ABSTRACT

HAUNTINGS IN THE MIDWEST

by Bret A. Nye

This linked short story collection explores the concept of utilizing the genre of fiction to tell a true story. These nine stories all feature a single narrator-character, known simply as Nick, who interrogates his own past through the art of writing. The collection challenges the notions of conventional narrative tradition in terms of both its composition and its various styles of narration. In addition to their concern with fiction’s ability to capture greater truths, these stories also investigate the themes of memory, trauma, and the subjective nature of reality, as well as the social and societal ramifications of working class life and the physical and psychological consequences of labor. Finally, the collection examines the ways in which place and region work towards the construction of persona.
HAUNTINGS IN THE MIDWEST

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I remember the cold wind blowing over our heads, the gray taste of winter air, the waning sun and its bleak yellow shade. We marched across dead grass and dandelion, our dirty sneakers crunching frost underfoot and the sky darkening with our advance. I held a rifle in my hands, a brand new pellet gun my parents gave me for Christmas, and my younger brother unarmed and vigilant at my side, too young to have his own. We were just outside the bowed backyard fence peering into the tree line beyond our neighbors’ tomato garden, watching for movement. Any sign of life. We wanted to get closer to the trees, crossed the imaginary boundary between the neighbor’s yard and ours. Two kids clad in snow jackets and caps stalking through the low grass. Looking anywhere for an enemy.

I was so proud of that pellet gun. Slid my hand across the soft metal barrel, toyed with the plastic trigger that clicked when it was pulled. The stock was polished in some cheap auburn glaze and the sight was a little left of center, but to me the flimsy replica of the heavier rifles my father had in a cabinet in his bedroom was real enough. I strutted out the door into the backyard early that morning, careful not to let the dogs follow me. I set up a few paper bullseyes, held the gun up to the crook of my arm like I’d seen my father do and bent my eyes to the sights. I spent a half hour loading pellets and shooting to no real excitement. So finally I loaded and cocked and looked down the barrel again but this time swung the gun around, searching for a better target.

I saw the wooden cardinal my father had carved for my mother years ago, sitting tall on top of the fence. I hated the thing, its dead eyes too large and its beak incongruent. I might have at least appreciated the sweetness of his gesture if I’d ever seen that side of my father, the side that spent days in the garage carefully sanding the curves of a gift for his wife. Some combination of the drinking and the factory work made him mean, constantly braced against his life, and this was the only man I knew for a father. I don’t think that my mother much cared for the wooden cardinal either anymore, its only positive attribute being its misshapen, homemade “charm.” She was always quick to mention this charm with a smile and a hint of embarrassment whenever somebody asked her about it. I aimed the gun at the cardinal, imagining the stiff,
lifeless bird instead squirming, preparing its wings for flight. I primed the gun ten times too many, steadied the stock, and blew it into splinters.

Feeling at once slightly regretful and riotously alive, I rushed in to the house to find my younger brother Chris. Though Chris and I ended up living in that house until we were grown, in my mind my childhood home always looks as it did back then: scores of odd little knick-knacks displayed proudly on the wall shelf, the good dishes in their glass cabinet, everything polished, shining. Even with the sickness my mother couldn’t stand a dirty house, and when it became too difficult for her to clean it herself she’d put Chris and I to work, feather dusters in hand.

I tiptoed through the living room to try and not wake my mother, dozing in her usual position on the couch while talk shows played on the TV, and stealth-sprinted back to my brother’s room, jammed open the door. He was still sleeping when I bounded in and shook him out of his bed. After some initial dispute about the surprise awakening he agreed that blowing up the cardinal had indeed been awesome and was excited at the idea of hunting with me. We rushed back through the hall, visions of exploding targets and wooden birds in our heads, but we were too loud and woke my mother.

She was sitting on the edge of the couch in her yellow nightgown, hands planted at her sides to keep things from spinning. By this point her hair had almost completely gone, and what was left strung off her head like cobwebs.

Her voice dredged up from the bottom of a well, my mother croaked, “What are you boys up to?”

I was the designated speaker for my brother and me, the representative. Chris didn’t say much to anyone other than me until he was in his teens, always shy and mindful of the embarrassment kids bring on themselves when they try to speak. And he was afraid of her. I knew that, and so did my mother. He was still so young he didn’t remember her healthy. But her appearance had deteriorated past the realm of affliction and into something frightful. I was afraid to look at her, too, though I tried to hide it.

