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A Walmart with No Televisions

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A WALMART WITH NO TELEVISIONS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master in Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

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Abstract

A Walmart with No Televisions is a deconstructed novel about the perils and heartbreak of adolescent drug addiction. What begins as a fad, a social affectation, quickly becomes a guiding light. The novel illustrates hope as a potentiality, and escape from oneself as something always in question. Happiness is uncertain, but the experience is not.

A Walmart with No Televisions

I've started a quest to discover solutions for heartbreak. I flail in the smallest places, find space in the most remote light, like the word "if."

Moonpie tells me about the men she fucked that day while we lie in bed. Johnny Paycheck could only get a handjob because it's Tuesday. He doesn't get paid 'til Friday. Eamon wants to bite her and that's it. I see purple marks on the tops of her breast. She tells me about this and rubs the crook of her neck on the pillowcase with peaches on it that Greg's mother gave to us. The wind blows our camper side to side. The lights flicker. "Baby, I want pizza," she says with her eyes closed. I bring my hand towards her mouth. She bites the hard edge of my palm.

I distinctly remember being sixteen. I had my first job—it was at a shoe store—and I had a little bit of money for the first time. At that age, most of us are pretty foolish, and I wasn't an exception. That summer, my mother basically said, "I don't want to see you around the house today. Go do something. Come back around dinner." A beautiful provocation. How could she know what she was actually inviting me to do?

If there's nothing scarier than hearing my own heartbeat, what next?

Our shoes are sticky from spilled liquor. The group of social workers I've just met behind Broadways are looking for coke. I'm the Rudolph of the evening, my bloody nose so bright. I have all the cocaine. I bring it to all the social workers. They are so impressed they give me their phone numbers.

When I text them responses come back immediately. Quickly worded. Almost brusque. To the point. Lots of ironic emojis. It makes me feel very unimportant. I have nothing to do so I take a long time to respond to give illusions about how I spend my time.

When they ask me what I'm doing I cannot bear to give the honest answer: pesticing my life away with needles and dope. I respond four days later with a single word: "chillin."

I like to do this thing when I'm drunk where I hold my face as slack as possible and shake my head back and forth. I'm spending my body without taking into account the person inside. Today I find out my friend Gus is dead. He was executed: shot five times in the head. I shake my head so fast back and forth that I can't close my mouth all the way and spit goes flying. I'm hoping to shake myself into meat. I grieve Gus and I grieve myself. My friend is gone. My most reliable source of clean dope is gone. I have trouble deciding which makes me more sad. How am I going to get high tomorrow?

I'm at the Shell buying cigarettes. The lady behind the counter has a single blue strand of hair in her otherwise brown bushel. There are dots on her face shaped like constellations. I can't tell if they're smudges of something or congenital.

"What do you do about heartbreak?" I say, not asking about any specific heartbreak, but rather about the weight of the sky—inevitable rain, looming dark, heartbrokenness itself.

"What honey?" she says, not looking at me and scanning the bar code of the cigarettes before placing them in the metal halfmoon under her plexiglass protector.

"What do you think can be done about heartbreak? What should we do with heartbreak?"

I meet Patrick in his basement. I'm sitting on the couch with spider eggs inside it. He tells me about his new girlfriend who runs a grow operation out in Burnsville. He's worried she's out there "fucking." He retreats to the spider webbed corners, crouching down to floor level where his two eyes meet the spider's eight.

Patrick pulls out lighters, bug spray, a crack pipe, and a ball of tin foil with my drugs inside it. He tosses the ball to me, and it lands on the floor. I scuttle towards it through my dopesickness.

He hits his pipe and passes it to me. He looks at the spider webs, flicks his lighter, holds the flame. He sprays into the flame. The fire is blue purple closest to the lighter and shoots out into the web an orange so bright it's almost white. The spider web pops as it melts. My heart is racing and I wonder what ODing on this basement floor would be like. What would my pool of vomit capture? Dust mites, spider eggs, cigarette filter fluff.

"Got them fuckers!" he yells.

You sure did.

“Let’s hit that pipe a few more times,” I say.

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The woman at the Shell station looks at me and her eyes are blue in the middle with green rims. “You know Canton? ‘Bout thirty miles west into the mountains? Where the paper mill used to be? Well out past Canton, you know that bridge that goes into Franklin, Tennessee? The bridge that goes over the border between North Carolina and Tennessee?”

“Uh-huh,” I say.

“I’ve never been there. I’ve never left North Carolina. Hell, I’ve actually never left the Blue Ridge mountains before. I know that bridge is out there though, my brother has told me about it. So, honey, I put heartbreak out past that bridge into Franklin, Tennessee. I’d say put heartbreak somewhere you’ve never been, so it can’t get at you. It’s just an imagination.”

I thank her and walk back to my car. I close my eyes to ransack a faraway place.

Today, after calling Papa and telling him if he gave me a \$20 I'd very soon pay back the other \$20 he gave me on top of this \$20, I went to Skinny Boies' house because he said he had roxy, only when I got there he said he didn't actually have it, we'd have to go to Ian's, and when Skinny and me got to Ian's he wasn't home, so we climbed over the fence and into his backyard, then going through the back sunroom we always knew his mother kept open we merely opened up his parents' bathroom medicine cabinet after checking the garage to make sure his mother nor father were home, and took not one roxy each but the whole bottle.

Later that day, I'm on my bed thinking about how my parents made decisions for me without knowing exactly where they were leading me. Parents have a hard job to do, especially because when I was a kid I didn't know how the choices I was making were actually going to affect me. They put their kid in positions to make good decisions and then they cross their fingers, hope to die. I got my first scar in life by pushing my face against a doughnut case and slipping, so my parents had to hope hard.

That summer day my mother told me to go outside I hung out with a guy named David Gaudy who had a very sick mom. A dying mom in fact. She was dying and so she had mountains of Opana to make her death a little less painful.

We sat on the Raintree neighborhood tennis courts, David crushing Opana like his life depended on it, holding the powder in a folded in half sheet of lined paper. There were so many crushed pills the powder was thick as cups of sand. We snorted and snorted and snorted, and then we felt great.

I came home at dinner just like my mother had asked. I wasn't high anymore, but I now knew that I could get high. My mother's provocation to live a little, spend a little cash, have a few surprising experiences, ended up with me lying on my bed right now, hardly able to breathe, my eyelids heavier than anvils. And for what? A sad day in high school. A habit easier to form than to get rid of.

For a place in the mountains, Asheville winters are very temperate. A few big snows, one or two hard ices a year, a dozen windy days; that's about it. Most winter days are bright and mild as long as you wear a coat. If you don't have a coat though, it is windy and gray and cold. To make it worse, most people are tourists not only wearing coats, but very expensive coats. They look so warm it feels even colder.

I have one coat I wear every day. It is a dark brown flannel with muddy green and red pattern. It was my grandfather's. He was a total scoundrel: liar, drunk, cheat, philanderer, pseudo-intellectual. Almost everything bad a man could be.

Out of all his grandsons—he had eight—he gave this jacket to me. Said, “Sam, you ought to have this.” And that to me was a sign.

“Music on the outside, darkness on the inside,” Grandpa says to me.

The trailer I live in has features. For instance, the toilet—it'd be too generous to call it a bathroom—is between the kitchen and the bedroom. I've installed a half-circle curtain rod around the toilet to give some sense of privacy for my guests, though no amount of egg frying can cover up all the sounds one might make on the toilet.

Kathy, the lady who owns the house the trailer sits behind, is very nice. She wears mostly paisley and has a smell that is distinct and charming. It smells like chemicals that are trying to smell natural. She is the type of person who wants to smell like the earth but buys that part of her identity from a kiosk downtown.

If she knows I'm at home around dinner she brings me food. Last night was cashew meat loaf. As I ate it, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine blood in my mouth.

Today I ride the bus because I'm bored and can't think of what else to do. I'm waiting for a dealer to call me back. I've called at least a dozen of them, half of which are disconnected numbers. I write a poem while I wait:

Hey, you on the bus!
Do you mind me
staring at the back
of your head
wondering:
do I love you?
Or do I just love the back
of your head?
I wonder if
when someone
is shot in
the face
do the bullets
come out
the skull?
How far do
they travel once
they leave
someone's body?
Guess it depends
on the gun

Moonpie stays over a lot and Kathy admires her for the way that she dresses. Kathy describes it as if someone held their arms out, ran through a Goodwill, and put on whatever stuck. Not only is this a true description, but it is a generous one. Kathy's generous readings are my favorite part of living in her trailer.

Moonpie and I have had this off and on, friendship/romantic relationship thing for years now. Something is changing though; ever since I broke up with Rachel for no reason at all, Moonpie and I spend time differently. She folds my shirts when they're dirty, and I collect her glass Jim Beam bottles to bring to the recycling center for quarters. Once, she collected all the tinfoil I'd smoke from and leave around the house. She left them in a little pile by my bed, knowing that sometimes I like to wake up in the middle of the night to see if I can find a little puff off the foil I missed the first time around.

Kathy loves it, too, because now she can give her old clothes to Moonpie. It's a win-win—Kathy clears closet space and Moonpie looks less like a streetwalking alien.

If I can never quite say what is wrong, is there anything actually wrong?

I have a habit of implosion. I can't tell you exactly why but every once in a while, I have fits. I look the same on the outside but on the inside I'm nothing but bad and roiling decisions. It's like going to five fast food restaurants in a row. Sitting in my plastic booth, unwrapping my burger from shiny wax paper, the people in the restaurant think I'm a normal person, having a midday lunch at the Wendy's. I'm anyone else, making a delicious choice. What they don't know, is that this is my fourth fast food burger in two hours, I have a bag of Klonopin in my pocket, and each time I finish the burger I pop two K-pins into my mouth, swallowing my Diet Coke and Jack, Super Biggie size. After the third burger I threw up, but figured one or two more couldn't make it that much worse. Besides, with all the K-pins I'll forget the vomiting in no time. I'm a regrettable purchase, ask anyone.

