my politeness was subconscious guilt—like our brief conversations would make up for all my absence. And they say that silence is just as dangerous as insult—and there I was, pardoning for indifference. But I didn’t know what to believe about William. I heard so many stories that it was difficult to not cast judgment. And I think that becomes a serious problem when we narrate other peoples’ lives—there’s a triculation of what we think we know and the actual know—and then the very real story of someone’s life.

This is myth-making, and as the story goes—the only reason he earned a teaching degree was because of free black scholarship—he was a terrible third-grade teacher, but instead of firing him, they sent him to middle school—he taught 3 different subjects equally as bad at each—he changed this name from Bill to William after a divorce—he was one of the highest paid teachers—he wasn’t a teacher—he’s crazy—a black old fool—never fired because being black—only hired because being black—we think we saw him once, roaming the streets—we think we know him—we write his story—we watch him fall—and we push.
William might have even been handsome when he was younger. He had a proclivity for dressing well: iron-pressed pants, straight-pointed collar shirts, ties, suspenders, and single-breasted jackets. For being sixty-three-years-old, his body was obsidian and very soldierly—walking chest first, head high, and back taut. But if you looked at McBride—really sat and touched eyes with the man, you could tell something wasn’t right. There was this absence inside of him—like he was never really there. His deterioration wasn’t the breakdown of muscle and bone—his deteriorate more intimate—it was the mind leaving before the body, and his shell trembling like constantly being shut on and off.

Students are wolves to weakness. They watch teachers more than teachers watch students. They know what they can get away with—they’re exploitative and manipulative, and they could feel McBride’s slow death, and took full advantage of his senescence. I don’t blame them. I did the same thing as a kid. I’ve always felt like becoming a teacher was like when criminals become cops—you just know because you’ve done it. And I did it—and I remember when we used to collect straws from milk boxes as artillery to defend against lectures—I remember ripping pieces of paper and putting them in my mouth—and then, like ramrods, using mechanical lead to stuff the plastic-straw muzzle with ammo—I remember unloading on the bloated backs of teachers, the little wet globs of spit and old quiz scrapping, and how our teachers never knew and we felt like rebels getting back at the educational monarchy. I remember being cruel, and how our Lyme-diseased music teacher didn’t know the difference between our claps and our well-orchestrated mouth-farts. She’d sing along—we’d fart even louder. Children can be the worst kinds of
bullies. Children don’t completely understand consequence and repercussions like adults [should]. And yes, as cruel as we were—we responded in response to incompetent authority, and McBride was incompetent to work his job.

Well why not fire him? Why don't encourage retirement? Where is the authority above the authority? The administration problem-solved by avoiding the problem. Justification—New Jersey’s Department of Education does not standardized test all academic subjects. 8th grade Social Studies is not tested by the State. This means its testing-importance isn’t comparable to English or Mathematics—or it is easier to have a bad non-tested subject teacher versus a tested subject teacher because the accountability is different. Simply, it took more work to reprimand McBride than to just let him continue teaching. Students would not be tested by what they learned, therefore; the school would not be held accountable for what students did not learn. But it wasn’t just the testing that pardoned McBride. He taught both Science and Reading—which were tested subjects—and apparently, he was equally bad at each. McBride’s career was inseperatable to his race—hired because being black and not fired because being black. They say every principal wouldn’t touch the stovetop of race. They hovered around the burner—they diversified the student population—they were too afraid of bringing the black male faculty percentage down to zero—they eventually hired me.

McBride and I taught the same students. While I taught English, I also became their confidant—and not really by choice. Students vented—every day, and I tried to channel their frustrations rather than invalidate them. Mr. McBride has been calling
me the wrong name for 3 months—our last test had all the answers still circled—he talks to himself in class—he falls asleep during videos—we haven’t learned past 1865. I was uncomfortable because I was deeply torn between role-modeling compassion and understanding versus being in complete agreement with McBride’s absurd pedagogy. He did talk to himself. He never called me by name. The kids never seemed to be learning anything but Black History. Nonetheless, I let them decompress, respectfully. I reminded them there was a big difference between—I hate Mr. McBride or he’s the worst teacher in the world—versus a well-thought-out discussion.

Students retaliated incompetence with delinquency. Our class conversations turned from concern and frustration to vengefulness and malevolence. Every instance started the same—guess what happened to Mr. McBride today? And those students, who confessed, weren’t the students committing the pranks—it was the students who felt guilty—the witnesses. Amusement was less about heckling McBride and more about watching him unravel. Students would move things around in room, like his historical figurines or dry-eraser markers. They’d put them in draws, on top cabinets, or under desks. And at the end of the day, I could see McBride probe around the room—mumbling, searching, slamming, and defeated. Students would get his attention while another ran to the projector and shut it off. He’d lecture and then realize the screen was blank. He’d walk back to the computer and turn the projector on. They’d repeat this—until he’d curse at the computer—heavy and above his breath. Sometimes they said, he’d just stop teaching—sit at his desk and stare blankly—his eyes just rolling and looking for a way out.
If any students got reprimanded, it was a lunch detention or an after-school detention. But nothing was *really* being done. And it seemed everyone knew; it was the tendentious talk of the faculty lounge and between the pangs of lockers and warning bells. And even in the centrality of the pedagogical chaos, McBride was never reprimanded. He was failing the education system as much as the education system was failing him. He’d meltdown—all confused like he forgot where he was—and then obdurately, the next day was the same.

Sometimes McBride used the boys’ bathroom instead of faculty longue—just because of the proximity from his classroom. Male students would joke that they saw McBride using the urinal—but I never thought anything of it—no one did. Though it was odd, not because he was going to the boys’ bathroom, but because he was around the same height as the students—and you’d see the little man in a six-piece suit waltz out and shake his hands dry.

*Teachers are not to use student lavatories*—we realized an email about not using the students’ bathrooms. We then had a team meeting to further discuss the issue. We were told that a student photographed McBride urinating in a stall. The student snapped the photo on his phone and posted the picture online. Maybe ten minutes later, the boy realized the severity of the prank and deleted the photo offline. Inconsequently, it was too late and other students screen-shot the photo—and then mass messaging of the photo. The boy’s parents were contacted and a further investigation would ensue. McBride had no idea what happened. He trembled and nodded his head. I don’t know what I wanted to do. I could have cried. I could have screamed. I could have screamed—
fuck you—to everyone in the room that half-smiled like this man wasn’t dying alive in there. Maybe I could have defibrillated him with a hug or something else more sincere. I could have balled my fist and yelled—my brother—and another—fuck you whitey—I stand with him. I could have told him I loved him—because maybe no one else had said it. I could have said I was sorry—I was sorry—I still am.

McBride put in for his retirement that year. He spent those remaining months of school packing-up his antiques. After the bells rang, and students left—and custodians cleaned—I’d see him walking from classroom to car, carrying boxes—his silhouette eclipsing and escaping above the hallway lockers—like it was weeping. McBride was long gone—maybe months or years before actual retirement. And no one threw him a retirement party—no one gave him a card—not even dialoged about—what next William? He just continued collecting and filling boxes.

Not long after he retired, I saw McBride walking along a busy highway. I beeped and gestured my hand. I wanted to stop and give him a ride. He was carrying bags. I wanted to help, but the way he looked at me—his deep lost eyes looking at me as if I were something new—like seeing me for the first time—and his nerves were pulleys—pulling at each other, trying to find meaning and make sense of me. But there was nothing, and he continued on—like I never even existed.
At Slumber Party

Somebody called us dogs—barking for their bodies below our bellies and between our legs. With their hands, they might search, and we could swell into the fun of the night.

Put two in the closet and two under the stairs, and two in the bathroom, and of what strange nature is knowledge—like the little monsters that were growing inside of us.
Like Gladiators

Maybe it was something about the summer heat. We all sitting around dehydrated in boredom, searching for excitement with cottonmouth. We waited for Nana to come home and ration off chicken-wings from leafy napkins. We sat around, backs hunched, sucking breading and oil plaster under cuticles—gnawing and spitting out marrow, and drinking red sugar water from three-ounce plastic cups.