“What are you boys up to?”

“I told her.

“Nick…”

That’s all she ever needed to say, just my name, and I would spill.

“Shooting some targets with the pellet gun.”
She hated the gun, hated that my father thought it was the right gift for me. They argued over it when my father brought it home, but she lost that fight, and not just because she was too weak to argue, which she was, but because losing fights to my father—with my father—seemed a natural part of their marriage for as long as I could remember. She’d been no stranger to bruises in the past, even before the chemo made her skin weak. My father taught Chris and me about confrontation and conflict, which were about the only things he was ever good at, and my mother tried to turn us away from that kind of life until she no longer had the energy.

“Nick, you better be damned careful with that. And Chris isn’t allowed to shoot it. Got it?”

“Alright, Mom, I won’t let Chris mess with it.”

“Nick, goddamnit, I’m serious.”

“I know. So am I.”

Before she could say anything else, I pushed Chris out of the room and we rushed back outside to set up some new targets for Chris to practice with. Looking back now, the scene was dangerous as hell: Chris, only six years old at the time, barely able to support the gun in his arm, the barrel wavering too much with his slightness, pellets flying and landing everywhere except for the target. I only let him go on for a few shots before retaking the gun. Reckless as I was, I realized the possibility for catastrophe if he kept on.

“What else can we shoot at?” Chris piped up, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know.”

“Are there any more birds around?”

“Not wooden ones.”

Which got us thinking about real birds.

We quietly, carefully unlatched the back gate and walked through it. We had to be stealthy because we knew if Mom heard the gate open she’d come out and yell at us, dizzy or not. I’m sure we looked like we were up to trouble, and then off we went, trudging through the stale leaves and cold ground, on the first legitimate hunt of our lives.
It took some time for us to find any approachable game. Sure, there were plenty of robins and sparrows settling on power lines and soaring through the air overhead, but my untrained aim could do little to impede the creatures at such a distance. I fired a few rounds in frustration at them, none of the pellets reaching their targets. Eventually my brother, acting as scout, spotted a small, black bird perched on a low tree limb some thirty yards away.

I don’t know birds, so I can’t say what sort of bird it was exactly, just that its feathers were especially dark against the pale maize light of dusk. It stayed there almost unmoving for a few seconds, still and confident. I raised a finger to my lips, gesturing silence, and used my index and middle fingers to point at nearby cover. In a spasmed sweeping motion I waved my hand at another likely spot. None of these signals meant anything to us before, but somehow, maybe just imitating what we’d seen on TV, Chris knew exactly what to do. We awkwardly barrel-rolled once or twice on the hard ground, winter jackets absorbing the blows, and then crouched over to our designated bushes for cover.

I looked over at Chris and nodded, asking my scout for the time to shoot. He peered over the bush at the black bird, squinted his eyes as if judging the distance or calculating wind speed, and trained his eyes back on me, nodding with resolution.

I hesitated no further; I pumped the rifle at least twenty times and threw it up to the bend in my arm, stared unflinchingly down the barrel. We held our breaths as I focused my aim. We reached a threshold, blood pulsing, hands tight, guts clenched in anticipation. I pulled back on the trigger and had the overwhelming feeling that this was something I had done before, in a past life or in a past world, not as myself, not as a ten-year-old child, but as a man, and my movements seemed right, they felt as natural as breathing or feeling for the warmth of a fire. I watched the bird keel to the side, its wings outstretched, and I followed its short descent to the earth.

We walked the thirty yards between us and the bird, a once-green yard where my brother and I mimicked ninja television shows and climbed on swing sets to avoid imaginary lava. This yard where we threw baseballs and footballs and suffered bee stings and ran around chasing the dogs. That day the yard was all dirty snow, mud, shuffled footprints. The bird’s body lay disheveled in the flurry when we got to it, twisted uncharacteristically, blood splashed on its breast.
We watched the bird for a long time, watched the way it didn’t move and the way its beak hung limp. I could think of nothing appropriate to say as I stood there in the increasing dark. I thought it might make sense to slap my brother on the back and yell “Nice!” or “We did it!” but I wasn’t entirely sure what it was that we did. Whatever expectations we might have had about our victory were dashed as soon as we were confronted by the stillness of the wings, the false twitch of the body in its dying. The open eyes glazed and wooden, the blood hyper-red.