Moonpie rips open the screen door to the trailer. I can tell it's her because her boots make a kind of tacky noise on the wood of the stairs where other people's shoes make a more tinny, high pitched noise.

I look out the window and see her kick the door. Her foot lands next to the knob. The door doesn't open and Moonpie sighs. I start laughing at her but inside I'm mad she's kicking my trailer door.

I open the door for her and before she even crosses the threshold into my house she's on it: "Sam, I fucking need \$5 to get a drink. It's an actual emergency, I really need the five."

I act like I didn't hear what she said. "What now?" I ask.

“Shut the fuck up. Give me the \$5.”

I can play dumb for another few seconds but Moonpie is too smart and she gets the five into her sweaty, little hands, and that’s how it goes. I make sure to tell her though that I also need a five back because without that five I have only \$15 when I need at least a twenty bag, and so on and so on.

Walking to the gas station Moonpie and I aren’t talking. I’m wearing very dirty socks and no shoes and as we walk through the morning dew in the church yards we’re cutting through I wonder if the water on the grass blades is making my dirty socks more or less dirty. Is this walk a version of a washing machine or not? It’s the time of year when the mornings are cold but the afternoons warm, which makes me think that if my socks smell bad enough after this, I can take them off and walk around barefoot. Or I could go and get my shoes out of the house so I’m not walking around in socks. It will be a big day.

My new drug dealer has the deepest eyes. They're perfectly almond shaped and a brown that goes on forever. Dying is also forever. In that way, this guy and Gus are the same: forever. Gus was more my drug dealer than my friend. That doesn't explain all the crying though.

My new drug dealer talks slowly and methodically. His lips are cracked. When he shakes my hand to hand me dope, it doesn't feel like a transaction. It feels like he is holding my hand. It's so sweet that I don't even care that he's giving me that white powder bullshit I dislike so much for burning up too quick, leaving not a lot of reusable residue. He's so sweet as we hold hands, especially sweet since this is the first time I've ever met him. It's so sweet that for a moment I forget why we've met in a Circle K parking lot. The smell of gasoline brings me back to reality, at which point I can't help but wonder: *why is such a sweet man with deep eyes selling such grimy, nasty drugs?*

We get to the station and Moonpie buys a Schlitz tall can. We sit on the curb and she splits her last cigarette with me as she drinks her Schlitz tall can in between spitting. Her hands shake enough where it looks like she's intentionally moving her fingers to a very quiet and fast song.

"So about that \$5. I'm going to meet Grizzly in a few and like, I need that five."

"Sam I don't have it." She won't even look at me.

"Well, I need it."

"I don't have it."

"Well, what are we going to do?" I ask. The curb feels especially hard on my butt in this moment. The guy who works at the gas station and looks like Snoopy the dog is corralling shopping carts into the corner of the lot. After the gas station closes homeless folk hang in this parking lot with their shopping carts.

It is very nice of the Snoopy man to not dispose of the carts, but to leave them where they will be easily found again that night. The Snoopy man is wearing tropically decorated flip flops that are at least two sizes too small.

“I can get it the five to you later,” Moonpie says, tapping the toe of her cowboy boot. I can tell she’s bothered by this because of the slight hiccup under her eyes. It’s an emotional hiccup sort of thing. The rest of her face is an erased chalkboard with the memories of past emotions written all over it. Nothing in, nothing out: no pain.

“Well I kind of need it now,” I say.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Moonpie says.

We agree to disagree and get on with our days. I run into Papa a few blocks down. Papa is in his full regalia—too tight paisley button up that hugs his midsection, baggy matte silver gym shorts, and dress shoes. He's just come from playing tennis and is smoking one of his fat hand-rolled cigarettes. He is a buffoon, but just as a water buffalo is unaware of its overwhelming size, Papa is unaware of his buffoonery, which makes him endearing and palatable. Besides that, he is very rich from selling weed, and not only, he is generous with his money.

I tell him what's up and he kind of takes pity on me and gives me a whole \$20. The only cost is that he starts telling me about his new sponsee and I have to listen (so annoying when people who used to use and have interesting stories start going to NA and then all they can talk about is people quitting using and how hard that is. Like don't you know how hard it is to use? Have you seen my socks, motherfucker?). The new sponsee, Philip, likes to do graffiti, has a meth problem, and is liable to disappear without word every three months or so. Other than that, he's great, according to Papa.

The last component of my most recent implosion was breaking up with my girlfriend of a few years, Rachel. Rachel is a functional person who foolishly believed, in part because of my lying and manipulation, that I was only a few achievable steps away from also being a functional person. I'm not sure why I broke up with her other than I knew it would make me feel bad. Feelings are not dependable, except for cheap misery. That's always dependable. I know exactly what it will do and what can trigger it: breaking up with my girlfriend, eating a lot of fast food, drinking no water and smoking a pack of cigarettes. A relationship means each person is asking something of the other, even if it is something very small. I began to resent that, and resent Rachel, because she wouldn't ask more of me. How is showing up once a week covered in blood with drugs in my pocket enough for someone? It's not, it can't be.

See, I'm stupid. I never like anything when I have it. I take everything for granted. It's effortless how little I appreciate the present things, like the nose in front of my face.

Before Papa was a weed dealing NA sponsor, he was a junkie who got beat up a lot for being a bad thief. He's replaced the thrill of using and acquiring drugs with constantly cheating on his girlfriend.

Before Moonpie was an alcoholic beast she had a boring name like Allison and she ran cross country. She swears she used to be shy.

I was a really happy kid once, at least that's what my mom says. I was too sensitive to fit in with most kids, so I started hanging out with weirdos. Drugs were how to fit in with the weirdos.

“My body is the carriage but I treat it like the horse.” — Moonpie

Grizzly and Daryl are brothers who sell drugs. They aren't drug dealers so much as addicts with habits big enough that selling drugs is one of the only ways they can use the amount they need.

Walking into their house, I step past a tipped over bookcase. Pill bottles, lighters, cellophane, and individual Lego pieces that usually populate the shelves spread out all over the floor. I forgot my shoes in the car and walk gingerly over the Legos and cellophane with bare feet.

Grizzly is squinting like he hasn't seen the sun in days. The sores on his face are mostly closed.

"Sup man." He sticks his hand out and I meet it. I nod back at him. "Yo that's fuckin' insane about Gus, yo. Like what the fuck."

"Yeah, man." I press my middle finger's nail into my palm until it hurts.

I meet up with Grizzly and everything goes smooth. Getting home a few hours later I see a note pinned to my door as I walk up towards it.

Moonpie has serial killer handwriting. It isn't proportioned correctly and is oddly sized. I know the note is from her as I walk up. A \$5 is pinned to the note. It reads: "Showed my tits to Chinstrap for this \$5. Hope it's worth it."

"Fucking gone," Grizzly chimes in as he walks over to give me my 30s in cigarette cellophane.

“Can’t say I’m surprised though, bro. (Grizzly says) Like how he lived? That’s fire on all sides, bro.”

I light a cigarette I got from Moonpie in the trailer without asking. “Yo, can I get one of those?” Daryl asks as he comes out of a back room.

“Nah, sorry. Last one,” I lie.

“That’s cool,” Daryl says, stepping by a turned over La-Z-Boy and dodging a Miller Lite beer sign that’d fallen off the wall.

“What happened in here?” I ask. “Looks like y’all had an intruder or something.”

Grizzly points at me, makes stank face, and nods his head.

“This guy right here!!!” Daryl and Grizzly dap up as Daryl pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his own pocket and lights one. “That’s exactly what we wanted it to look like,” Daryl says. “Fuckin’ intruders.”

“We need to have a talk,” Moonpie says. She’s sitting on the steps of my trailer in a dress that looks like a picnic table. The shoulders are way too big for her so the seam hangs down to the middle of her bicep.

I've been waiting in the McDonald's parking lot on Sweeten Creek for two and a half hours. I'm so sick I can't even eat any McDonalds. Patrick said he'd meet me here, only now he's very late, and his phone is off. He's the only person who answered his phone today, so I can't leave on the off chance he does show up. If my days are binary: dope or no dope, staying in this parking lot waiting for Patrick is the only chance to get the dope.

Finally he arrives and I crawl to his car as if I didn't have any legs. When I get up to his window, he looks at me with something worse than pity: disgust. I'm clawing at his windows, scratches on my face, my clothes are rags, so he acts like he doesn't know me. For a second, I felt a pang of fear that he would drive away out of sheer embarrassment.

He gives me a tinfoil ball, and before I even open it up, I know he's shorted me. The little ball of tar is tiny. He drives off before I get into my car.

I would usually go somewhere else to shoot up, but I'm too desperate. I take out my rig and try to find a vein in my arm a few times before giving up. I'm so cold and clammy that I don't have veins anymore. I tie my belt around my ankle and look for a vein in my foot. I put my foot on top of the steering wheel to get some leverage, and there I am, leg on the steering wheel putting a used and crooked needle into a vein on my foot.

Next to me is a mother and her toddler child. They're staring at me. The mother covers her child's eyes. The child, with her eyes covered, slowly chews her McDougle.

I push the needle plunger down, feeling the solution move through my veins, and I'm, finally, a little warmer.

Like right now, I work at a greeting card store. It's more banal than that even sounds. I work there because I haven't yet crawled out of the blast zone of my previous implosion.

My boss at the Hallmark store is named Vicky. Just this year her brother committed suicide, her mother had an aneurysm, and her father a heart attack. Vicky sits in the back room with the stock room door open, Easy Mac in front of her, and she closes her eyes with a Pall Mall blue in her hand, wrist hanging out the door so the smoke "doesn't get inside."

When I disturb her to ask where the Charlie Brown figurines are or when Pat should take her break, Vicky, without even opening her eyes, says, "I need you to handle that on your own." Vicky has got to be one of the best bosses.

“About what?” I ask, dabbing a wet paper towel under my nose to remove the dried blood stuck to my face. It’s a crisp morning and the sores on my arms feel like they’re going to close up and swallow me with them.