In the Alabamian summers of the 1990’s, we were all there—siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews—Nana’s grandchildren all living together, and sometimes ten of us, and even fifteen, and five, or three—but there we were, like a summer camp, bunked together for weeks at a time. And these bodies, so many of us, crammed throughout the house, like little ants colonizing whatever empty spaces we could find. Sweat was everywhere—like little pools of gelatin bubbling. Especially on the living room couches, which were covered in a plastic wrap. It made a noise as if bodies were rubber.

Nana forbid us from sitting there—but we did anyway, or at least, only some of us. These couches were like thrones, as well as the cement stoop and Nana’s broken-down Buick. I can imagine the overcastting of a body pointing and directing—two feet squared on the Buick’s hood, with the paint chipped and exposed primer and thick rust—splitting teams, assigning positions, or choosing monkey—and so we stood there in complete docility, waiting—eyes and ears unmoving, what it meant to be picked—to be an inclusion of this little society. And here is where we learned to be people—hiding between the house and its foundation, tagging the wet cotton shirts, pretending and exploring and living like
each day is new territory. However, this is not for the love children can form—the
love to recreate life with rules and naively and honestly and whatever else we
quietly promised to each other—but this is much more insidious—this is for
violence bodies can make, and the strange things we become when pinned against
each other like the animals we never knew we were.

My cousin Shay and I became puppets, with their hands in the back hinges of
our throats—mouthing and moving dummied jaws, and their long limbs like gallows
stood high above taking ownership and the rights over our bodies. It only takes one,
and whoever it was, announced the day’s main event—something like, Battle of the
Bird Chests—or a fight between the most emaciated looking cousins. Shay was a
couple years younger, and even as skeletal as I, with two blade-blunt shoulders
winged out, and lankiness like the way twine knots. Someone prepped her, squeezed
her wrist, mimicked punches, swinging the peg-like things, forward and back—and
labeling moves with numbers—1, 2, 1, 3—the movements differed. The fear I began
to feel was a fear I would become accustomed to—the fear of familiarity, of
closeness, of the black bodies around me—of my family, and the authority that their
bodies had over mine.

And there I was, squared-up with Shay, shoulders pronated, chest sunken,
barely taller than her—trying to figure out what to do before her fist fired. I don’t
remember how many of us there were, but Shay and I were in a circle, and the grass
reached to my ankles; it tickled, I scratched, and wiggled my glasses as the sun
glared like some camera flash or spotlight. Someone yelled, jab, cross, punch,
uppercut—and Shay looked around, unsure. I remember her fists on my lips, and
them busting with blood from the saggital band of hand bones and clip-on keratin nails. The sounds of Shay’s hair-ties bobbing, the little black afro-puffs like clacker toys clanging. Pink plastic balls swung, as she swung. I tried to cover my face but she knocked off my glasses—and for this meant, Shay broke rule number two, never hit the kid with glasses. And then I heard someone say—hit her—hit her, and all these notions like right and wrong, and good and bad, and everything else that seemed important became nothing as loud as the humiliation I was about to face, because for if I hit a girl—I hit a girl—but if I lost—I lost to a girl.

Little humans like hair cells of the inner ear when struck—cochlear nerves rattle and fluid drums and a head becomes heads and motions and inertias and gravities and their laughter like an echo and the cries of a boy—some twenty-five years ago, when I curled my fingers into a ball and swung them back as hard as I could—and I broke rule number one—never hit a girl—not even when the sun gets too big for the sky, and touches down on earth, and burns the white right out of our teeth—and God says something like he will bring the fire next time, and then the painful tangibility of it all, humankind failing the way it did—the way it always does, when bodies are spectacles. And as I replay this memory, I can never really figure out what was more terrifying—our bodies’ gladiatorial display, and the music we made—the grit and grind of knuckles and chin and cheek—or the way they watched, with no horror—with no remorse, only applause.
5-Series BMW

Stepdad is under the hood of his blue BMW. He points to ceramic brake pads; his finger long-snakes in a black latex glove. On an unfolded cardboard box, the pads are in a smudge of dust and caliper grease like metallic paw prints. Stepdad says—those over there might not fit. The garage is cold, and I keep my hands in my pockets. I'm learning how to be a man. Stepdad never goes to the auto repair. He says—Davon, cars are like women—they never work like they're supposed to, and don't come with manuals, and even if you put their parts in all the right places—they'll complain. He bangs on something under the hood. Stepdad rolls backwards from the wheeled creeper, and jabs his oily finger into a hand-made hole, we laugh. Stepdad says—my first car was like my first girlfriend—round and hatchback—like the beatup Datsun that kept getting rear-ended. Stepdad asks for a screwdriver. He says—I used a screwdriver to start her-up.
Before Homeroom, and then After School

And my index finger can stop the world—as I pinch the blunt of weed like a cobweb of crickets—scorching. Bringing us to the hidden that thickens into a bulwark of smoke and brine and bodies and some boys who slip and disappear like the embers themselves. We are bus stop burners, after-school stoners—and barely thirteen.

Maybe our teachers know. Maybe the itchy eyes, and the cottonmouth, and the raspy throats—and how our bodies buoy with the assurance that life—and everything will never end.
Thirsty Thursday

Let’s be honest—your days of late night drinking are done. No more beer-pong, flip-cup, or keg-stands. You have to ditch the *Life Is Better When You’re Drunk* t-shirt. The mornings of facedown fetal position by the toilet like death is one retch away, is over—or at least, until it’s the weekend. Nevertheless, you will want to decompress. If you don’t, life in all its entirety will explode without notice. And everyday, when this incoming adult world zones in on your unexpectedness, and the sun stretches into your window and slaps you hard awake, this decompression will be God—or something like a hard drink.

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You’ve been drinking until two, leaving you just enough time to dance off the liquor: two twenty-four ounce beers, three Red Bulls and vodkas, and a shot of Southern Comfort. Dancing off the liquor seems plausible when you’re drunk. Somehow, this kinetic motion will release the toxicants out your body, and give you the clarity to operate a vehicle. So you dance and drink a couple waters, and the hours peel back like onions. This is your second adolescence. This nightclub is a playground, the music—like nursery rhymes—with no bedtime, no curfew—bicycles are replaced by cars, and parents replaced by police. You glance at your phone; it’s three-thirty; the numbers are hazy. The bar is about to close. Calculate the hours until your alarm will go off. You have about three-and-a-half hours of sleep. That seems like enough. Cash out your tab and walk heavy to the car.

***
Maybe you will have friends who are lucky enough to decompress daily. And they can go to work, still drunk on *Tipsy Tuesday, Wasted Wednesday, and Thirsty Thursday*. These friends have either mastered their profession or they have mastered the art of drinking—and one makes you an alcoholic and the other makes you an idiot. But I think that’s the American Way—*happy hours*. The fundamental ideology that we need rewards for doing what we’re supposed to be doing, like labor is futile if not chased with salt and lime, or a cookie, or a high-five, or any other positive reinforcement. But we are not dogs. Wishbones are not checks. We are our responsibilities. We are defined by what we do. We are Willy Loman driving his car into a wall—just in case shit goes astray.

***

Confidence is like speeding up to a red stoplight, and not slowing down because you know it’s about to change—like an invincible intuition, like this awareness that the universe is and always has been on your side, and to prove it—speed up.

***

Blame it on transitions. Like transitions are the proximity between when a needle is drawn and when it enters your skin. Those little seconds that seem like forevers, waiting—seeing the needle get sharper, and not knowing “exactly” when it’s going to intrude your body. Transitions work because the after-moment is expected, and still somehow always unexpected.

***

I’ve never been one to believe drunken decisions are just drunken decisions—everything always a conscious choice—the alcohol merely a buffer between
thinking it and doing it. The out-of-control feeling is always a choice. And even as toddlers, we like this feeling. Think how we used to spin in circles to get dizzy, and then try to walk. Yes—we are out of control, but because we’ve decided it. I decided to drink and drive. I was fully aware of the possible repercussions, but I didn’t care.