I looked over at my brother and watched his eyes widen. He bent down to the ground and reached for the bird but pulled back before touching it, wanting a little distance. I let him sit that way for a few seconds before touching his shoulder and telling him to follow me back to the house. As we walked I could tell that he wanted to look back over his shoulder at the bird, the impulse burning and demanding him to look back, but something in him told him that it would be easier not to and he never did.

We entered the garage and I sat the pellet gun cautiously back on the shelf. I wanted badly to cry, to rush in and grab my mother around her shrinking waist and hug her, with hospice waiting quietly in the near future, and then her passing, and then the blur of her face and my memories of her with it, but then I thought of my father, how he would react to my tears with harsh laughter and a slug on the arm, how he would tell me that the world was for the strong and the hard and that I needed to get used to the pain of it, and I would cower in fear under his glare, so I stifled the feeling. I pushed the button to take the garage door down and I watched the sun hang motionless behind it, disappearing.

Chris went in immediately for warmth, still so young then. I wondered how long he would remember what it felt like standing over that cold dark thing. A week? A year? I collected myself and joined him inside and in silence we tiptoed together past the living room, past my mother coughing in her sleep, wanting a little distance. We made it through the hall and sat down on our beds and started the process of forgetting.
CONTACT

At the end of the third quarter we were losing and our hearts started getting heavier, the illusion of the game’s ability to save us that much thinner with every point we were down. The air was particularly thick that night, rain slanting visually through every molecule, the grass slipping beneath us as we pumped our feet up and down. The surreal nature of the night-lit field got to me, into my veins and pumped through them like a serum, the powerful feeling of removal from the people yelling in the stands and the kids climbing around underneath. I was alone with my fellow linemen and we were fighting for something out there, at the same time angry and afraid, wondering before each hit whether this one will hurt us more than the last, never able to totally adapt to the relentless contact of offensive line play. Coach signaled the next play from the sideline, trap right, meaning I’d get to leave my usual foe alone and pedal to the right around the center’s flank, find the middle linebacker as he fills the gap our line will have left for him and go for his throat. In our high school league, in our high school town, middle linebackers didn’t seem to remember about traps and would flush right through the four-gap, thinking this was their reckoning, the time for their teenage wrath to shine and be felt in the backfield. By the time they’d realize our ruse I’d be closing in at his exposed right side. I bent to the line of scrimmage and thrust my knuckles into the wet dirt, leaning forward like a bull nosing the door of its cage.

I was thinking a lot about what my dad said the week before. He’d pulled me aside after a dinner of macaroni and cheese and lit a cigarette with the stove.

“How’s practice going?”

“Alright.”

“Alright’? Is that what you’ve got to say about it?”

“I guess.”

My father was once a star linebacker for the Roston Rebels, which was the last time he was really a star anything.

“You goin’ through the motions again out there?” he asked.
Of course not. I cared as much about football as anything, and worked my ass off at every practice to prove it. Anybody paying any attention at the games could see that, many had even noted it to me with jovial smiles and pats on the shoulder pads.

“No, Dad.”

“I don’t see much passion. You’ve got to work hard to stand out. If you want to be better than the average guy you’d better act like you give a shit about it. Else Coach’ll put your ass on the bench, and then where will you be?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know,” he repeated. Then he threw the macaroni pot and dishes into the sink, food scraps and all, and wheeled around and caught me by the scruff of my neck before I could get away and pulled me towards him.

“Where the fuck are you goin’?”

“I’m trying my hardest out there, Dad,” I said, already trying not to cry, because it would just enrage him more. “For fuck’s sake.”

His skin boiled and his grip tightened on the back of my neck.

“You’re just going through the goddamned motions, huh? That’s what you do best. And with no passion for the game, none at all.”

What a sight we must’ve been, wrestling around in the kitchen like that until my father lost focus, or got tired, or just got bored. He finally let me go and then just walked out of the room as if nothing had happened. A little bit later I went back to the sink and did the dishes.

Just as I started to drift off to sleep that night I heard him calling from the hallway outside my door, repeating himself like a tape loop. Like before, only now he was a few whiskey and cokes deep, and I guess something—who knows what?—had set him off again. He hit my door with his fist again and again, hard enough to splinter it, and I crept over silently to make sure it was locked. Later, his voice ran through my dreams.