“Well,”—Moonpie wrings the little bit of skin on her forearms, giving herself rug burn. “Me and Greg have been talking,” Moonpie takes a big sip out of a Jim Beam bottle, “and it seems like you’re using too many drugs.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask as I toss the wet paper towel at a garbage can leaning against my trailer.

“Sam, I mean, last night you came over and could hardly stand up. You kept falling asleep on your feet. Then you threw up outside and then when we helped you in, a needle bent at almost a ninety degree angle fell out of your pocket. I mean needles are one thing, and I don’t like to judge, but how could you put that in you? You’re smart enough to know that doesn’t lead anywhere good.” Moonpie took another sip out of her Jim Beam bottle.

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“What does that mean?” Moonpie sips again and now she can’t look up at me. It’s starting to rain and neither of us stand to go inside.

“Can I get six Roxy 30?” I ask. “Why y’all want it to look like shit?” Grizzly and Daryl’s living space always looked like shit and was disgusting, but this was different. The room is destroyed. Almost everything is off the walls, cabinets were open, loose change and tops to pill bottles hid in the plush give of the carpet.

“You know that bitch-ass Trees?” Daryl asks.

I nod. Trees was a train kid with tattoos of trees on his face and a bad case of Hep-C. He was always pretty nice, I thought.

“Well he came over here,” Daryl says, with his legs wide in storytelling posture, “and we had some tastes and we were all pretty fucked up, you know.”

“Woo woo woo wooooooooo! What, what! Getting fucked upppppp!” Grizzly shouts as he digs through different pill bottles looking for my 30s.

“Exactly,” Daryl says, pointing at Grizzly. “And anyways, so Trees leaves, and we notice he left his backpack. Not a big deal, we’ll give it to him next time we see him.” Daryl lights a new cigarette with the old one he wasn’t close to finishing. “And we get to going about our day and Grizzly notices a bottle full, I mean fuckin full, of K-pin is missing.”

“I don’t know. You’re not wrong. I look at Moonpie. She is so small half her weight is in her eyes. “But I don’t want to hear it. Especially from you.”

“Especially from me? What does that mean?”

“Yeah, especially from you.”

Moonpie lights a cigarette. I pull one out of her pack without asking.

“Look,” she says, “this isn’t a judgment or an intervention or any kind of thing. I just love you and you seem like you’re doing like shit. You talk less. You come around less. And when you’re around, mostly you’re a fucking zombie, or a vampire or some shit. All pale and sweaty, and you normally have blood on you. You just show up and sit silently and pass out in whatever corner. And I’m not saying you can’t do that, I would never tell you what you can and can’t do, you know that Sam, but I’m saying I love you and this isn’t good. I’ve never asked you what was going on with you because I trust you, but at this point, I don’t need to ask. I can see what is going on.”

“I don’t want to hear this from you. Why don’t you go suck Johnny Paycheck’s dick, I think it’s Friday.”

Moonpie looks at me hurt. “It’s Wednesday, Sam.”

If what I'm truly after is death, but I'm too scared to die, is intravenous drug use the coolest way to get what I want?

“Right, so only thing that could happen Trees fucking stole our shit when we were all fucked up. We search his bag, figuring maybe he put it in there, but no dice, just hobo punk shit. You know clothes, dog leash, tobacco, some stupid book, that kinda shit.” As Daryl talks I’m twisting the top of the cellophane and melting it with my lighter, molding the molten plastic to create a sealed bag. “Right, but he’s gotta come back, so he’s fucked. Grizzly and I do a bunch of blow, get fucking hype. We’re waiting by the door with baseball bats. We’re gonna fuck this guy up, right. We hear a knock at the door a little while later. We open it and course it’s fuckin Trees. We wait till he comes in, and he’s still a little fucked. Me and Grizzly don’t say shit, just let him in. And once he’s in, he’s all shy and shit, you know how he is, and he’s like “Oh, I forgot my bag” and we’re all, “yeah, you fuckin’ did.” We start wailing on him with the bats, comin’ at him hot. And that little junkie bitch is slick! He’s dodging and dipping and dancing around and we got him some, but we also missed a bunch and totally fucked up our living room. Shit was destroyed but he was more destroyed if you know what I mean. Anyways, he gets his bag, and he fuckin’ leaves and now we got a whole fucked up living room and still no bottle of K-pins. So we’re out like \$750 bucks without that bottle. And Grizzly over there, his first good idea in fuckin’ years, says I know: we were robbed anyways, Trees took our shit, let’s call up insurance and tell ‘em that someone jacked our shit. See if we can get some money. Destroy our house, act like somebody else did it.”

“That’s right!!!!” Grizzly is his own hype man as he does a line as long and thick as my ring finger.

“So yeah, we’re just waiting for insurance to come by. Give us that paper as reimbursement for our robbery,” Daryl says.

“Well damn,” I fake laugh. “Hope y’all get reimbursed or whatever for kicking the shit outta Trees. Hope you find your K-pin and get the money.”

We dap up and I leave. Gus always hated Grizzly and Daryl. Said they were trash and stupid and didn’t even know it.

I do a whole thirty in their driveway before I leave. Driving down Swannanoa River road my nose starts to drip blood into my lap. I’m not going to see anyone so I bleed on myself until I get home.

The summers are hot and long. Moonpie and I lay in the trailer and the thick cotton of our cheap sheets sticks to our moist skin. Once, at the pharmacy to pick up nail polish and sunglasses, I see an ice tray: electric blue plastic.

The trailer has a small refrigerator and freezer. The addition of ice cubes from the tray into our life is unbelievable. We lay in bed and I rub the ice cubes all over her body, licking the trails of cold water they leave.

I do this not because I'm a great romantic or know a lot about having sex, but because I love "Do the Right Thing" by Spike Lee and the scene where Mookie rubs ice all over Tina is exciting and sexy. Who else can I be but characters from movies that strike me as cool?

When it's cold outside I dream of alligators.

I'm going with Papa to sell weed to this guy named Daniel. There's no way Daniel is long for the world. He has a voice like an ashtray and his skin is bright red like a boiled lobster. He has the swollen face of an alcoholic with the refrigerator of one too. Nothing but Kraft singles and Bud Light.

His walls are covered in girls in bikinis. Daniel is at least sixty. He has worked at the meat department at Ingles Market for two decades.

"Daniel's so awesome," Papa says as we mount the winding gravel road that leads to Daniel's trailer. "He just lives his life." I guffaw inside at this. Is there any other way to live? Everyone is "just" living, that's the sick part.

"Shut the fuck up, man," I say. "This man is sad as hell and you know it."

"You're so critical all the time," Papa says. "He's just living and you're out here judging him."

"No, I'm judging you."

"And who are you to judge? Live in a trailer with your hooker girlfriend. Be zooted out all the time, act like everybody doesn't know you're fucked up constantly. Look down on people silently. As far as I'm concerned, Daniel is authentic. You're the one with the image problem."

My reflection in the car window looks back with disappointment. Sometimes I see myself and I don't believe.

It was only a few weeks ago that Moo-moo's name had been changed to Mexico. The saggy, stinky mutt Bron loved had begun to slow down considerably. The dog's fur drifted off her in rancid tufts.

One night, after six or seven aperitifs, no dinner, and then six or seven glasses of an orange digestif, Bron told Greg and I that a new name for Moo-Moo seemed the best way to revitalize her.

We began listing M names.

"Morty"

"Metropolis"

"Macchiavalli"

"Mikey"

"Mexico!" And at that, we all knew that Greg had come upon the new name.

I feel like a chicken crisp.

Papa loves to take me and his mistress, Pussy Willow, to Chili's for bottomless margaritas.

The booth at Chili's has sticky pleather and the seat cradles me because I'm sitting in the ass crater of whoever sat here before. Papa gargles carbonated water and makes faces at the waitress's butts. I know Papa is cheating on his girlfriend with Pussy Willow because he has a very big mouth. It's unclear how much she knows about what I know, so we mostly sit awkwardly, the biggest point of possible discussion off limits. Occasionally she kicks my shin.

Papa is impervious to other people's discomfort. He eats chips and queso, shoving too large bites into his mouth, cheesy smears sticking to his chin and dripping onto his paisley shirt.

Pussy Willow is a little drunk. I'm trying to catch up. She wiggles at Papa. He looks at her out of the side of his eyes as if he doesn't notice, all the while hoping to make eye contact with me to indicate that he does notice. He wants me to know that a woman is flirting with him. I haven't slept in two days on account of Concerta and I worry my memories are dripping out of my eyes, showing my shame to everyone. I yawn and my eyes water.

I love Papa the most when he was smart and critical and a little cruel. The horny boy careening around town buying cheap food for pillhead women was fun, but the element of surprise was what I liked most about him. He'd hustle drugs all day, fielding people's calls about their sobriety, and then at the end of the day, give a homeless guy \$500 for no reason other than, "he liked his look." Papa was political insofar that he was such a crass man, but he wasn't ideological. I don't know a way to predict him.

"You're right, brother. I've read Kant and you haven't. So suck my dick, why don't you," I say. I'm satisfied at myself after this one.

Papa laughs and we pull into Daniel's lot. "I'll spank you more later, baby," Papa says as he pivots out of his seat. He goes to his trunk and pulls out the pounds of weed he keeps in a frozen eclair box.

We go to Daniel's door and before Papa can knock, Daniel opens up. "Whaddya been doin? I been waiting for hours! People waiting on me!" Daniel's red and sweaty neck folds jostle as he shouts at Papa. Papa's late because he was playing tennis in a paisley shirt and dress shoes.

"I'm sorry, man. It's been a busy day," Papa lies. He's late to everyone and everything. Sometimes I feel like Papa sells weed for the power of it and the power only. He is a professional at making people wait, and having a busy phone is a salve for his deepest insecurity: that nobody likes him or wants him.

I'm driving Greg to the wildlife center to look at the wolves on a smoky Wednesday. We drink our twisted teas in silence, the day seeming rotten. Greg applies purple lipstick, makes a kissy face, and looks at himself in the mirror before removing the purple lipstick and replacing it with a shade of pert rose. Pulling down the mirror he puckers his lips and tousles his short and spiky hair.