* * *

Parents try to prepare you as much as they can. "Mom, any needles today?" "Mom, I don’t need shots, right?" And always no. Always, (I’m not paraphrasing), Honey, you’re up-to-date. Like now you can continue life without worrying about a sharp object piercing your arm. Oh the comfort, but oh the deceit. I am still upset. But maybe it’s the sink or swim method. Mom doesn’t have to tell me I’m going to get a needle, just like she doesn’t have to tell me water is wet. She holds my hand, sits with me in the waiting room, and tells me that it’ll be okay—but when they call my name—Davon, the doctor will see you know, I’m on my own. And I think most young adults, like myself, are completely unprepared for the real world—a world where if the doctor decides to give you a needle—it’s what the doctor decides to do. And a world in which needles all have personalities, like your boss, and colleagues, and for me—hundred-and-thirty students, and a hundred-and-thirty essays. Imagine—purgatory: drawing X’s over: there, their, and they’re—for eternity.

* * *

You have a job. You know if I got pulled over, and convicted, you can lose your job. Any criminal offence will result in (most likely) and (especially for a new teacher) termination of his or her contract. You know from this point in my life, you’ve worked for a good job—but the goodness of work has to be balanced with the
impressibility of the release—of the opposition—of the moment when you fall and get back up feeling not dizzy, and your equilibrium re-focuses itself to its center. And after thirty long seconds of driving, a police car pulls behind you.

***

I have a great job. So who am I to complain? It’s my responsibility to grade essays, even if I’m waiting for Godot, alongside Vladimir and Estragon. But I guess my struggle was the suddenness. I was in college taking five classes, four days a week. And I wore sweat pants and a dirty College t-shirt every day. I ate Pop-Tarts for breakfast. If my class was earlier than ten AM, I was still half-drunk by the time class started. Unfortunately, there are no courses in responsibility—no 101 in Adulthood, or how to pay taxes, or how to survive Monday mornings—or how to not just say—fuck it. And it all just happened so fast—from pants pressed, tied ties, bagged lunch, and then out the door, like George Jetson.

***

Whenever someone tries to explain what it means to be scared shitless—it really means that you feel your stomach has released all of its contents in one moment—like a drop in gravity, and your body has lost all control of its basic functions, like holding in bowels. So literally, you’re scared shitless. Signal your blinker, pull over to the side of the road, hoping the police car will speed around you in pursuit of someone else, but you’re wrong. The police officer stops, parks, and waits. You fumble through the glove compartment for your paperwork.

***
Three months after graduating, I get my first teaching job. I’m twenty-three, teaching seventeen-year-olds—kids who siblings I partied with in college. And not to undermine my intelligence, and this is not an essay about teaching, but there I was—this fledgling entering the trafficking morning flock—as if I knew how to fly yet: from home, to car, to work, to car, to home like some daily migrations. And on Friday, or Tuesday, or Wednesday, and Thursday—I bet, even George Jetson, after emptying his wallet, and whizzing away—soon after the credits rolled, George is somewhere drinking a neon martini. So hell, yes, I want to drink—I drink as if it’s an elixir—as if this is the only way to survive the next day.

* * *

The police officer walks to your car; his flashlight is like little camera shutters. Roll the window down, and the police officer asks, “Do you know why I pulled you over?”

“Good evening sir…” trying your best not to stumble the words, but there is this little man in your head with a bunch of other little men, who all look like you, and they’re all screaming FUCK, as loud as they can—and one has a picket sign, and it also says FUCK.

“License and registration please.” The police officer is a short man. He barely has to bend over to search through your car with his spotlight eyes. You swear he knows everything. Offer your the paperwork. He takes it and walks away. This could be a scene from The Terminator. The police lights spin like carousels—making the other cars driving by look purple. Your car idles, and the engine sounds like it too has given up. Your palms stick to the steering wheel.

The police officer returns, “Have you been drinking this evening?”
This moment is like when you’re sleeping, and you dream something terrible. It’s something like during the Cyclone, when Dorothy realizes everything around her is gray—all around her, just a blanket of gray. Billows stack, and the absence is directionless, just an everywhere blankness. And in this dream, everyone is dead—or gone—or it’s all just the same. And this can’t be real—it has to be your mind’s unconscious projections—and it sure as hell is something to cry hard about. And then you wake up. You’re safe, the bed is warm, and the relief is almost wretched. But this is not a dream. And everything that feels so unreal is happening.

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Someone once said *to work means to not work—whenever you can.*

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“Sir—I have not been drinking.”

He waits, and butterflies collide—maybe a tornado of butterflies with little razor-wings. “I’m going to need you to step out the car.” The officer waves the flashlight. You open the door. Shoes feel empty. You can still see the bar in the horizon. You never made it through the red light.

***

Works means to do the most to do the least. Maybe because of the routine—maybe the mechanical monotony, and maybe because monotony cannot be fixed—it can only be accepted. And if or when I am still drunk, or sleeping, or just “kill me now” kind of day, I know there are options—always alternatives to actual working, and for teaching—I can show a movie, give a test, a worksheet, or some other stimulation that’ll occupies their time while I wait to leave work.
The police officer gives you a series of tests. Number one, balance on one foot—this is difficult even when you’re sober. Two, walk across an imaginary line—which is even more difficult than the first test because you can’t barely balance on one foot. Three, count backwards—starting from fifty-seven and ending at twenty-one. You miss number thirty-two and twenty-six. You wait. The police officer hasn’t verbally evaluated your performance. But you think you’re finished, and almost confident that you’ll be back in your car with only this experience like a mental note to never drink and drive again. You’ll say: *I’m never doing that—I have learned my lesson—I can go back to work, and be a better American, and follow the rules, and walk a little taller than how I’ve been crawling—and wipe the sweat off my brow, and I can be happy that tomorrow my students are taking a test, so I don’t actually have to teach, and maybe I’ll get an hour or two of sleep, before Mom and I are in the kitchen drinking coffee together.*

The police officer says, “Just one more test, please,” Nod, exhausted, but ready for this to end. He says, “Put your hands behind your back.”

There is liminal space. In this space, I always imagine Rudy Ruettiger. I’ve seen this film too many times; so many times that I hate Sean Astin’s face, like viscerally. But for some reason, this movie was the filler between learning and lethargy. Somehow, when our health teacher rolled in the television set, we all felt relief—we all, teacher included, took a swig from the flask of *I don’t really give a fuck.* Which is safe to say,
every profession has that liminality between work and non-work—and maybe it’s right—and maybe it’s wrong—and maybe it’s just a necessity.

* * *

The holding cell is one long wooden bench, with a metal loop that attaches to handcuffs, which are still secured around your wrist. The police officer tells you that you’re going to take a Breathalyzer test. Stand up. Breathe into a tube connected to a computerized device. Breathing is sober, deep, and wishful.

It’s Friday morning. Your car is impounded. Your eyes are craters. The skin below them looks rigor mortis blue. The dishevelment is almost too cliché: wrinkled dress shirt, unfolded collar, and untied tie-knot—but on your work desk, there is a red folder with emergency lesson plans. You wait for a friend to pick you up. When he gets there, he doesn’t say much. He fills out paperwork and rubs rheumy eyes. Drive. Your head presses against the cold window. You think about life like you never have before.

You get home. Maybe you still live with your parents. Your mom is on her way out. Try to avoid her, but she smells you with her eyes, and says nothing, and like two continents, you move past each other. Her perfume mixes with alcohol-sweat, and guilt is just as fermenting. You say, “Mom, I called out of work.”

“Of course you did, Honey,” and there is such an expectedness in her voice.

You haven’t cried, nor do you think you’ve accepted it all yet. You don’t know what it is about crying, but crying and its inexorability, sure as hell is some type of acceptance.

“Mom,” Try and get the words out. “Mom—I got a DUI last night.”
“It was eventually going to happen.” And Mom walks out. And, if you could describe this feeling—viscerally, it feels all so much like pushing your finger too deep in your belly button.

***

I think Willie thought this before crashing. I think he thought life is defined not by our character—or by the way we treat each other—or how we love one another—but life is defined by how operational we are. It is defined by how long we can survive before we crash—and when we crash—if we can still be useful.

***

Seven months later, you’re in court. Maybe your lawyer is convincing, maybe the judge is forgiving, maybe everyone in this stuffed space of bodies brimming over bodies and eyes tired as this deadness, and in this purgatorial moment between moments: fate, choice, and future are the in-betweens, like when Willie could almost see the wall before the crash—and if the sky could billow, like a cotangent, you will all take on its sadness, as if the verdict states that we are all guilty—in some kind of desperation of rapture to freedom, and when the judge calls your name—pray for the first time.