My mind went blank when I heard the quarterback scream hut, and then we were moving and I kept crouched, dipping through the muck and the waving limbs until I hit that four-gap and I saw the linebacker’s numbers, flashing dumbly on his chest. I lurched forward into them with
every bit of force I had. There was an animal satisfaction in his feet leaving him, his shoulder pads absorbing the ground as I stood over top. Our running back made it into the end zone because of my block and my teammates knocked helmets with me to celebrate. I looked for my dad in the stands as I jogged to the sideline and picked him out easily in the small crowd, his sweatpants and ball cap and jagged grin, one foot raised on the bench seat and his arm crooked up and waving in approval. This was one of the few times I ever saw him smile, and I smiled back.

But it wasn’t enough. We lost the game, even with my career performance at left guard, and I drove home with the windows down blaring death metal to the breeze. Past the center of town proper, where the streetlights buzzed loudly against the silence created by the team’s loss, past the empty community college and the last stoplights and out into the bean fields surrounding Roston.

When I got home I walked in the door and found my dad reclined in his usual chair, watching highlights of the night’s area games on mute. As usual there were plates with leftover food on them scattered among the end tables in the living room, an ashtray at my dad’s side filled to the brim with butts. Dust covered everything, and I could barely recognize my mother’s old knick-knacks on the shelf on the wall, thick layers of crust and crud disguising them.

“Where’s Chris?” I asked him immediately.
“Out fuckin’ around with his friends, I guess.”
I took a seat on the couch at the other side of the room.
“Don’t you want the volume?” I asked.
He didn’t look at me, dropped the remote on the end table with a clatter. “You can have it if you want it.”

I stole glances at his eyes. They wavered a little every time I looked, recognizing my own eyes searching his but he refused to acknowledge my gaze.

“You played a hell of a game tonight, son,” he said. “Can’t help it if your coach’s a fuckin’ idiot.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”
“Sonofabitch has no idea what he’s doing out there. What was that, a draw on third and sixteen? Gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.”

“I know.”
I didn’t dislike my coach, or even think he was particularly incompetent. The opposing team was simply better that night, bigger, meaner. But sometimes it was fun to sit there with Dad and agree, to goad him on and watch him come to angry life, so long as it was directed at something besides me or my brother. During those times Chris and I could only shut ourselves in, in our rooms and in our heads, to batten it down.

“Someday I’d like to ask him about that dumbass Hail Mary in the third quarter, too.” His face remained emotionless as he ranted on. “Maybe I’ll do that. Head in to his office this week. See what the hell’s goin’ on in that head of his.”

My father stopped speaking for quite some time then, just looked around the room as if the next thing he should say would come from somewhere in the walls.

From somewhere I found the nerve to address him head-on. “What’s going on, Dad?”

He waited a few moments to answer, and even then he didn’t. “You know, Nick, you’ve always done well with Chris. Even when you were kids you never fought.” He took a swill of the whiskey and coke he’d poured himself. “Hell, I can remember beating the hell out of my little brothers. They’re probably still pissy about it.”

“Uncle Jim and Brad?”

“Oh yeah, we fucked each other up. Still do if we get too much of this stuff goin.’” He picked up his tumbler and swirled the heavy dark liquid around in demonstration. “That’s why we drink coke straight when we visit them, isn’t it?”

He tried to smile but it was more of a grimace, like stretching his face in happiness prodded some ulcer in his gut. “Yeah, seems like it,” I answered.

“It’s good that you take care of him.”

I figured it was, though I didn’t understand what he really meant at the time. I left him to his muted highlights and headed to my room for sleep. We didn’t say goodnight to each other anymore.

On the way I noticed the door to my brother’s room open and saw my father’s all-Ohio football plaque on the wall, a relic from his high school days as a linebacker. There were baseball medals hanging on tacks beside it, fuzzy photographs of my father in various uniforms in cracking frames. We didn’t have the space for a trophy room so he hung all of his stuff in Chris’s room, and it watched over him as he slept every night.
A few hours later I woke to the feeling of being examined by someone from a distance. I checked the door and saw the outline of my father in the frame, barely visible in the pitch. He said nothing, didn’t move for a while. I meant to ask him what the hell he was doing but before I could muster a word he slipped away down the hall.