"Gahhhhh! I look like a whore," he says, removing the lipstick and lighting a Virginia Slim.

Walking by the wolves with our recently opened bottle of Jim Beam we begin swapping the warm liquor back and forth under our coats. Kids exclaim things like "Why are the geese eating poop?" to their dreary parents.

Greg's phone starts to ring and it's Bron calling.

I can't hear Bron on the other end but Greg replies, "Ok. We'll be right there." He hangs up and smacks his lips dramatically. "Moo-Moo Mexico is dead. Bron came home and found her dead in the living room. Apparently, her tongue is out of her mouth and stuck to the oak flooring. It's turned slightly grey."

I look out the window and into the Chili's parking lot to see two round men in green and brown shirts smoking cigarettes. I imagine them as satiated, that their fried appetizer trio was not only delicious, but exactly what they wanted.

Papa and Pussy Willow and I are here as a kind of mock. He and I sometimes go to better restaurants, but he brings Pussy Willow here to lower the ceiling of expectation. Chewing on my oily mozzarella sticks, I think about Lake James that sits at the feet of the mountain, and I taste the hushpuppies that glow all day and night in the Eblen Short Stop heater. I'm having a hard time swallowing the mass of processed cheese and I feel so ashamed to be here, to be acting like Chili's is a joke when in fact I love Chili's. Love it so much I realize that Chili's was the first restaurant I ever ate at—I sucked the hot salty potato of the fry and I screamed with delight, desperate for more. Papa bringing us here as an ironic nudge to Pussy Willow indicating his willingness to class drag, his difference from other hipsters, makes me almost hope I choke and die.

How would I look with lake blue skin? Would the smoking men outside give me mouth to mouth or would that cross a line?

We walk into Daniel's house, and his son, Andrew, who I've never heard speak, sits at his computer playing one of those games that is designed to steal your life by being so time dependent that the person that plays it doesn't have time for anything else.

"Alright, alright," Daniel says. His voice sounds like how a waddle looks. Daniel spreads his hands over his table, knocking frozen food crisping sleeves and beer cans to the floor. "Weigh the stuff out here."

I hate how Papa weighs out pounds at people's houses. It takes so long. Papa brings the nugs out and balances them on his scale. Daniel starts monologuing about all the people in his mobile home park waiting on him: "Darlene be needing a quarter and she's been hitting me up every hour. Kathy wants only a little bag but she's worse than Darlene. She even calls me! And Monty down the hill, I don't know how much he wants." He whips out his phone to show Papa the dozens of unanswered text messages he has because of Papa's tardiness.

I walk across the trailer and look at all the girls in bikinis on the walls. I stand behind Andrew and ask, "Can I watch you play?" Andrew doesn't respond. I keep watching. The game he plays reminds me of trying to score dope. The game consists of acquiring resources, which is done by finding pixelated trees or rocks and clicking on them. The character then does some totally inane action that only in the most vague way resembles interacting with the world, a pantomime pickaxe, and a number on the top of the screen goes up. I pick up my phone, checking to see if any dealers have returned my texts.

Andrew clicks a few more objects and watches the numbers go up. At some imaginary point he is satisfied. Then he goes to "town." He gives the imaginary rocks he imaginarily harvested to an imaginary shopkeeper. The imaginary shopkeeper gives him a new imaginary pickaxe that will make the imaginary rock number at the top of his screen go up more quickly. I can't help but wonder what it feels like inside Andrew to spend a day like this, every day like this. What feels more real to Andrew, the bikini girls on the walls, or the imaginary number on his screen?

The drive to Bron's house is feverish. Our Jim Beam consumption is speeding up. I take a sip. Greg takes a sip. We are a Jim Beam see saw.

Walking into the house I wasn't sure if it smelled like dead dog or if I was making it up. Surely the dog hadn't been dead long enough to begin to death stink.

"In here Greg. I'm in here," Bron weakly yells from her bedroom. I follow Greg in hoping Bron won't shout at me.

Bron is covered in blankets with an aperitif in her hand, the gold rim of the glass shining in the dark room. *Law and Order SVU* plays on the television. Bron has a duvet over her that cost more money than I had in the bank. Bron's small house is stuffed with ornate antiques that Greg and I shimmy carefully past as we make our way to the bed. She was once married to an antiques dealer and when he died she liquidated the store into her home.

"Here's what I need you two to do," Bron whispered. "Moo-moo Mexico's favorite bed is right next to her, seems she almost got in it to die. Probably collapsed right next to it. I want you to put her in the bed, carry her outside, and bury her behind where we buried Phebe. You remember where that is Greg? Where we've buried the other dead things?"

“You ever been to a strip club?” Papa asks Pussy Willow. “They got girls there.”

She looks away demurely either because she is flirting with him or the third Xanax she had taken is kicking in. I can’t remember if I had accepted her offer of Xanax or not which suggested I had probably accepted. Couldn’t hurt to take another. I want to end up face down in my chicken crispers, our Chili’s waiter asking if I was ok while Papa and Pussy Willow sloppily shove my head around the sticky floors.

“I’ve always wanted to go to one. No one ever wants to go with me though,” Pussy Willow says.

Papa’s eyes get big.

“Ooo baby, well we’d love to take ya. We love the Treasure Club! Ain’t that right brother?”

Greg nods his head, "Behind where the tree house used to be and beside those shrubs with the red leaves."

"Yes, beside the Photinia."

"I'm sorry about Moo-moo, Bron. She was a great dog," I say.

"Yes, she was. Thanks for your help," Bron says and puts her hand on my hand. It's the first time I've ever touched Bron. Her hands are more leathery than I expect.

Sauntering slowly out to the living room, Greg and I spot Moo-moo on the floor. Standing over the dog I'm struck by how totally dead the dead dog is. I can't help myself and begin laughing at the silence of the room.

Greg, scoffing, says "You monster!" before he begins laughing.

Moo-moo was a large dog and now she is a heavy object. At least 120 pounds. She's on her side, and her favorite bed, a once glorious, now ratty piece of poofy cotton, is at her back.

Greg and I look at each other considering the most humane way to transfer this dog onto the pillow. We get on the side of her feet and roll her body onto the bed.

Once Moo-moo Mexico's body is on the pad, we gingerly begin to carry her to the backyard. The dog is much heavier than I expected, so as I walk, I'm walking with wide legs to support the weight and Greg is doing the same. In the teeter totter of carrying the dog I smash Moo-Moo Mexico's head against a large wood chest.

A few minutes down the road Papa's phone starts to ring. It's Daniel.

"What could this fucker want!" Papa shouts. He answers. I can hear atonal and totally uninhibited wailing coming from the phone. It doesn't sound at all like Daniel. "What? What's going on? Hello!" Papa says into the phone.

"Whhhahhhhhaaaaaayyyyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" comes from the phone.

"I don't fucking know, man," Papa says as he hangs up the phone. "I don't know what that is."

"We should go back. We should go back there," I say. "That sounds bad. I don't know what it is, but we gotta go back."

Papa reluctantly agrees and we drive back to Daniel's. As we pull in, the door to the trailer is open and Andrew is standing on the stoop, manic faced with tears melting down his face. Rounding the corner of the stoop, I see he's holding a hand reaching up from the floor. Daniel is on the floor, not red faced anymore, but a dark and deep purple.

"What happened!?" I yell at Andrew.

The Treasure Club is the strip joint in our town. It's across from Walmart. It's the world's most immoral fast food menu. That's not because strip clubs are immoral—quite the opposite, strip clubs are very moral in my mind—but rather this is the type of club where most of the workers don't want to be there. It's not a performance space, but a place of compromise.

At the Treasure Club I drink four Bud Ices as fast as possible. Pussy Willow is asleep in the booth beside me. The club has on NBA Classic, a television channel that shows old basketball games from the 80s and 90s. I drink and watch Larry Bird, Parrish, McHale, and Dennis Johnson try and whoop those showboating Lakers. It's unbelievable how beautiful Magic Johnson was at basketball.

Papa comes by to indicate he has already spent hundreds of dollars and he's still on the way up. He sweats and blinks wistfully at the flesh.

Papa is convinced the girls like him. If someone is nice to him, he thinks they like him. If they're mean to him, he thinks they don't like him. Papa doesn't often consider the way his behavior impacts how people treat him. He dreams of phone numbers.

Driving Pussy Willow home, Papa puts on Prince's *Controversy*. He almost swerves off the road and kills us all looking for a lighter. Pussy Willow is really asleep now; she's curled up in the back seat. The bottomless margaritas are making me lucid and sharp. I feel put off by Papa's bottomless want. He starts dancing in the driver seat, rolls the window down, and shouts into the night as loud as he can. He puffs his cigarette and ashes the tip onto his lap.

"When's the last time you fucked, brother?" Papa asks me. "What was her body like?"

“Call 911,” I tell Papa. I don’t know what to do so I start trying to do some kind of chest compression on Daniel. A person who’s not breathing becomes an object very quick. Papa and I futilely wail on Daniel’s body.

Andrew is sitting in a corner, under a bikini girl, crying with an intensity that almost sounds like laughter.

The paramedics arrive and they do chest compressions and mouth to mouth. They get the big paddles out and shock Daniel’s chest. After a few minutes they put the big sheet over him. Goodbye, Daniel.

“What the fuck, man,” Papa says as we’re leaving. “How do you just die like that? Like one minute you’re talking to Darlene about a quarter of weed and then you just fucking die? Like what?”

“What about Andrew. Jesus Christ. What’s he gonna do?” I say.

We are blank computer monitors sitting in Papa’s car.

“I guess that’s just how it happens sometimes,” I say.

We gingerly set the dog down. It's deep winter and the sun is sighing behind Bron's shed. The old rusty truck she keeps in the corner of the yard is collecting bits of the falling frozen rain.

We begin digging and the ground isn't totally frozen, but close. The dig is hard. I sweat through my coat.

The hole ends up being about six feet long and four feet wide.