You remember a bumper sticker you saw once, a faded-out yellowish blotch, on the back of a beat-up Oldsmobile. It said: Trust in God. Be sure you’ve seen that bumper sticker before in the passing of hundreds of cars daily—and they preach one thing or another about how life should be lived—from soccer moms, honor students, abortions clinics, to Barack Obama—whatever it is that people think people care about, and feel necessary to publicize, you suddenly feel that
authoritativeness grab a hold—and you feel the faith, the assurance that is physical, a real punch in the gut—something warm to remind you that you’re here and everything might be okay if you just believe in other than yourself.

But God doesn’t save you. God doesn’t tap the prosecutor’s shoulder and whisper, “Hey, this one here, he is a good guy—he doesn’t deserve losing his job, paying $10,000 in fines, license suspension, mandatory community service, and possible jail time.” Blah, blah, blah, and a list of your honorary accomplishments—really, none of that shit mattered. You beat the DUI because the prosecutor owes your lawyer a favor. He saw her earlier that day. She goofed on a previous case. He didn’t hold that against her. So convincing her wasn’t because God stepped in and sent down a redemptive angel; it was a matter of repayment. Simple. Life is a line of good credit.

The judge calls your name. You have no priors. Suit is clean. Face is shaved. And whatever god there might be, the judge becomes him—and sits there on Mount Sinai and says, “Reckless Driving and 60 days loss of license. Go pay the cashier. Next case.” Atlas drops the world; Moses splits the sea; you beat a DUI. But the avoidance of the tragedy is no miracle. You still committed a crime—which is illegal because people die—innocent people die every day. You are let-off because of an expensive lawyer and a little luck. What real lesson did you learn? Don’t drink and drive? Pay for a taxi? Call Mom?

My real caution to you, reader, is not to drink less or wait till Friday or trust in God—my caution is that the idea of work and its companionship to reward is the real disaster. We will never get used to working every day—happy hours will not be
cancelled—college students will still be unprepared for adulthood—and nothing will be more sobering than the child who spins himself around in circles until he falls.
Patricide and Boot Shines

One day I will ask my mother about my dad and she will lie. She will tell me Daddy is in the other room shining his boots and I will wink my little head and scramble two twine-legs into the other room and ask Dad why he shines his boots. I will say—Dad what for? He will smile and press his large hand to mat my whirling curls. He will offer me the faded rag and I will help him shine his boots. I will shine those boots like I've shined boots all my life.

One day my mother will kill my daddy. She will tell me he is not your father. I will not understand, and I will cry. He won't be in the room while my face dampens the waist of her dress—because I know, no one will shine daddy's boots. My mother will show me a picture. I will not see myself. I will say—no, until the picture will die. She will knot me in her arms. I will mourn like I know what death means.

She will take me to a park in Teaneck to meet my father. My arms will cross over my seatbelt for two hours, and my eyes—like billows, will puff and swell. I will say—not-my-daddy, and I will want to kill him. But my father will wait underneath a tree.

I will unfasten my velcro-strap shoes. My lips will salt, my nose will bubble, and I will sprawl my body like a wet bird. I will scream—daddy, and the man will smile.
Don’t Open the Door

Back when we lived in a two-level home in Orange, New Jersey, the front door of the house had a window. We’d peek through the textured glass before entering.

Everything looked warped, and the hallway was dark because the light fixture never casted far enough and left things slick and shadowed. Through the front door and to the left, was a short hall leading to the landlord’s apartment. We were afraid of our landlord. We were the horror of our hearts. We could see this fermentation that seemed to breathe under the door. A thick cayenne haze that we thought we could see, and wrinkled our faces and stuffed our noses. When coming home, we’d run as fast as we could up the stairs and to our apartment—brother’s feet, and then mine, stepping in iambics.

There wasn’t much room for us. We could extend arms, stretch legs, and sit for dinner at the table or in front of the television, but to be kids in this confinement left us with little to do. By the time we ran, we were tagged, and by the time we hid, we were found—and whenever we played or did much of anything, the landlord complained. She’d stump upstairs, and bang at the door—her heavy hand sounded like it was one pound away from turning the wood into splints—*ya are too loud*—over and over again—banging and demanding us to quiet. Even if we were simply watching television, she’d hustle up those percussive stairs and drum away—*too loud, too loud*. I’d grab on to Brother, my little hands glued around his stick-thin wrist, watching his reaction—searching for answers to grow out his brown eyes.

She became our mystery—the voodoo witch from the far away island with the inky black skin, and eyes just as black and pure pupil—the deepness and
heaviness in her voice that sounded like it came from someone else—like some devil that possessed her, and controlled her walk—movement always uncomfortable and unbalanced like her body was even foreign to her. She scared me more than I could articulate, just a feeling—like a room when the light is turned off, and you just know, something is watching and it is dark and bottomless, and it is always one touch away from pulling you down.

This never happened when Mom, Stepdad, or Sister were home. This was the almost cliché, predictability of it all. When we tried to tell Mom, we were overreacting—just be quieter and she won’t bother you—she’s old and probably works nights—and honey, can you pass the rice. And the boy who cries wolf is not only about dishonesty and victimology—but it is also about the vulturous nature of predators. Those sixth-sensed who smell the vulnerabilities in our blood. When Brother and I were home alone—barely ten and almost five—we always felt one step away from being dragged down into her apartment, and never seen again, but on the back of milk cartons.

Our fears were warranted, although, we rarely interacted with her much. It was only in passing—getting the mail, taking out the trash, or coming home from school, but whenever we saw her, it was as if the three of us held a secret, and nothing about it was good. She wore this hatred, like we were the taxidermists who stuffed her swollen and purpled face—just this chilling horridness, and the serious proof to always check behind the door, inside the closet, and under the bed.

Our cousin from Alabama was visiting. Not much older than my brother, Siddik was the initial instigator after we told him about the woman. He insisted that
we find out for sure if she really was a voodoo witch. He said he would go regardless if we didn't want to come. And sometimes in a moment of confronting fear, the result could well be the perfect manifestation of exactly what you are so afraid of, and Brother's frightened but pending curiosity, pushed him to find those very real answers. And though his brown face whitened and even his shadow shook, he knew he had to go—and I knew I had to go with him, because I was more afraid of something happening to my big brother than what the actual danger was that awaited us.

We waited for her to leave, watching from out a bay window. It was early afternoon by the time she slunk outside the apartment building. She lived with her brother. But we hadn’t seen him in days, and assumed he was at work. Tiptoeing the best we could, we slipped down those stairs with cunning. There was no excitement in our voices—only a suturing silence that bound our trolley-walks together. We really had no plan. Siddik said if the door were open, we'd go in—if it were locked, we’d leave. Brother put on his thick fearless face, but I remember the Rorschach patterns of sweat on back of his shirt—each one getting bigger and fiercer, and the stairs that led us could have led Dante to that inferno. The only thing keeping us from the darkness she owned was a twist of the doorknob, and the slow creak of hinges like gates opening and uncovering the truth. Siddik wiggled the doorknob—and the door opened.

You’re our lookout—Siddik told me to stay by the front door just in case she came home. From the doorway, the living room was visible. Heat emitted with a heavy musk. Siddik and Brother walked in. I watched, pretending my sweaty hands
were binoculars. The apartment was lit with candles—the ebbing radiance filled where there was no natural light. Siddik turned to the right and entered a room. Brother turned to the left and entered a room. I toggled my binoculars.

After about a minute, I heard noises coming from what must have been the kitchen, dishes and pots and clanging, and cabinets closing. We were wrong to think no one was home. Brother and Siddik heard it too, and both slowly opened the room doors. Something died hard in their faces. For Brother now knew what was under the bed, and inside the closet, and behind the door—it's the proof of nightmares—the things movies are based upon—the panic that enters and cements you to time, and all you can do is wide-eye. I pointed in the direction to where the kitchen would be. The racket became louder and footsteps followed.