I never saw him again.

I woke to an early alarm and went to Saturday morning film the next day in a rush. Coach yelled and stumbled on his words and threw empty water cups around the locker room. But I was never the recipient of any of his critique, considering my quality performance the night before, so I took that as a victory. Afterwards a few friends and I bought some weed downtown and took it back to someone’s house, smoked it in front of the TV. I focused on the video game we were playing together, happy for the light feeling the smoke and the flashing colors on the screen combined to give me.

When I returned home in the evening my grandma was sitting on the edge of the couch, her terrier in her lap and worry in her eyes. She told me that Dad left town last night and that he said he probably wasn’t coming back. I think she wanted to be there to tell us in person, to try to make up for my father’s inability to do so.

“Long time coming,” I said. I’d seen him looking at exhausted pictures of women he’d met online, plenty of times, and I’d guessed that he’d sent the same type of images to them. Probably scans of his old sports pictures. Sometimes I think of that glazed face of his on that last night I spent with him and I know that he wasn’t looking to try and love them, that he would only breathe air into their necks at night so that he’d have a place to stay until morning.

“I suppose so,” she said. I could hear in her voice that she was embarrassed for her son, his indiscretions and his failures.

“You gonna be okay, Grandma?” I asked. This felt like a formality, offering my condolence. In truth, I knew that she’d be alright, that she’d lived a hard Roston life like we all had and that it had made her tough.

“Oh, don’t you worry about me. What about you guys?” She typically referred to Chris and me as a pair. “Do you need anything?”
“We’ll be alright. I’ve been thinking about starting up at the factory after graduation anyway, so I guess that’s in the cards for sure now. We’ve still got a little of the money Mom left us, that’ll get us by until then.” And we did get by, more or less; Chris and I would stay in that house by ourselves from then on until I left Roston, Grandma stopping by a few times a week to drop off food and visit. But I was never able to connect with her, to see her as any sort of guardian, because she still suffered the loss of her son, the shame at his flight out of town in the night without giving notice at the tire factory where he’d worked for years and without telling his own sons that they had to cut it on their own from then on. It pained her to see us struggling there in that house, but I always insisted that I could take care of the both of us just fine and she never argued.

I borrowed a few bucks from her and took a look down in the basement where Chris was playing a football videogame on our old TV set.

“That’s pretty fucked up about Dad, huh,” I said. I wasn’t sure how else to approach it.
“Yeah, it’s kinda crazy.”
“I mean, we always knew he was an asshole, but this…”

Chris shifted up in his seat and yelled something at the game. I didn’t push the issue any further.

“You wanna come out and get some pizza with me and Driscoll?”

“Alright.”

I drove with Chris to the pizza joint my best friend Driscoll worked at where we could sneak light beer from the tap all night. It was nothing more than a sliver cut out of the wall of a dilapidated building in the center of town, drunks lining the bar and kids cajoling in the booth seats. Driscoll was holding a mug to his chest when we entered the dim interior and I sidled up and put my arms around him in a mocking gesture of affection. Chris sat down nervously beside me. I laughed, looked side to side, and then reached over the bar and filled a couple mugs, one for Chris and one for myself. Chris held his tight to his chest, nervous about being caught.

Driscoll finally looked up from his beer. “Can’t believe we lost this one.”

“I know.” I took a good long drink. “Probably takes us out of playoff contention.”

“Don’t say that, man. We won’t know where we stand until the morning.”

“But it isn’t gonna be good. Ferry View will jump us and take our spot in districts. They utterly destroyed Sennet last night.”
Chris piped in. “No, St. John’s will take your spot. They’ve got the tiebreaker on Ferry View.” He took a quick sip from his mug, trying to pretend his involuntary beer-grimace was actually a sneer. “You gotta win next week if you want any shot at that playoff spot.”

Chris read the league standings in the paper every Saturday morning. He watched every game from the stands, too skinny and “frail,” as I liked to joke, to spectate from the sidelines with his sophomore friends who played. But like me he valorized every hit, every collision and block, even if he couldn’t perform them. There was nothing more important in our lives.

Driscoll burped offensively. “Well there’s no fucking way we’re gonna beat Chesterville next Friday. We’re fucked if that’s the case.”