Greg climbs in holding the end of the pillow with Moo-moo Mexico's head on it. The weight transfer is intense, so as Greg climbs down the weight of the dog shifts towards his feet. He slips and Moo-moo Mexico's head smashes into the wall of her frozen grave.

The impact breaks Moo-moo Mexico's neck. The dog is lying in the dirt with her head hanging off her body like a streetlight leaning past the pole that supports it.

"Oh my god!!! No!" Greg exclaims.

I can't stop laughing.

"Why are you laughing? That's not funny! Look at her!"

I'm laughing more.

"Oh my good god. The horror!"

Greg starts laughing now.

My stomach hurts.

"I can't do it. Sam you've gotta get in there and fix her head. You've seen dead people before I think. We can't bury her like that. We've gotta fix it."

Papa laughs. We smoke cigarettes in silence.

I'm so fucking pissed at how stupid and horny Papa is for asking me that dumb question about who and how I have sex that I spit onto the floor of his car. I spit into my palm and rub it on his face. He slows down for a red light.

"Dude what the fuck?" Papa asks, smiling. He knows he's getting a rise out of me and he likes it. I punch the dashboard as hard as I can and spit onto the floor again. "You rubbed your spit on me! That's gross, dude. What the fuck?!"

I open the door and get out into the intersection.

Greg has the pain of recognition on his face. I climb into the hole and take her sweet head in my dirty hands. With rigor mortis and the broken bones in her neck, it seems Moo-Moo Mexico's head was always at this horrible angle. I grab her, and even though I really don't want to, I twist her snout like I'm trying to open a can of spaghetti sauce. A sick few clicks come out of her bones. I twist harder and her head snaps back to normal with a sickening final crunch.

"God, you're a barbarian. How could you do that to such a beautiful animal???" Greg asks.

"Bitch! You asked me to. In fact, you made me!" I'm climbing out of the grave and the Jim Beam is catching up to me. I totter onto my butt.

"As if that excuses you," Greg laughs and wanders inside. He comes out a few moments later. "Bron doesn't want to see her. It's our job to toast the girl." Greg pulls out two little glasses and a bottle of rum. "Let's say some words, Samuel," Greg says.

"Moo-moo Mexico. Moooooooooooo-moooooooo Mexico. I loved you like a dog. And that is to say, I loved you more than just a pet. You were my friend, and you are my friend." I'm beginning to get cold sweats. I need to find the 30 in my car that I dropped under the seat. I down my shot of rum dedicated to the beautiful Moo-Moo Mexico.

"Sam we were supposed to toast that!"

I mumble in response. "May Moo-Moo Mexico live forever in our hearts."

“Do you think it hurt?” Papa asks.

It’s a cold night and I’m not wearing enough clothes to walk home.

One of the best parts of Moonpie sleeping over is that she sleeps so much later than I do. She also passes out early, heavy drinker that she is.

I leave before she gets up most mornings. I take pictures of her when she sleeps. Not for any weird reasons, but for the normal ones: a look of peace, the pink of her open mouth. If the picture is good enough, I can look at it and hear her sleep breathing.

Making great efforts to keep my footsteps quiet (when Moonpie is sleeping), I sulk around the house lifting piles of clothes hoping to find her purse under one of them.

Finally, a pot of gold, and I open the pleather flap and I find the patchwork little wallet made of colored hemp and cloth and the green money bills and I take a little. Only \$40.

Later when I come back to the trailer, I expect Moonpie to be gone but she's sitting on the steps having a cigarette. Her mouth is open, and her bottom lip is stuck to her front teeth. She doesn't notice me coming or her stuck lip. I'm opiated enough to basically fall on top of her when I sit down.

"Sup," I say, taking one of her Winstons.

"Sup, Sam," she says. "What'd you do this morning?"

"Nothing," I lie, leaving out going to Darryl and Grizzly's.

"Cool. I'm just getting up. Probably be outta here soon. I need to get some stuff though so I was looking for my wallet and I thought I had \$40 in there? Did you take money from my wallet?"

"No, of course not," I say as I smoke her Winston. I don't feel bad at all as I lie to her. I mostly feel fucked up.

There is a made up panic about an LED screen shortage on account of a natural disaster in Taiwan. Even though I'm skeptical of any kind of crisis, Greg suggests it'd be a fun idea to go to the Walmart and watch people panic buy shit.

We totter out of our car and walk into Walmart. It is pandemonium: UTZ cheeseball barrels strewn like fall leaves across the cement; bobby pins are everywhere on the floor; there's no meat except turkey hot dogs; the gun counter man is holding a gun behind the counter, looking like he fears he might have to use it; the kids clothes are entirely mixed up with the adult clothes; the bikes have wheels missing; I see what I think is a log of shit in a Tupperware; all the Teflon pans are already peeling; and when we finally get to what we came for, the entertainment section, we see the horror we traveled so far for: a Walmart with no televisions.

I say things not for truth but for the pleasure of saying them. *No I haven't been using drugs too much.* Cocaine tastes like chlorine as it slides down from my sinuses. *I never buy twice in one day.* I'm selling DVDs Papa bought from the library sale back to the library so that Patrick can come over and sell to me. *I love you so much. I'd never lie to you.* No, those aren't mine. Bloody cotton balls happen to fall out of my pockets sometimes. *I've been a great friend recently.* If I bang enough dope into my arm there isn't a ceiling.

Charles and Charlie live in a basement apartment off of Lakeshore Drive. Lakeshore is a neighborhood for rich people, but there is one dumpy apartment building at the very beginning of the development. Charles and Charlie live in the dumpy basement.

Charles and Charlie hardly knew each other when they first moved in but their connection was forged iron-clad through a rented-shop vac. Greg used to live here, but he moved out because the floor was always covered in piss.

Both Charles and Charlie are terrible alcoholics. The kind of terrible were they take turns pissing themselves after passing out drunk most every night. Greg eventually had enough and decided those two could live in their own piss.

Without Greg there to lecture them about the state of the house, Charles and Charlie came up with a solution. The weekdays were for pissing everywhere. But then, on the weekend, Charlie and Charles walk to the Ingles Grocery across the street and take turns renting the shop-vac to clean out their carpets. Sometimes on my way to work I see Charles and Charlie humping their way to Ingles to go get the shop-vac.

It is a very sad marriage. And just like marriage it's filled with compromise and encouragement and support. May death do them part.

If I eat nothing but Burger King, what kind of royalty am I?

I look around me and all is stinking, all is burning. It's so bad and I don't have any hands to cover my mouth. The bridge back to safety is on fire too and I'm very flammable.

Charles put Moonpie in Papa's trunk and said, "You have to hang out with us. No choice."

Moonpie is laughing and acting performatively upset. I don't like putting her in the trunk. That's how people suffocate.

Driving down Broadway we hear Moonpie kicking the trunk, yelling, "Let me out! Let me out!"

Micala says, "And she acted like she wanted to go in the trunk!"

I know that I'm a good thief because I steal from everyone in my life and no one knows. There is a confidence in that, also a great sadness. What's better: to be a great thief in silence, or to be a bad thief and have to deal with the crimes committed? Have you looked in someone's eyes and lied to them? The feeling of their not-knowing is wide as morning water.

My goals are binary: dope or no dope.

Big cities—I've never really spent time in any, but I've heard—have open-air drug communities. Apparently, there are sections of town you can go to, and there'll just be a guy hanging out, and if you look right, or if you do the right hand signal, he knows what's up, and then you got whatever drugs you're looking for. This seems much more civilized to me, less people living as scabs, waiting to be flecked off with a wrong step.

Asheville is obsessed with purity and beer. Alcoholics walk freely but if you use needles you've got to know people. Once you know though, the whole secret world opens up.

People idling in the back of grocery store parking lots are usually buying dope. Two men shaking hands through a car window at a quiet intersection is most likely a transaction. Alleyways are passe; we buy our goods in front of the grocery and besides the Walmart.

Papa pulls over; it was 4 am after all so stopping on the middle of a normally busy road isn't a big deal. We let Moonpie out and put her in the back seat with Greg and me. Charles has his feet out the window and demands we listen to "Little Red Corvette."

As we drive down Merrimon, about to turn onto Lakeshore, Charles decided he's had enough. He takes his shirt off and throws it out the window. He unties his shoes and throws those out the window too. "My Uncle was a total," Charles turns around from the front seat to directly face Greg, Moonpie, and me now, we can see his shark eyes, empty all the way down, and then he starts speaking again, "fuck. My Uncle was a total fuck. I never needed those fuckers," he says, spitting into the wind.

Papa's eyes are darting and his sweat is starting to smell. When the music gets loud and the chaos is unavoidable is when Papa's driving is at its worst. He turns onto Lakeshore and floors the gas because he's scared. He nearly passes the turn into Charles's apartment, but barely makes it by slamming his brakes hard enough to squeal the tires.

Charles flies forward and smashes the crown of his head into the windshield. It makes a thick noise. The windshield has a spidered crack where Charles hit his head.

It is easy to dislike. Critique is convenient because it asks for so little. I read Ben Lerner and tell myself it is bad because I don't like it, this professorially mommied poetry of an overgrown, gouty intellectual. This has nothing to say about what *the book* is. I'm too weak for anything but my own squalor, and so I read "The Lichtenberg Figures" and it wraps around my throat like my own hand strangling me as I look into a mirror. Even though I can see what might be "good," I don't look past myself. I look so handsome as a corpse.

“Charles, oh my god! Are you ok?!”

Charles laughs. “Oh yes, I have a very hard head.” He throws up when we get inside but no one takes it very seriously. Moonpie and I are going to take some LSD and so we figure the kindest thing to do is offer Charles some.

He takes it and listens to the Goo Goo Dolls all night.

The next morning he wakes up with a head ache.

I keep people that love me at arm's length. Introduce me to a stranger and I have no walls, I'm without country or border, I can say anything. With a stranger, there is no reverberation. They don't know me, so nothing I say can bounce off their knowledge of me and come back like a ball bouncing off a tree and smashing into my nose. This is a fancy way to say that I can lie to strangers and that makes me feel safe.