Siddik didn’t wait to find out. The shadow of a body cast itself through the blinking candle light. Siddik ran. He pushed passed me, leaving us to whatever fate that awaited. The shadowed body walked into the living room. Brother quietly pulled himself back into the room, and slowly closed the door. It was a man. Her brother. He investigated—panning his dark plum head. His thin frame moved like his flesh was a coat thrown over a rack, or flesh barely hanging to scant bones. He looked to the left—the room where Brother was hiding. And then he looked to the right—the room Siddik had just ran from. He opened the door to the right, and walked in. My stomach felt like it was in my throat. I wanted to scream. Just to tell my brother to run—run! But I couldn’t abandon him. And when the man walked out the room and looked in my direction, I tried to quickly elude his glare. There was space between the door and the wall. When he glanced over, I spun my back against
the wall. He walked over. His heavy steps hammered as loud as my chest. The wood floor seemed to move with him, as he got closer—and when I could hear him breathe, the front door slammed shut.

Panic is a death. I don't know how long Brother was in there, but I waited and Siddik hadn't returned. What had happened to my big brother? I didn't know what voodoo actually was. I didn't imagine strung up headless chickens, or bowls of blood, and talc powder covering my brother's sacrificial body. I just knew he was in danger. In real danger—nothing I could go and tell Mom. No one was home. If I rang the doorbell or knocked, the man might take me too. What was my big brother doing? Was he still in the room? Maybe under the bed? He was safe. He had to be safe. I heard footsteps charge to the front door. It swung open and Brother grabbed me and pulled me in a full sprint. We ran up those stairs like whatever this world is—was moments away from being over.

About two weeks later, after Siddik left—brother and I were home alone from school. Our sister was walking a friend to the bus stop and would be right back. She reminded us to lock the door, and not answer for anyone. This wasn't a new script—she had often left us alone, but only for an hour at max, and always instructed us the same. We watched her leave.

We were on the couch watching television, and not two minutes later since Sister left, the woman was at our door, yelling—*I know you are in there, open the door.* I wanted to collapse, to hide my stomach into my ribs, wrap my arms around Brother like he was God—just to run inside his body for protection. He perched his finger on my lip—*shush.* I could feel his heart on my back. I closed my eyes, wishing
it would just stop—she’d just go away, but she kept banging and yelling—open the door.

Then it got quiet, and she said—I have my own key, and she walked back downstairs. Our floppy feet scrambled for a place to hide. We peered around, looking for safety in the most usual of places. Her feet came back up the stairs. We ran to our bedroom. Too fast to shut the door—and stuffed ourselves underneath Sister’s bed. It looked out into the kitchen—and we watched. The door of our apartment opened slowly. Brother drew me in closer—embryonic close and tight near his belly. She walked in like a hot animal, breathing full and heavy. She looked around—inspecting everything—like looking for a quarry—I’m gonna find you. I’m gonna get you. I gonna kill you. We saw only her chalky black legs hustle from corner to corner like a rootless tree. I pressed my eyes as hard as I could. I only heard her quick shuffling—a pause, and the shuffling again. And I am convinced that fear can kill. I am convinced—she will kill us.

She got maybe six feet from the bed—her arthritic hands hung long and low like chisels. Her breathing excited—like she knew she was close—like she could taste the prepubescent sweat seep out our bodies. One foot—another—one foot—she was in front of the bed. I could smell her. And then, the door of the apartment opened. Sister walked in. She screamed—what are you doing here? Get out, now. I opened my eyes, and the woman spun around, in shock. Her face all opened and then said—I will get all of you—and then rushed out of the apartment.

When Mom and Stepdad came home, we told them the whole story—including breaking into the woman’s apartment and her brother finding out. Mom
was livid, but not angry with us—and not actually angry, nor surprised, just emotional, and very affirmative. She said—pack your bags. All of your bags. You are leaving. Mom rushed around the apartment throwing clothes into a suitcase. Stepdad was looking out the window into the backyard. He said to Mom—No, I can’t believe it. This can’t be serious. Mom said—this is serious. We are leaving, tonight.

Sister, Brother, and I looked at each other, unsure of what was actually happening.

Sister swiveled her head. We did too. She looked towards the backyard window, and began walking over—we followed. We looked out into the night, and the porch floodlight cast a urinated yellow across the sweeping blackness—we looked closer through the thin sheet of yellow. There they were, five of them—freshly dug and plotted shallow holes, each line-up, and ceremonially ready—and even a small one waiting for me.

Mom packed the car and moved us to Alabama. Mom and Stepdad returned in lived out the rest of the lease. They never spoke about the woman and her brother again.
Morning Noise

Stepdad gets ready for work. It’s 3 AM. He shaves taupe-hairs into a lemon-scented froth. Stepdad nicks his neck, and spots red on little white paper-rips, like bolls of cotton swelling with blood. The blue flakes of silver-sheet moon slide through the folds in the bathroom blinds. The hot water steams, and his callused fingertips soften. Stepdad’s jungle-eyes glow green and wild while watching Mom sleep. It’s almost silent—only her breathing and the tightening of high-ankle boots.

Somewhere after 3 AM, and while Stepdad gets ready for work—I am craning my neck for my house key. My eyes blink, like bulbs of blur—and I burp, shift my weight, and straighten my back. I am a bulky leaf lapping and whirling—loud, and so drunk, and winded, and I stump my feet, and wiggle the tongue from out my shoe—barely standing. Stepdad is rebar—concreted by these stone mornings, where we meet. When the door opens, a pale light splits my face in two, and Stepdad sits—shoulders slumped at the table, rippling a spoon in his coffee. His skin, like the husk of a coconut, and he says nothing—and our two bodies are two continents moving past another.
Fantasy Showbar

Our first strip club, and a right of passage—already drunk as hell from as many miniature Captain Rums we could swallow. This is our first voyage into the body of a woman, and we can’t hear ourselves over the swell of music. Under-aged and barely visible through the flashing lights—and this thing that awaits us has longed in the bottoms of our bellies since the beginning of time. It’s like a moment that doesn’t feel like it is actually yours—but we own this, and drop green furling dollars. We become the throng that buys her skin, and it’s priced by the single or 50 for a double. I think I’m in love, like the fly beguiled by the lamp or the mosquito stuck to the wicker, and if do die here—worshipping the sun out her body—I will give her all my lunch money.
**Not the Worst of Boys**

We never carried a body before, and it was heavier than expected, taking four of us to trudge her out Austin’s house and into the wooded opening. She was as well-dressed as we could put her back together: one heel out, unbuttoned jeans, bra straps unpeeled, pieces of unfamiliar flesh laid out like a doll, but real, our real-life Playmate. And she was a woman in the eighth grade – the dream-body us boys masturbated to—the premature curvature of womanhood growing loudly between skin and cloth. And as her drunken languor and its lidded fixity cemented us, we marched soundlessly, still tethered to some adolescent morality while looking for a place to leave her. We weren’t the worst of boys but we sure as hell weren’t the best.

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Being fourteen meant a lot of things. My best friend, Austin, and I greeted it with fresh possibilities. For the first time in our lives, we were not considered children. We were teens and being a teen came with new freedoms, like a badge of jurisdiction – an extension of curfew, of responsibilities, of our place and position in the world. Austin’s parents were going on their annual trip to Vero Beach, and this equated to an open house. Austin’s sister used to housesit, but this year, Austin’s parents left him unsupervised. They said Austin was old enough to stay home for a couple days without them, and his sister would come by to check periodically. Periodically meant not at all, and this meant—party. All we needed to do was get beer, pot, and cigarettes.

Quentin was our pot-man and beer-man. To buy a 30 of beer, we also had to buy him a 30 of beer; to buy an ounce of pot, we’d have to buy him an ounce of pot,
thus doubling our purchases. But he was good to us—always reliable. I think he felt
some sibling responsibility because he was an only child. We were his little
brothers, but also his second attempt at being a teen again. He vicariously lived
through us. The grief of not being a “cool kid” in high school must have clouded over
him, which I’m sure—in a way, it clouds over all of us. We all as humans seem to
always try and find some surrogate—a something to live through once again.
Quentin still lived at home and was unemployed. But for us, he was the near thirty-
year-old statue of male achievement. We idolized him. He spoke about women and
the numbers of women he had like some trading card. He told us which women
were the best— the ones with tits and ass. He said how to use our fingers like probes
and our tongues like surgeons. We’d listen to his speeches like sermons. For it
seemed, being a man meant having women—like a commodity—just this exchange
of goods, and acquirements of goods with the right persuasion.