I nodded, sneakily refilled my mug. “This weekend has truly gone to shit.”

Eventually the kids bounded out the doors, and the drunks followed them leering. At midnight the owner snapped off the lights in the back and yelled to Driscoll to go ahead and lock up when he left. It was just the three of us then, so we no longer had to be cautious about the beer. An hour later and the place started to fray around the edges. We’d lamented all the failed plays, complained about how awful film had been that morning, cursed our shortcomings. We’d run out of things to tell each other.

Driscoll gave me a mischievous look. “You wanna hit a car?”

I smiled and threw on my jacket. We all went out and got in my car and I revved the engine obnoxiously before squealing out of there. I drove us to the west side of town where most of the street lights didn’t work and crept the car up behind a dark convenience store I knew, turned off the lights.

I looked back at Chris and told him, “Wait here.”

“What are you guys doing?” This was rhetorical, because he knew exactly what we were doing.

“Don’t worry about it.” I reached back and smacked him on the head. “You’re not gonna get in trouble if we get caught. You have nothing to do with this, right?”

“Bullshit.” Chris unlatched his seatbelt, opened the back door.

I grinned and launched out of the car. The three of us met at the trunk and Driscoll and I pulled out the two baseball bats I kept there, leaving Chris to stand guard over our crimes. Our eyes swimming with abandon we ran crouched behind the convenience store like shadows. We gripped the bats loose and casual, held them diagonally away from us and low to the ground so
that every once in a while they ticked audibly against the chipped gravel under our feet. There was a form to this, a posture. Careening around the side of the convenience store I noticed a lone four-door parked in the alley and glanced over to Driscoll. We advanced on the car and I raised my bat and brought it down through the back windshield, cleaving a violent gash through the center of the glass. We set to swinging and hammering until the glass was gone and then we worked on the peripherals, tearing out the wiper blades and ripping at the side mirrors and slamming in the door panels. It was a fever in us, lifting our hands to the work of dismantling. Once we decided the car had had enough we flew over to the next one, two streets up and jammed with parking tickets, and took our bats to it. Chris hid behind walls as we worked, terrified and excited, looking around for any sign of authority.

Glass shining kaleidoscopic across the pavement, sweat perched to fall from our eyebrows, we finally stepped back and stood over the wreck, appreciated our craftsmanship. I may have even been pressed to calling it artistry if I were so inclined to believe in art back then.

While we hovered at the beaten car we heard the whine of a squad car coming down the street towards us and Driscoll shot me a wide-eyed glare.

“C’mon dude, we need to get the fuck out of here!”

I shared his fear at first, the familiar tinge of knowing that you could be caught. But I was proud of what I had done that night, of that expression. I needed someone to witness my destruction.

“Go ahead, buddy, if you’re so damn scared.”

Driscoll looked at me as if I were insane and took off backpedaling down a nearby alley, away from the sound of the siren. I looked over at Chris, his eyes wide and his mouth open.

“Get the fuck out of here!” I yelled at him, shaking a little. He looked down the alley and then back at me. I took a few steps toward him, a menacing glare on my face, and he finally ran away to find Driscoll. I took up the bat again and moved on to the next car, whacked at it with my tired muscles. My head rang with the echo of metal colliding with metal and my stomach turned with the beer and it wasn’t until I had started on my fourth car that the police picked me up and brought me in.
My cold night in jail was the tangy sweet taste of metal in the air and old puke on the floor. A springy cot shot into the brick wall and the impossibility of sleep. But before that Chris found me there, walked over to the holding cell and pouted disappointment.

I went up to the bars and held them like I’d seen people do in movies. “Sorry about that.”

“Christ, Nick, what the hell’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t look at him. “Just feeling reckless, you know.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

I nodded graciously. “Yeah, yeah, that’s about right.”

Chris stepped away, looked around for a minute, checked his phone. I stuck my face between the metal and made agonized faces at him, pushing for a laugh. He was not amused.

“Nick, if you need bail or something you know we can’t afford…”

“Oh, shit, Chris. They’re not gonna do anything. They know how bad they need me to beat Chesterville next Friday.”

He shook his head in disbelief, understanding the gravity of my offense even if I didn’t at the time. “Nick, you beat up so many cars…”

I chuckled out loud, the phrasing hilarious to me. It had been a good many cars, I thought to say, but I kept my mouth shut.