Moonpie and Papa team up to have a talk at me about where I'm getting my needles, are they clean, etc. And I can't believe it. I play it totally dumb. I act like I have no idea what they are talking about. I lie to them and look them straight in the eye and lie some more. And the worst part of it is, they know I'm lying.

I was told by a very smart woman once, a treasure really, that when your body is too cold or too hot when sleeping, the body tries to wake you up by giving you bad dreams. A kind of warning to that you have things to take care of in the waking world.

As I freeze in my little trailer I dream of alligators with sharp teeth and thick tongues and warm bellies. And I refuse to wake up, I refuse to open my eyes, because deep down I want to be eaten whole, swallowed alive. Come get me gator. I want to live in your hot belly instead of this hard bed with itchy sheets I stain with my open wounds.

Moonpie is sitting on my steps as I get out of my car. My shirt is a little tight and I've been sweating so it sticks to me. The sun is close to setting and the afternoon has lighting that makes everything seem important.

Moonpie typically doesn't bring important conversations up to people. She is typically the subject of the important conversation: her drinking, her self-destruction, her wild spectacular failures she exhibits as a fearless dance explaining, without words, how very dumb you might be for caring about anything. I can tell by her posture though, her fearful slouch, that she has something to say to me. A Winston trembles in her hand.

"How's it going?" she asks, looking past me to stare at the scraggly trees that shake when the wind blows. I wonder why she has to look at the trees to see something vulnerable and scared. I'm right in front of her after all, blood on my clothes, stupidity in my heart.

KFC BLUES

If primordial subconscious soundtracked
an ice machine
then it would absolutely and
unquestionably
be the soda machine that

at the KFC in Matthews
North Carolina. Such a deep sound
comes from that ice: a dark

Gurgle: fuzzy mold the color

Of night

and sugar concentrate.
The gurgle is so deep that perhaps
It comes not from the machine itself

But from the dead

cow eyed stare of the workers
—who, one at a time,
commanded to sweep

floors, and one at a time
at their own pace
decide *absolutely fuck you*

no way will I be doing that,
and then they leave the KFC.

The one
person I knew who worked
at the KFC in Matthews
North Carolina is dead, shot—

In the fucking head

and not to be glib but I wonder where
or what kind of dead—he would
be if he had stayed working at

the KFC—last time I went

there I ordered my food
and the employee's red
polo was way too big

and when I told him
the food I wanted
his eyes rolled back in

his head and his mouth
opened and legions of dirty
pennies shot out

spinning on the floor.

I grunt at Moonpie, waiting for the conversation we're about to have.

"Sam, I don't think I can spend time around you anymore," she says, and her lips are shaking. Somehow her eyes have gotten a little wider and a little shorter. "You try to take care of me, and I appreciate it, but you don't take care of yourself at all." And at this she lights another cigarette. "I feel like I'm such a mess and you're such a mess, and me being a mess around you makes it so you don't have to fix your mess. You just deal with mine. And I don't want to be other people's mess anymore."

I'd like to say that in this moment I feel incredibly hurt, heartbroken even. Heartbroken in part because how does she think I deal with her problems? As far as I'm concerned I'm the most selfish piece of shit ever; all people do is worry about me while I ignore them.

I want to cry and shout. I want to be an Italian widow throwing myself on the casket of my beloved but instead the opiate induced constipation I've been feeling for weeks is subsiding and I can feel a shit the size of a Subway footlong sliding through my body and everything pales in comparison to that.

"Well, that's very noble of you," I say. "A real martyr move. The pain of being cared for? Something like that."

I'm a dying star surrounded by beautiful things much brighter than me.

"Who are you turning into, Sam? You're killing yourself —"

"And you're not?" I interrupt her.

I'm experiencing this type of conflation with needles and penises. When I lay in my bed sick I can only dream of tips of needles going through my skin and into my veins. The simultaneous hot and cold prick, the locked in fear of having a needle in my vein, the endorphin rush and near fallout as I remove the needle. And in the most sick moments, the highest fever, the most sweat, I close my eyes and try to imagine a needle in my arm that will set me free and yet, without my control or input, I'm thinking about sex. When I mean to imagine my sweet filling up of the syringe, and that same syringe entering the fallow and stupid church of my body, I instead imagine a disembodied person, an amalgam of the all people I've had sex with, lying beneath me. I'm putting myself inside them just as I hope that the needle goes in. The tape roll of my mind can't decide who's entering whom or what is inside of what.

“I don’t want to keep enabling each other to do that. I want us to be happy and old one day.”

I feel as if I won’t live to be even 30. I’m 24 and 25 feels a big stretch.

“I hope you get there. Maybe I’ll see you around the old person’s home. Maybe I won’t.” I start to go inside.

“You know this doesn’t mean anything about how I feel about you, right?” Moonpie asks in a cracked voice. “You know that, like, sometimes the hard thing is the caring thing? Not seeing you is because I love you, and all that?”

“I don’t know. I think love is about sticking around. A verb not a noun. Do you understand?”

Moonpie looks at me with an open mouth. I climb around her, go inside, and lock the door. I turn up the CD player in my kitchen as loud as possible to drown out Moonpie’s banging.

I lay on the cold kitchen floor listening to Britney Spear's "Toxic"
loud enough to vibrate the linoleum.

I don't talk to Mom much because I don't like to lie to her. I mostly don't answer her calls because I've made a pact with myself: don't talk to Mom on the phone when I'm fucked up.

She loves me so much and she always knows. She doesn't say anything, but I can hear how she knows and it breaks my heart.

Feeling brave, I say, “Hab,” that’s his (my new dug dealer’s) name, Hab, I say, “Hab, you seem like an angel. What, with your big brown eyes, how’d you get into dealing?”

His cracked lips smile, and he says, “Man, I used to use. So I started dealing to use more. I eventually quit. I went to outpatient rehab and I sold drugs the whole time. And when I started to sell to fiends once I was in rehab, I saw how beholden they were to me, and with that gratitude I wasn’t doing anything. Just pushing them down deeper. So I started tapering off the bags I sold. A gram was .8, a dub was .15, and like that. I figured I was helping people out. Someone caught me though, caught me skimping on their bag, and they beat me with a bat. Got to the point where I had to choose, you know. What kinda life I was wanting to live. So I’m goin to school now. This is actually my last day selling dope and you’re my last run of the day man.”

He looked at me with these deep brown eyes that go forever.

“Did you skimp on my bag, man?” I ask.

“I did, man,” he says. He sticks out his hand and I grab it, and as we shake he puts his other hand over top of my hand and pats me. It feels good. Hab makes me feel safe. The back of his Jeep does not have the same forever as his eyes. He drives away and then is gone.

The bag he put in my hand is warm.

I make a mistake and I answer my mother's call. We talk for a bit, and she says one unforgettable thing: "Sam, why don't you answer the phone more?"

I said, "Mom, I'm falling below the bar. I'm getting to a point where I'm not worth loving. I broke into someone's parked car and stole their iPod yesterday. I sold it for \$30. People don't even really use iPod anymore, Mom."

Crying, she said, "Son, there is no bar for my love. There is no bar. There is no bar."

I have always been without country and this is by definition. Suburbia is a placeless place that is able to access all influences. Middle class whiteness has very little identity outside of consumption. Identity is something to try on, flirt with a while, then discard and begin anew: a costume. Growing up suburban in the internet age makes ideas and “cultures” available, but experiences hard to come by.

That lack of experience allows suburban teens to have a cavalier unbelonging. Not only does one feel totally alienated from everything, belonging to nothing, but they are able to try on any outfit they like, to see the deep particularities of how exactly it doesn’t fit, in what precise ways it doesn’t work.

I took my no-placeness and quested to go even deeper into nothing. I felt so remedial spiritually and emotionally and interpersonally for no real reason. I was simply young, but sensitive enough to understand there was *something* I was missing.

And so now, I look back at these choices of fashion I made: the choice to steal Ian Hester’s mom’s hydrocodone; the choice to snort Oxy instead of swallowing it with Patrick McGuire; the choice to smoke Roxy with Brad Beame instead of snort it; the burning crack rock behind the Regal movie theater with Zach Patterson. All these moments of fashion, of hoping to fit in, trying to build an identity, led me to where I am now: sitting in Alan’s Pawn with a handful of stolen iPods and electric guitar tuners hoping to reach \$100 so I have enough dope to bang into my arm so as not to spend the day sweating from inside my veins and periodically needing to shit myself.

I have a serious trouble with crying. I never do it. And worst of all, it's because of something horrible and macho way at the grizzled heart of me. I'll feel tears start to spurt up, and then I push them down. Not even consciously, but just because of a silent code that two estranged parts of me made before their estrangement. So I sit, divorced from myself, pauper and king of my own emotional unavailability.

But O'char-dohn-ayyy how you've opened and closed me and opened me up again. I can drink a few glasses, and I'm born anew. Pauper and king united. I can cry, oh, can I cry.

With my new power locked and loaded I'm three dry and sweets in and ready to fall into my feelings. I saunter into Broadways winking my eyes at myself, preparing the tears for the first person I see that I vaguely know.

I slouch because my Dad loves Joe Namath. How could a boy not love Joe? Big arm, blue eyes, mop of hair, unassailably cool if you're able to look past what a scoundrel, womanizer, alcoholic, and degenerate he is. Unfortunately, that might be partly why he was so cool. People often remember him for being drunk on national television and telling a poor female reporter that he wanted to kiss her but before that he was an All-American leader in swagger.

Papa says my heartbreak is an issue of semen retention. I'm not masturbating enough according to him, and that's why I'm so lost. Papa isn't wise but sometimes he knows things. He tells me I should start going on cam sites to watch the girls take off their shirts and stick silicone inside themselves.

The worst thing that can happen is that he's wrong so I give it a try. While I'm perusing the different cam girls, scrolling mindlessly past rows and rows of pixelated models named things like "AmericanXkittyx666" and "Texarkanathicccc" and "exoticcream," I begin to feel emboldened by all the options and by my anonymity. I can pay these people to do anything I want and there is an aspect of safety because they're in their houses, and I'm in my house. We're contained horny bubbles. We can't even hurt each other. There must be worse ways to spend \$20 than to see someone's butt, right?