Quentin picked us up in his parents’ car, with an empty tank of gas that we
paid to fill. Never say where you got it: his one rule and we never did, not even to our
other friends. It made us feel mysterious and superior. We had a clout of admiration
from our peers as the suppliers. Austin and I were enablers, and the ripple-down
effect influenced our friends who influenced their friends and so on. Years later,
some of us became alcoholics, some became drug addicts, and others died from
both. Austin never shook off the deterioration of alcoholism and drug use. I escaped
from our small town and its degeneracy, but I still feel a sense of responsibility to
my old friends—and guilt, like some how I helped path their roads and held their
hands, and we walked together out of adolescence into adulthood. And today, I
grieve over those lost years—like a half-burnt Polaroid. While other teenagers were playing sports and compiling photo books, we were popping pills, rolling joints, and drinking forties—and looking for our older bodies with younger minds.

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The sun was heavy, and night reluctantly draped across the billowing sky, like the way a head draws itself in to sleep. Austin and I peddled our bikes swiftly through the outskirts of adjacent neighborhoods to assemble our crew—first stopping at Eddy’s, then to Kevin, and last to Steve’s. We told them the agenda, and it was simple: get fucked up. Steve was in charge of snacks, Kevin was in charge of stealing cigarettes, and Eddie was in charge of music. We all played our specific roles, and when we planned a party, it was bound to be notorious. Notoriety in a town with less than five thousand people was never a challenge. So we peddled on, under the growth of the Pine Barrens, bobbling through the thicket—our arms high and winged, cutting the air as hawks, while the wind blew and stretched branches and their long finger-leaves touched like how us kids used to play tag. The umbilical strength of childhood could only stretch so far. Our Jansport book bags, though colorful, and stickered, and stuffed with pillows, and sleeping bags, and hard candies—were also filled with drugs and alcohol. And we continued on, peddling and parting into the newness of the adult world. We all felt the same way—little by little, the old elementary games and songs about ducks and geese were becoming eulogies of a past.

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Each girl puffed and bubbled smoke inside her mouth. They'd smile in an attempt to beautify awkwardly smoking, and trying not to cough. I watched, across from them, smoking a cigarette of my own, occasionally blowing little donut-rings to impress them. Austin was packing pinches of pot into a rainbow-colored glass pipe. Eddy and Steve were fetching beers from an outside cooler for the eight of us, and Kevin was sulking by the television, for we had already made arrangements for who was going to hook up with who: I had Ashley. Eddy had Meredith. Steve had Lauren. Austin had Stephanie, and Kevin was the odd man out. There was a rigid ownership to the way we had these girls—a closed channel of dialogue between us and ourselves, like a contractual agreement they signed before coming over. And one must complete the agreement or be ridiculed as either A, prude for nothing doing or B, slut for doing too much.

Music bleared from Austin's parents’ home theatre. Its officious lyrics telling us how to bump and grind bodies like cogs and gears. Our awkwardness was the tributaries to what we thought sex would be. Each girl pushing her hips into the seams of our pants, as we collided and collaged our bodies into each other, like a Pollack painting. We all looked a little awkward. I was scrawny with long arms and legs but a small torso. Steve was like a klutzy grimacing clown falling over his feet. Eddy still looked ten, and had two ears like airplane rudders. Kevin was a short stout bowling pin. Austin looked the oldest. He had something of a goatee of about fifteen hairs that looked more like butter-bread crumbs. Nonetheless, none of us were really safe; we all had some pubertal quality we struggled with. And as we are
grinding our gawky bodies, like scarecrows newly off their crosspieces, we
embraced and retreated from the naïve babies as do when they first try to walk.

Stephanie looked different than her friends. She was tall. Her legs were
ostrich-long. Her hands looked almost ruler-length. And her braces wrapped around
like some train on a great mountain of teeth. But Stephanie was the only girl in our
grade with boobs. Even through her youthful dysmorphia, she was the most wanted
possession. And without choice—for she took one step in the middle of adulthood,
unwillingly, and wiggled her foot, and turned back around to find us gawking boys,
like mad carnies. So she was very self-aware. Very much so, that Stephanie always
wore loose-fitted clothing to hide her breasts. And like a hunkered bird, slouched in
a baggy t-shirt, Stephanie smoked her cigarette and drank her beer, and we watched
as poachers watch between crosshairs.

Ashley and I stumbled into a bedroom. We kissed hard, jamming faces into
each other. Our braces clinked, and we laughed and open-mouth kissed again. Her
blonde hair gentled as yarn on her shoulders. It smelled like flowers and was
pressed pin-straight. I knew she felt my erection, and I felt embarrassed but
intrigued. With clothes on, our bodies folded onto each other like two chairs. I
softened my knee in her crouch; she didn’t retreat. The denim compressions and
sudden jerks of our bodies were far from sex, but we still made noises. I fumbled to
unsnap her bra strap. Another base down, I imagined telling my friends. Once
unsnapped, a sense of accomplishment flushed my face and excited my body. I
moved forward and unbuttoned her shorts. I wormed two fingers in, but she
stopped me and quickly reared away. She wore a face of amnesiac worry. I asked her what was wrong. She said she wanted to leave.

Lauren and Meredith were still on the couch and were completely uninterested in Steve, Eddy, or Kevin. Ashley sat next to her friends. I walked over to Steve and Eddy. Eddy handed me a beer. I gave the girls my back and presented two fingers to the boys, and pressed them to my nose. Kevin returned with his middle finger. Eddy split his fingers in two and snaked his tongue between them. Steve seemed too frustrated to gesture any attention. Steve asked if the girls wanted another beer – they declined, and said they were ready to walk home. They looked around for Stephanie, but she wasn’t there. Ashley asked where she was. Kevin snickered and shook his head. Eddy drank from his beer and shook his head. Steve shrugged his shoulders. I glared at Ashley with obvious dissatisfaction and indifference, and shook my head. Ashley got up to go find them.

She heard Stephanie and Austin in his parents’ room. The rest of us shadowed behind. The door was locked; she knocked and no one answered. Ashley knocked a bit harder and said her and the girls were ready to leave. No one answered. She knocked again, and Stephanie responded – *go ahead without me.* Again, she knocked and Stephanie said – *I’ll be home soon, Austin is going to walk me back.* Ashley turned from the door in frustration. She walked passed Meredith and us, and then both Lauren and Meredith tagged behind. They left, and we all went to the bedroom door and started knocking. We laughed and told him to give us more pot. Austin yelled – *fuck off.* Steve, Eddy, Kevin, and I did just that. We went back downstairs, plopped on the couch, and threw back more beers.
Later I found Austin in the bathroom washing himself. He was covered in vomit. I asked him what happened, and he said Stephanie threw up on him. We went into the bedroom, and Stephanie's laconic expression looked almost ghostly. She mumbled and drooled. She was propped up on a dresser – her arms long-stretched – her shirt damp with vomit, and her jeans were ruffled to her knees. I questioned Austin again. He indignantly explained that they smoked a few more bowls, and she started acting weird – she started shaking and coughing until she vomited. He looked panicked. His blue eyes were the sails of a ship capsizing. He said we needed to get her out of his parents’ room so no throw-up got on the carpet. I stepped in front of her and sunk my hands under her arms; Austin grabbed at her feet. We lifted on three. And when we did, her inert body gave and collapsed back to the floor, and her head slammed into a bedpost.