“Nick, just what in the fuck am I supposed to tell Grandma when she comes around?”

“Just tell her I got drunk and beat some shit up. She’ll understand.”

“There’s more to it than that…”

“No it isn’t,” I snapped at him.

Chris came back up to the bars and glared at me with steel in his eyes. “You lost it, Nick. That was way over the top out there. You completely lost it tonight.”

As I stared back at him I felt the space grow a little between Chris and I, the bars separating us and working an isolation into our bones. The roles had never been reversed before, Chris having to look out for me, having to be the one to deliver the scolding.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

“You remember what Dad used to tell us about how him and his buddies celebrated their football victories on Friday nights? They’d smash mailboxes with a baseball bat, drive by at a million miles an hour and lean out the window and swing at them. He said they’d hit the same people’s boxes after they replaced them, some people’s about eight or ten different times. I guess
the cops didn’t give a shit about mailboxes back then, letting that sort of thing go. You remember how he’d laugh like a fucking maniac when he told us?”

Chris cocked his head to the side in curiosity, as if he were looking at a science project. So much older than his years. His hands clasped in concern, his face narrowed in ascetic thought, I felt I could finally see him then, that all the times before I’d only seen a smaller version of myself when I looked at him. It was terrifying, coming to know him through the impossible distance of the cell.

He spoke to me once more before he left. “Nick, what do you want me to do?”

My face wanted terribly to twist into a grimace, my eyes wanted to spill, but I tried like hell to work the expression into some kind of smile. “Try not to worry,” I told him.
Imagine him there, his first few weeks on the job toiling at the cusp of adulthood, reckless and quick with the tires as he handled them, and then his later years there, new bosses and new systems and old hatred, each day another notch in his skull. Under a film of smoke and a gray turret sky I see him walk steel-toe to pavement through the lot and into the mouth of the building. He passes through the turnstile and shines a badge to put a name to his face. Crosses into the plant proper and immediately a flood of sick-smelling heat, a whir of machinery. Metal terrorizing metal, sweaty bodies stationed among the clashing parts. He snakes through to the back of the plant, dodging forklifts as they whiz by. Supervisor carts trailing behind. The recognition of the same 12-hour-shift look on everyone’s face, on his face.

Here they make tires. From people standing in place applying strips of cured rubber to revolving spools to the molders and shapers of product to the treaders and finishers and finally to the warehouse, where he puts in his time. Hops on his forklift and blurs through the hulking stacks, rowed to oblivion, chasing down competitor’s tires locked away in the cage upstairs to take over to testing. The competitive edge, he’s dangling right along it. He drives up the beaten ramp and enters Warehouse 3. A profound silence greets him, emanating from musty rubber air and the near-dark created by dim overheads that haven’t been re-bulbed in twenty years. The constant worry that the tall, winding stacks of skids will come crashing down on him, or any of the other warehousemen creeping among the rows like shades. He flies through the black and reaches Warehouse 4, loose tires spilled across the floor, empty and forgotten skids bent all ways, whole cities of cobwebs at the ceiling. He drives through to the deepest part of the room, where it’s pitch black at six thirty in the morning and almost impossible to navigate without light. He parks his forklift and turns off the engine and waits for the rotten smell of exhaust to die.

Most people hate being up there in Warehouse 4. It’s hard to see and the place smells like must and rot. This is where all the broken tires go, the tires that were never made right to begin
with. Anything that can’t be sold. Most people hate being upstairs in Warehouse 4 because they swear they’ve seen ghosts roaming the stacks. They share tales of flashlights gone missing and cold air coming through in the middle of the summer when the rest of the factory is a hundred degrees. But he’s not afraid of phantoms; he likes the silence up there too much to worry. He settles into his seat and closes his eyes and thinks of her, working in his mind until he conjures the softness of her scent, the sense of her body close. He gets up and walks around the tall dark columns, keeping his eyes closed and feeling the tires for the path. He thinks of a time when his oldest was too young to remember him and he would whisper whiskey breath into his ear. How easy it had been once. His eyes pulse in thought until he feels a rush of cold from somewhere even deeper in the stacks and his gut tenses. He peers into the corners of the room, stalks the source of the cold air in the dark until his supervisor comes trundling by on his cart to tell him to get back on task.