First person I see after I order my glass of chardonnay is Adrianne, a neighborhood line cook who I've talked to a few times.

Pivoting around her table, I say, "Hey, Adrianne. How's it goin'?"

"Hey, Sam! How's it been? Long time, no see."

She leans back and opens up her shoulders to sit more straight. I assume this change of body position is an invitation for me to sit down, so I take it the invitation and I accept it. "You know, here and there. Up and down. What you gonna do? How about you?" I take a big sip of my chardonnay and my tear ducts are already twinkling.

"Yeah, pretty good," she says. "No complaints, except that everything sucks and I feel like shit all the time!!!"

We both yuck it up at how hilarious that is, feeling like shit! Wow. A wonder, alright.

Go back and look at Joe on the bench for the New York Jets in the 60s. He wore fur coats in the cold and slumped his shoulders. Disaffected, post-war cool. My dad was a lonely boy with dysfunctional parents who saw the handsome, cool guy on TV protect himself by having bad posture. If you slouch like Joe everything rolls off your back.

I'm scrolling around, clicking into rooms, thinking that Papa was right: maybe my issue is semen retention. I'm feeling looser by the minute. I click into one room where the model's name is "sexyirene1988." I like Irene. She seems nice, talking to the people in her room but not selling. It's a nice casual environment that I can get into. She's experienced but not calloused. Eager but not performing. Oh yeah.

Sexyirene1988's phone rings and she picks it up. Immediately her face drops and this makes my face drop because right as she answered her phone I had dipped my first, little toe into being an active participant in the room. I had just sent a message that read: "come on my heart come on my heart come on my heart come on my heart come on my heart. Come sit with me on this loser bus and we can share the leisure end of a two liter," and now I was petrified that she would see this stupid message while distressed.

I can't hear what sexyirene1988 is hearing on her phone but I can tell it's not good. She starts laughing this laugh that signals tears are next. The laugh travels down her body until she's laughing with her belly and that's when the tears start. She sounds like a hollow, dry cough.

“Here’s to feeling good all the time!” I say and Adrienne and I cheers. Sitting silently for a few moments I notice that Adrienne has glitter on her face, and that the dim lights of the bar kind of make the glitter look like stars, which she would probably like to hear. And she has that silly cat eye make up on, but it doesn’t seem that silly right now, it actually seems special, like she knows who she is and she’s putting it all over her face. I can feel my act of crying turning on me. I’m meaning to wind up and perform crying, but instead I’m winding up to actually cry.

“You were really good friends with that guy Gus, right?”

I grimly nod.

“Is it true what people are saying about him? He got taken out to Blacksburg and shot in the face, what, like five times? They don’t even know who did it. I mean not that it was a total surprise, he lived a little rough. I did like him though. His poor family, oh my god. What do you think a person looks like after something like that? Could you even recognize him, you think?”

My liver, kidneys, and back all hurt when I sit and I assume it is because of my slouching and not because of the suicidal cocktail of chemicals I take through my mouth and my veins. I'm ascending to unassailable cool with each ache. Look at my slouching: against the wall in a Burger King. Outside the Salvation Army in the cold. Inside the downtown Asheville bus station to stay warm. Cool as concrete in the shade.

Every morning I wake up with sore shoulders and stiff back and I think, "I love you, Dad. Goddamnit, Joe. Why you gotta be so cool."

Sexyirene1988 is crying into her phone, saying “No. No. No. No. No. It doesn’t have to be like that! There’s another way. Don’t tell me that.”

As sexyirene1988 fields this seemingly traumatic phone call the chat lights up with encouragement miles beyond miserable: “bobs” “boobs” “milkers” “oinga boinga” “tiddies” “tits” “oink oink oink” are the jeers from the audience in the room with names like “fatcockrandy1996” “texasbigman” and “zero dark slayer”.

I zip up my pants and leave sexyirene1988’s room feeling much worse than before. My semen is doubly retained now and I wonder if my heartbreak is shaped more like a well or a cave.

I call Papa on the phone and relay the story to him. “Dude,” he says. “Don’t be so sensitive. Just go to the next room.”

And with that, I'm totally off. My throat seizes up and I forget how to breathe and I'm hiccuping and choking on my snot and sobbing down my entire face. I'm a salt deposit and all the deposits are coming out wet down my cheeks.

"Oh my, I'm sorry," Adrienne says. "Are you OK? I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm OK," I blubber out before taking a big, huge sip of my chardonnay. "Even when I set out to cry, it doesn't go like I plan," and at this I start to laugh and cry at the same time.

I'm on a strict car maintenance schedule. I drive my gray Corolla until it makes a horrible noise or won't turn on. Then I take it to the mechanic to get an oil change or replace the battery regardless of what the problem is. It's all fingers crossed after that.

Sitting at Mountain Tire I'm watching "Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives." I blew down a 30 before I got here so I'm feeling great. Guy is eating a deep-fried potato skin with seafood gumbo spooned in until it's almost spilling out. I'm allergic to seafood but I imagine the opiated drool dripping down my right lip is instead scalding seafood roux bringing me to sweet, sweet anaphylactic shock.

Kenny waddles to the counter and says, "Sam!"

He's holding the slip of information about my car like it's contagious.

"Alright, so," Kenny begins by inhaling deeply because this is a real motherfucker of a list.

"What do you do about heartbreak?" I interrupt him before he can begin.

He's taken back by my question, I can tell. The human behind the terse mechanic automaton appears if only for a second. "You got totally messed up struts." The robot Kenny is back.

"No, no, no," I slap my hand on the counter. "First, what do you do about heartbreak?"

Kenny is annoyed now.

"I don't know man, there's a lot of fish in the sea. Get another one," Kenny tsks his lips after that. He seems done and I don't want to push my luck.

"Kenny, my boy!" That's a good answer. "Let's put a new battery in there and change the oil. Rotate the tires if I can get a deal on it." I strut out of the mechanic on a cloud. I head straight for Burger King, the place where all clouds lead.

Life has been different without Moonpie around. We only saw each other at nights, but those nights were safe and restorative in some perverse way. Lying in bed at night, talking about our days and smoking cigarettes, it was like our own little NA meeting except drugs were encouraged.

Pulling up to my trailer, Moonpie is on the steps and she might as well be an apparition because I don't understand her presence at all.

"Hey there," I say.

"Hey, Sam," she says. "How's it goin'?"

"Good," I say.

"I've thought a lot about what you said to me. The love is a verb not a noun thing. I think you're right. And that doesn't mean I'm coming back to watch you implode."

"OK," I say.

I just wanted to show you something. Something I've done as a way of telling you how much you mean to me, and how much I appreciate who we are to each other." Moonpie is wearing a turtleneck and she pulls down the neck to show me a tattoo, about five inches long, of my first name: "Sam" in ugly script with a frilly underline and some stars dotting around the name. "You might not love me, but you need to know that I love you."

Grizzly demands I come to Darryl and his house so they can show me something. I walk in and they're sitting on the spider infested couch that used to sit in Patrick's basement. I didn't even know Darryl and Grizzly knew Patrick, but it makes sense. All the junkies live in a little sad world where the only people that will return their calls are the other sad junkies.

"You called me over here to show me Patrick's old spider infested couch?" I say, bored.

"What? Spiders? No, shut up man. Sit down," Grizzly says.

They have an old box television with a VCR hooked up to it at the head of the room. A rig is sitting on the chipped wooden end table they use as a living room table.

Darryl hops up and shoves a VCR in the player, flips on the TV. "Yo, watch this. You ever heard of "Bum Fights"? You used to buy 'em on cable."

“Is that a fucking tattoo?” I ask her. “Why would you do that? What are you doing?”

Moonpie starts laughing now. “I thought it was a good way for us to break up. So that there doesn’t have to be hard feelings. You can know that I love you.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I’m getting angrier by the moment. I’m wearing a t-shirt Moonpie bought me and I take it off and throw it at her. “Why would you do that?”

“Sam, where’s your sense of humor?” Moonpie looks actually incredulous. I’m incredulous at her incredulousness.

I walk inside and I’m toaster oven hot. Moonpie left a lot of clothes and Jim Beam bottles and cigarette packs at my house. I grab armfuls of the clothes and I start throwing them outside the trailer. I throw her underwear over a bush. I rip cigarette cellophane in half with my tongue and I snarl like a beast. I take her Jim Beam bottles and I’m throwing them at the side of my trailer. I take all my clothes off and I’m rolling around on the ground.

This is the big break I’ve been waiting for.

On the television is exactly what “Bum Fights” sounds like, unhoused people fighting, voyeuristically and nauseatingly filmed from grainy and pornographic angles.

Darryl and Grizzly *ooo* and *abb*. We shoot dope. The bums keep fighting. I look over at one point and Grizzly is nodding out, his eyes flickering, and then he says, “that big titted lady bum really is punching that guy,” and I’m out of my mind. Grizzly can’t stand, can hardly open his eyes, and yet he can see the violence and filth on the T.V. screen. Through it all, there is ugliness.

I feel like I can hardly see the T.V. The images are moving so quickly and are all so disgustingly familiar and nauseatingly distant at the same time. I feel totally outside myself, like what people say happens when you die: I’m disembodied from my body, a floating body above my body. I look down: a despicable sad creature, a bug on its back scuttling its leg, brandishing the air. This is the end, I think.

Hallelujah I'm free from all sense.

I go back inside and grab more Jim Beam bottles and I throw more Jim Beam bottles at the trailer. Moonpie is watching me self-destruct and I love it a little bit. When I'm done I pant and lay on the ground.

"Well, Sam. I have to say, I'm disappointed in your behavior. I thought you would have a better sense of humor about the whole situation."

And at that I can't stop laughing. Moonpie tries to talk to me a few times, but she's reduced to stuttering because I'm laughing so much. She walks away and I keep laughing.

I notice as she walks away that the heel of her white cowboy boot is coming unglued from the shoe. I'll want to fix that for her later.