We tried to wake her up—said her name, shook her shoulders, even slapped at her face – but she was unconscious, an inanimately frightening unconsciousness—a marionette without strings or manipulation. Her head bobbed under a face-full of long draping hair. Austin yelled – *fuck, fuck, fuck*. I told him we needed to calm down and get her into the kitchen. I reluctantly called for the other boys. Minutes later, they waddled in clearly drunk and giddy, until seeing her, and then they stiffened, almost corpse-like. I told them to help us carry her into the kitchen. I grabbed her feet and pointed to Austin to go around her back, and saddle under her arms again. Steve helped and grabbed one of her feet from me. Kevin lit his cigarette. Eddy was still rigid.
Half dragged and half carried, we got her into the hallway, but once again, she was falling out of our grips, so we attempted to reposition ourselves, but Austin couldn’t position his hands in time. He yanked at her under her arms, and her bra flipped up and her breast slipped out. We were all in the hallway, and no one moved. Austin’s hand still cupped her breast. It was obvious no one had seen a *real-woman breast* before. A heavy silence washed over us. Her pants were still unbuttoned below her waist. My heart thrashed; my palms sweated. We put her down and Austin moved his hands. I felt fear, guilt, and excitement. I looked around at the other boys, and we all stared at her unblinkingly—like a trance—a hungry animalistic gaze that was burning her body open and bare. Austin moved a little closer. Then Kevin followed. So did Steve. I wanted what they wanted.

Eddy yelled—*wait*. His eyes marbled, and he began crying, and became hysterical. I couldn’t react. I couldn’t fend or proceed. I just stood, and he continued yelling—*she’s dead— we’re dead— we’re all going to jail*. I unnerved and tried to calm him. I told him she definitely was not dead because her chest was moving. I knew what we were about to do and it was wrong and would change our lives forever. Whatever bit of childhood innocence we had left was about to die in raping drunken testosterone. And our childhoods would never be resurrected again, even through Quentin-type vicariousness, we would never be the same—Stephanie would never be the same—we all would die collectively and alone that night.

But I needed to save myself. I grabbed her feet. With authority, I demanded help. No one moved. I continued, and dragged her into the kitchen. I breathed heavy and struggled. She started coughing while on her back. So I hugged her tight and
forced her up on cabinet doors. Austin trailed behind. I told him to get me a cold washcloth. Vomit dripped from the corner of her mouth. I had no idea what I was doing. I could hear her stomach and esophagus retch in preparation to regurgitate again. I was afraid she’d choke on her tongue, so I put my hand in her mouth and yanked at her tongue. The vomit oozed out as a black sludge between my fingers and down my arm. Steve, Eddy, and Kevin were in the other room pacing. Austin returned with the washcloth. I removed my hand and washed around her mouth and let her stomach drain. The glitzy glint of mascara now looked like ash.

* * *

We carried her to a wooded-opening, halfway between Austin’s house and Ashley’s house. We figured we could leave her there and when she woke up, she’d find her way to Ashley’s. So we did just that—carried her under the cover of night, and left her there. If we called the police, we would have been caught with pot and alcohol. We feared calling Ashley because she might call her parents. So we justified our actions as an act of self-preservation. We figured no one had done anything wrong. Stephanie got drunk and high at her own choice. No one forced anything on her. And when we got home, Ashley called over ten times—yelling and pleading—asking where was Stephanie. The other girls sounded from the background. When calling her back, we coiled the phone cord around our necks and pretended to gag in remembrance of Stephanie. We elbow-nudged and squeezed our bird-chests. We licked our lips and wiggled our tongues manically.
The Road to Mt. Pocono

I always imagine Dad the same. His arms are crossed. He’s still leaning on the side of his car. His mustache is a caterpillar, and I’m scared. I can see myself like looking into the future for the hundreds time. I’ll tell myself—ready? And I’ll put his smile on.

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Every time I release the clutch, the car bucks a little, like little tremors. My left leg is cramped—maybe now it’s a log or maybe it is still a leg, but it’s heavy, and the traffic is relentless. It’s a stream of relentlessness—of blinking relentless—and these brake lights pulse, like one big butane lighter. We inch a bit further. I wonder if there is an accident. I want to crane my neck out the window, but I fear death from an incoming truck—a quick honk, a quick death—pop—head gone—clean decapitation.

Whatever is causing this jam-up, I hope it’s not a car accident. But if it is, it’s got to be a good one. Not a fender-bender, a real rubberneck’er, like a complete giraffe three-sixty-degree step-on-the-brakes-and-stare neck-twister. And maybe this small town doesn’t own a Jaws of Life, and has to rent it from its neighbor—so it’s all taking forever, like the forever-arm of an old clock. And if this is all right, and there is a person folded like chair between the steering wheel and driver’s seat—I hope they’re okay; that’s sure as hell no way to go.

An over three-hour drive, plus traffic, from New Jersey to Mt. Pocono. Mom has forced this on me—it’s been almost a year since you’ve seen your father. Mom has this way with guilt. She reminds me how her father went to get bread one day—for
Mother and six other children. He was going to corner store, probably a block or two away. Of course there were lots of mouths to feed, and bread is a good way to divide up hunger, and maybe only one slice each—fold it longwise, bologna or ham, America cheese, and sugar water. Her father never brought himself or the bread home. She saw him next in hospice. He died soon after. This is some thirty years later, and I think Mom is afraid I’ll regret something—and maybe she does.

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Guilt is such a disease of a thing. It’s sharp and probes and prongs, and feel like a dryness that never wets—like a memory of someone else and something else you take on from another life—and it’s foreign but close and feels like forgetting and remembering all at once. Dad, I’m on this obligatory drive to see you, not because I want to spend time, and talk, and notice the similarities in our faces—I drive to see you because I don’t want to feel guilty when you die.

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Traffic jam delirium—what if this accident is yours Dad? It wouldn’t be the first. Dad got another DUI—license suspended in New Jersey, then another—license suspended in Pennsylvania. Dad hits a car, fleas the scene, and goes to a diner—sits and eats something soft, and forgets everything that happens. He’s arrested. Dad is an alcoholic.

I lived with him once, only out of convenience. It was my first year in college. Dad lives in a high-rise studio apartment in Hackensack. He works Mondays through Wednesdays and then drives to Mt. Pocono the rest of week. I get home late and wake up early. I sleep on a futon. We share this common space like two prisoners,
whose bodies have just meet—*hi Dad*—*hi Davon*—*goodnight Dad*—*goodnight Davon*. We could be strangers but we look too much alike. I never leave alcohol here. Unfortunately I did once, and there was shit all over the bathroom. I cleaned it up. He never remembered. I moved on campus.

* * *

Before retiring from dentistry, Dad takes an over three-hour bus ride Pennsylvania to New Jersey, then a two-hour bus ride to New York, four days a week. He worked in the Bronx, at Jacobi Medical Center. He taught dentistry. Sometimes I go on the hospital’s website, and I search for him. I like to see his face and the abbreviations: D.D.S. It reminds me of myself. I’m kind of proud, imagining his students listening to him, and calling him Dr. Loeb. I wonder if he does the same—if he looks me up in his imagination. I wonder what he sees—I wonder what does he want to see. My students listen to me too. One day I’ll also be Dr. Loeb. It makes me feel close to him—our last names. My last name used to be Dublin. We changed it when Dad finally signed on to being the father.

We look alike. I’m going grey already—just like him. This resemblance when we stand together feels weird. I never grew up with Dad. I don’t know how his body moves.

I don’t know what it means to look like your father. But Mom says how similar we are—she would know. She says I get my crooked lip from him. He gets it from his mother—all our lips astray sidewise. I pluck hairs out my ears. I stare at Dad’s when we like Siamese across from each other. The bottom of my ear is long, like a long vowel—it’s called the lobule—I don’t know if that’s supposed to be ironic.
Cemented in this traffic, my bones are becoming rebar, and the school buses, mini-vans, crossing guards, and the everything about rush hour is such a chaos. Children have turned into giant strange looking child-beetles with their bright book bags winging and bumbling out one after the other into the cottage-style red door homes. My car engine hums in annoyance. While in the town of Lafayette Hill, I could die from all this nostalgia.

Mom never had a mini van. I always wanted one. The other moms drove big caravans to our soccer games. Children and soccer balls rolled out like one—and Gatorades, and hoagies, and everything familial piled into the trunk, like these modern frontier women would never return home.

Mom drove a Mercedes in stilettos. She’s always been a little obvious about the money she makes. It’s nice seeing a black woman be a walking societal contradiction—she shouldn’t have made it. She had children young—before her twenties young. But she’s worked very hard. I’ve never been embarrassed by her. Before I was born, she worked as Dad’s dental hygienist; that’s how they met. They were over twenty years apart. She says Dad had no friends at work. Mom would help him with his bedside manner. Maybe they fell in love when she passed him the mouth mirror. I bet she grazed against his hand—and in that moment, like if two stars could touch—they just knew. And something in their bodies had spilled over into each other.
Mom was married with two children. Dad was married with two children—and not married to each other. So maybe this love thing is like a loss of a sense—an arm torn off, an eye ripped out. Maybe it’s just mysterious because it’s inconvenient. Maybe it’s an arrival when the body realizes it’s compensating for some ineffability. Sometimes love is the imagining of possibilities—*we can if we just*—do this, do that, and forget the truth about all our lies.

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I’d like to stop here at the water gap. Meditate about how beautiful everything is. Park on the shoulder, cross my arms and gaze into the nature for answers. I could tell you about the hemlocks becoming countless and like giant mop strokes of greens—or the birds moving in the express lane on the tops of cars—I’d like to watch the water change colors with the mood of the wind because sometimes blues are bluer and sometimes they’re dark—but it all happens within the same breath. This is the extroverted scene of the soul.

Dad used to take me on nature walks, to the Teaneck Creek Conservancy. We’d hold hands. I’d try and step on the biggest rocks, jump over the biggest puddles, and try and pick the biggest leaves. I could jump and Dad would lift me up, feeling invincible. I imagine that’s how this whole father-son thing is supposed to feel. Dad and I saw a snake once. He told me not to be afraid.

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PA 447, twenty miles on here. Dad is a New Yorker. I don’t think he’s ever felt like a New Yorker—not in the logical leisure sense. He likes to cut wood—likes swimming in real water, his fire burning stove, and the way nature isn’t a car horn. His home is
his final retreat or his reincarnation. But at the same time, he’s isolated. Divorced, single, no friends, no family near by—and he has cats. The irony of his isolation is tragic. His wife knew about my mother. My mother left her husband. Dad did not leave his wife. My mom moved on, met my stepdad. Eventually, Dad's wife left him. Dad’s sons have never forgiven him. Love can quickly turn its back on you.

Dad’s parents are dead. His father died when I was 8. We never meet—and not because the weather was bad, but because I wasn’t really his grandson. Dad’s mother died when I was 20. We saw each other a couple times—maybe five. She was in the hospital with a bad case of pneumonia. This was when I lived with Dad. He left his phone on the dresser. Dad’s son called—*tell Dad my grandmother died*. I am an outsider—they made sure to remember that. It’s hard for me to address her as grandmother; I think there’s some ownership there that I don’t own. She left 1.5 million dollars to seven people. I guess thanks for equal split—the $2,000—but hey, at least they know who I am now.

It’s hard to feel bad when I think about Dad alone in his chateau. I just paid the monthly statement in my student loan. And yes, each bill breaks the bank. My spite isn’t about money. Mom took Dad to court for child support. Damn right—she should have. Dad’s sons didn’t pay for college. Their grandmother gave them $10,000 a year; Dad paid the rest. Again, it is not about money—it’s about equality. I didn’t ask to be a lovechild. It’s not my fault love is fucking irresponsible.

One day, Dad’s house will be mine. I’ll take this drive with my family. I’d be okay with a minivan. And I’ll be the best dad in the world. I cried a little bit after I wrote that sentence.
I really don’t want to stop for gas. Eyes can ask and answer more questions than mouths do—*why are you on these roads—I don’t care if you want directions, go that way—what are you*—based on your answer, *I am trying to figure out which will make me more uncomfortable.* I don’t stop for gas.

I don’t intrinsically think it’s always about race. Regardless that Mom is black, Dad was married and so was she. Nonetheless—she was black, it’s 1985 and this is America. Mom tells me that Dad’s wife used to call her his little black girlfriend. Mom and Dad—as funny as that sounds in the same space—used to play tennis together. I can imagine him smiling then. Maybe the sun remembers it too. I bet people would stare—so the sun would shine more and make Mom even darker. I bet she loved this, even as much as she loved him. I wonder what promises they made. I wonder who broke which promise first, and then who was more hurt.

People used to ask Mom if she was my babysitter. Being biracial is more societal than biological. I’ve grown accustomed to being followed around a store while with her. They tell her where the discount rack is. They talk as if always looking down. But Dad is *sir*—he and I get sat away from the bathroom—we aren’t responded to as second. I have always seen these two sides of the world. When with Dad, I look more white than black. When with Mom, I’m a non-white, and that’s all that matters.

There’s two Beechwood Drives in Lake Ariel. I have to put in the address to the Comfort Inn, right by the Twin Rocks diner, so I won’t get lost. Dad and I will get
breakfast there tomorrow. Diners have been our thing, ever since I was young. It’s easy to find something to order. Diners are easy in general. We will talk about school. He will ask me about a girlfriend. He wants to be a grandfather. It seems like it’s important to him. Maybe he’ll do a better job the second time around.

I’ll order pancakes with two scrambled eggs and bacon. I never remember what Dad orders. After, we will drink two more cups of coffee. I’ll talk a lot and he will listen. I’m here visiting because I’m an adult now. I’m not so angry anymore. I think I’ve forgiven him because he makes me sad. I want to know what I’ll look like in 40 some years. I hope I’ll be healthy like him. I have a hard time watching fathers and sons interact—in real life and in make-believe.

There was this episode of “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” when Will’s estranged father comes to visit. He tells Will he’s going to take him on a road trip with him for the summer. Will is excited, and tells his Uncle Phil, whom he lives with and who has taken over the role of father. Uncle Phil is honest about his skepticism. Will is eagerly upset with Uncle Phil. The day comes for Will to leave. His father goes to the house and tells Uncle Phil he is not going to take Will with him. But before his father has time to leave, Will comes home. His father makes up a bullshit excuse—which are all the same with fathers like these. Will tries to keep it together—like he has tried all his life. But we father-less men can only man-up for so long. He says—I will be a better father than he ever was—he says—there isn’t a damn thing he can teach me about how to love my kids—he says—how come he doesn’t want me—and I’ve been asking the same questions all my life.

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The irony in pain is something beautiful. Though having never grown up with Dad’s family, I am exactly like them. I often think about self-definition. If I was striped of everything about myself—what could I not live without. I am defined by my creativity. I wanted to be a cartoonist, an artist, a musician, a writer. I cannot say I am a lot of things with confidence—but I am a writer and for that, I am certain.

Dad was a sculptor. At his house, he has wooden sculptors on top of the brick and wood mantle. He sculpted Mom once, but he eventually threw it in the Hudson.

My grandmother—and now I’ll take ownership of her—because no matter how much she was not in my life nor whole-heartedly accepted me as her grandson—I am her artist. I am visiting Dad because he has paintings for me.

Grandmother was a painter. She had a little gallery in Long Island. Today, I have five of her paintings hung up in my apartment. And I am close to her—and I don’t care that she was never close to me—barely even ever in finger length—but these paintings are mine, and they say Lillian Loeb in the corner.

My brother, Adam—who I will also take some ownership over—was a musician, painter, and poet. We’ve met each other maybe 10 times. I wanted to write my first book of poetry at 17. I did. It was shitty—but his was self-published, and I wanted to self-publish mine. And though I hate the poems, it made me feel closer to him.

I am related to a famous painter. I will write a book about it one day. It’ll be called, “Finding Soutine”, but first I have to find what it means to be a Loeb.

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I am a man now Dad. I love you because it’s the right thing to do. I hadn’t heard from you in three weeks. I called you. I texted you. I left messages—nothing. I called Jason, your oldest son. We both hadn’t heard from you. We think you’ve been drinking. We called the police in Lake Ariel, and they sent a patrol car to your house. I waited an hour to see if you were alive or dead. I’m not ready to deal with the death of my father. For so long, I wanted closure. I don’t want to miss you when you’re gone. I’ve always thought this essay would be a eulogy—but I’m happy it’s not.

I think you’ll still be waiting besides your car—with your arms crossed, and you’ll smile, and that caterpillar mustache will wiggle. It’ll remind me of the first time I meet you. It always does. You were outside your car, I was 7—and Mom reached for my door handle and said—ready?

I have to figure out if I am.