I'm going to go to rehab, or something like it, as a joke. I wonder if something serious will come out of it. Every junkie has got to have at least one stint in rehab, maybe even two or three. I've been using for years and haven't gone to rehab once!

I'm thinking about careers these days. Currently, I have a job at a greeting card store because all the other employees are such old ladies that they can't tell how fucked up I am all the time. It is decidedly a job though, definitely not a "career." How lucky I am to be so free, to be so glamorously broke, to have such robust veins to shoot so many drugs into.

I'm sitting on my bed smoking and I call up a social worker I know:

We talk briefly. She explains to me she is tired. Me too, I say. She explains to me the daily grind of her life is exhausting and dehumanizing. Me too, I say. She wants something better. Me too, I say. Then she asks if I can meet her at a bar around the corner and sell her some blow. I can, I say.

My career crisis is solved before it even begin. I do a big line of the coke I'm about to sell the social worker. Casuals don't carry scales, she'll never know. Why not one more line for the road.

I go to Mackenzie's parent's house to feed the dogs with Greg. They are at an Alanis Morissette concert in Virginia and Mackenzie is on a bender at Myrtle Beach with someone named Ben, and so Greg took it upon himself to make sure the dogs had food.

At the bottom of the lot Mackenzie's parents had a shed where Stanley lived. Stanley said he was from Pumkintown and he spent most of his time staring at the water. He was nice and Mackenzie's parents gave him food and shelter because of their altruistic and liberal sensibilities.

I was waiting for Greg to finish with the dogs. I kicked some sand into the water and accidentally kicked a rock harder than I meant to. Sitting on the ground ripping my sock off to inspect my toe nail, Stanley came up beside me.

"Hey, Stanley," I said, looking at the blood beginning to pool under my fractured toenail.

"Mmmmmm," Stanley said as he looked out into the distance.

"Hey, Stanley," I said. "What do you think you should do about heartbreak?"

"Mmmmmmmm," he said. "Cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry until you can't cry anymore."

I'm cleaning out my apartment and learning how dirty I am. My clothes are preposterously filthy, not only with the usual dirt from wearing them, but with dust and spiderwebs that populate my room from years of not cleaning. There was a period where instead of doing laundry I would wait until my white t's were an off-cream color, and then I would go to WalMart and buy seven more hanes that I would wear until they, too, were an off-cream color.

Deciding to clean my closet, I pull out my hamper of dirty white t-shirts. Behind the hamper is a stash of Moonpie's Jim Beam bottles that she meant to throw away but forgot. I wish I had known they were there so I could have thrown them at the siding of my trailer.

Johnny says I should try to be more aspirational.

“What would that even look like?” I ask him.

“What do you even mean Bickman?” That’s what he always called me, Bickman, and if he wasn’t so present when I was in his presence I would think he didn’t know my name. But I know he does.

“Are you stupid? What should I aspire to?” I ask him with a smile this time.

“You think your life is that good, Bickman? No goals? You can’t think of a single goal?”

“No, I say,” and the stone bench I’m sitting on is getting colder as the sun sets. I’ve a scab on my palm from when I tripped and fell a few nights ago. I pick at it with my teeth.

“How about start small. Replace dope with suboxone. Read a book a month. You should read more books. I know you want to be dumb, but you’re not. So might as well start learning a little something occasionally.”

I stick my tongue out at Johnny. He's older than me and the way he sees through me makes me uncomfortable. I like the comfort of lies. Johnny feels like me from the future and so when I lie to him he laughs. His laugh sounds a little like a mean crow.

I light a cigarette to make it seem like I'm ignoring what he said. He continues to stare at me, not taking the bait, knowing I can't actually ignore him, not after he found me in the labyrinth of the South Slope sitting under a copper awning waiting for Grizzly or Daryl to call me back. He knows he's got me pinned. Where else am I going to go?

"I don't like Vonnegut, though," I say.

Johnny laughs like a mean crow again. "Dumbass, just because that's what I read when I was getting clean doesn't mean that's what you have to read. I've got a lot of Henry Miller, too. Your grumpy ass probably wants to read that." Johnny pats his hands on his knees. "Well, Bickman, I don't want to sit in this dilapidated, cold building anymore so I'm going to go home and feed Cap'n. Come by later if you want, or maybe I'll see you around."

I wave at Johnny and watch him walk out. Once he leaves I realize that while he was talking to me I felt outside of my body. Not quite so totally trapped in what urge I would have to satisfy next. The wind blows an empty bottle to skittering over the ground, gliding into the air for a moment, before falling back to the dust to spin uselessly.

I'm driving Greg to work at the fancy hotel where the tourists stay. The hotel has a big patio that overlooks the mountains. Fancy people have been coming here for about a hundred years. Once, a woman I was sleeping with worked on the patio, and she brought me there to drink a bottle of wine after the hotel had closed. That was the only other time I'd been up there.

Greg's feeling a lot of heartache too at the moment, so as consolation we share most of a handle of honey bourbon. Even our burps are sweet.

We are a little distracted, so I miss the turn to go up through the neighborhood that leads to the hotel. We dead end at the golf course. The gate to the course is open. I look at Greg and he snorts his approval. I creep through the gate and begin driving on the golf course.

The sand traps are very bouncy, and the grass is short and dry allowing me to drive very fast. I make sure to hit every flag I come across as a makeup for other checkpoints I've missed in my life. Greg throws up on his feet, he swears it has nothing to do with my driving. I throw up too, out of good measure. We pass a golfer and they look at us as if they've never seen a car drive on a golf course before.

We pull up to the employee entrance. It's early enough where it's still dark out. Gregor rolls out from passenger side.

"Samuel," he says. "That was a good ride. Keep the rubber side down."

Kathy sent me a text message that said we needed to talk. It's funny, as I walked around my trailer to knock on her door, I realized I'd never seen the inside of her house. She always came to me.

Kathy opens the door and her house smells like too many Glade candles.

"Hey Sam," she says.

"Hello, Ms. Kathy."

She steps out of her house so we're talking on her front stairs. "Would you like anything to drink?" she asks.

"No, I'm ok. Trying not to drink right now."

Kathy laughs. "Oh well, honey, I don't keep alcohol in the house! Didn't you know that? Haven't drank for decades!" Kathy laughs when it seems she should be offended. "Well, the reason I asked you to come by is about drinking actually. My son, Keith, I'm not sure you've ever met him, he's getting out of rehab and he needs a place to stay. As good of a tenant as you've been, I've got to give the room to my blood. So you have to leave by the end of the month. I'm sorry, Sam," and the way she looks at me I can tell she actually is a little sorry, which is very sweet.

Laying on my bed back in my trailer, I wonder if it would be kinder to Kathy to just leave now. She gave me that month, but I imagine she wants her son here as soon as possible. I hate saying goodbye anyways. Every day of the month would be a funeral, each wave a gasp, each meal she left at my doorstep a reminder.

Besides, what did I really have in this trailer I needed to keep? Moldy socks, trash, a few portraits from goodwill, and a couch missing a cushion. I grab two pairs of socks, "The House on Mango Street" by Sandra Cisneros, and a backpack.

As I leave the apartment for the last time, a screw falls out of the door hinge. Without that screw, the door can't close away. I push to shut the door, and it lightly swings back open, leaving about six inches of opening. I stand on the stoop and push the door closed, watch it breathe open. I push it closed again. It breathes open.

I try to repair the hinge to no effect. I put the screw in my shirt pocket, try to close the door one last time. As I turn around to leave, I hear the sigh of the door leaning open.

My friend Conrad said I could live with him. He is trying to live an ascetic life. He has no job and no internet. There is a relationship between those two things. He's rigged an encryption program through his phone that steals the internet credentials of his upstairs apartment neighbor. He uses their internet to learn Russian instead of finding a job.

He told me I could shoot dope in his house as long as he couldn't see any evidence of it. I immediately dream of leaving needles in his dirty wok that he permanently stores on the stove.

In the mornings, Conrad comes out of his in his navy blue onesie that is complete with a zipper on the backside so that he can shit without taking it off. Dead skin sticks to the crease of his face between his cheek and nose.

Conrad steals my books and CDs. I ride in his car and I find CDs of mine that I didn't give him. I see this as an act of war.

I shoot dope in the living room. I piss in his toilet. I have sex in his bed when he's not home.

We have an uneven truce as the days go on. He is watching his girlfriend's cat while she is out of town. Conrad is at the store, and I sit on the ratty ottoman face to face with the girlfriend's cat. I lick my lips. The cat yawns.

I get a text message from Conrad saying that he hasn't paid the power bill and that the lights will be shut off imminently. There's a harsh click, everything goes dark, the cat hops onto my shoulder and digs its claws in before it launches off of me.

I close my eyes until I see stars or Conrad comes home, whichever happens first.

I don't believe in fate, but some things seem fated. As I sit on the curb of the Burger King on Tunnel Road, I'm debating how to use my last \$3.75 in quarters. There is a spicy chicken sandwich and fries which would cost \$3.41. There's also a grocery across the street where I could steal a few cans of soup, I'd have to eat them out of the can though, not warmed up, and then I could spend the money I have at Burger King.

I'm navigating this proposition when I receive two text messages simultaneously, a fated moment that isn't quite fate.

One is from Moonpie: "You left a little ball of dope in my car. Hit me up if you want to come by and get it. I know I shouldn't give it back to you, but it seems like something you'd appreciate." An invitation to a familiar and toxic hole.

The other is from Johnny: "Spare room just freed up. Got someone supposed to be coming in two days from now. I'll give you the room instead if you come by. Want it?"

I have enough gas in my car to get to either of their houses, but not both.

I buy some french fries, get in my car, and start the engine.

Vita

Sam Bickford worked for many years as a store manager at retail stores in the Asheville Mall. Dissatisfied with low pay, long hours, and hopeless fluorescent lights, he decided to apply to graduate school. After his graduate education, he will accept a post-doctoral Fellowship at Louisiana State University. He plans to receive his Master's in Fine Arts in August 2022.