He wonders about the cold for a while but the thought is forced out of his mind by the work. Twelve hours in and out of an airless truck trailer tossing twenty pound tires, knotted and piled and stuffed inside until the doors barely close. Each trailer holds hundreds, and he fills four to the brim. All the while a tinny radio bleating grunge music, the lightheaded smell of fresh rubber, the curses and dirty jokes of the other laborers. Poker with penny antes during break and the impossible slow crawl of a day.

He walks back through the turnstile and out to the thick air of the factory town at shift’s end, feeling like a captive loosed. When he gets home he still smells of the place, he’s still breathing it. He says nothing as he passes her on the living room couch, says nothing to the boys playing video games in the basement. Later the whole family watches the same television show in different rooms. At night his throat gets dry and he gets something for the thirst and starts to feel woozy and sad and suddenly he is a whir of machinery, metal terrorizing metal, sweat-soaked and screaming through the doorways of his house. They curl up in their familiar positions against him. He goes on like this for more than an hour, eventually collapses into his bed for a few moments of sleep before the alarm rings him awake.
He drives to the plant in still-dark. Comes up over the hill and sees the building’s façade, violently chugging smoke even in the shortest hours of the morning. The factory has no need for sleep, it only needs the breath of its workers. In the doors, back through the turnstile and back to the warehouse. The first chance he gets he goes up to the deepest part of Warehouse 4. He searches everywhere for the cold air, obsessed with it. He spreads his flashlight beam across the length of the room, jogs up and down the rows, first in patience and then in unbearable haste, impetuous, consumed by the day-old memory. His supervisor rolls through on his cart but he hides quietly among the stacks, careful not to give himself away. He has decided that no matter how long it takes he will stay there searching until he finds the cold feeling again.

Hours pass and the lights go all the way out, a blankness absolute. He realizes he’s been chewing the insides of his mouth. He can taste metal along the edges of his tongue and figures it must be blood. He no longer has any sense of where he is in the warehouse, gropes senselessly at the air in front of him to feel for the walls of tires. The only sound his heartbeat deafening on his eardrums. He is running out of ideas, running out of time. About to give up and return to his trailer and his tires he hears something, at last, a whisper, soft as a voice coming from a closed bottle.

He returns to his forklift and turns off the lights, abandons the flashlight and walks on into the dark. He continues in the direction of the voice, reaches the place where the tires should end and keeps going through. There is no threshold, no cement where the warehouse wall ought to stand. The voice louder every few steps he takes toward it. It’s getting colder the further he goes, his lips quivering, his fingers achy and numb. He thinks he can almost hear what the voice is saying. He reaches his hands out in front of him, no longer to try and feel his way but instead to find the source of the voice, to come upon this speaker by feel.

And soon a touch.

Contact.

It is so cold that he can barely feel anything, struggles to will his hands to move but manages to force them along the surface of this thing he’s found and realizes that it’s a body, a person, dressed in what seems to be a worn cloth workshirt. He pleads for this body to speak, to repeat what it has been whispering.

The body opens its mouth and proclaims, Son.
It says nothing more and only silence fills his ears. But he can smell the body, the department store musk, the Canadian whiskey, the twice-worn shirts. The desperation, the fear. He opens and shuts his eyes in disbelief and soon he can make out its silhouette, just perceptible as his eyes adjust to the dark. He is freezing, and the cold air billows all around him, and soon he’s crying, sobs heaving through as he embraces the image before him.

Imagine that this man is your father, the man who never learned to take care of you and your brother when your mother died, who drank your grandfather’s Canadian whiskey and wore your grandfather’s passed-down workshirts and spiraled downwards into hell along with him. Imagine your father haunts your every thought and memory, just as his father haunts the factory, just as his father haunts the town and so on forever. They are all the same, these fathers. They are yours. They are mine.

Imagine your father is a ghost, and if you can do that, understand you have no choice but to let him haunt you.
BLACK FRIDAY

Even in the icy wind you could feel our heat, soft at the edges of our breath, warm and frenzied as we watched our cell phone clocks tick closer to the hour. Our bodies shifting and heaving, only partly in our control. Led by the agitation of an approaching excitement we didn’t dare put words to. We clicked and chawed at the cold, teeth glistening, jowls quivering. Two days of stiffness being worked out with the stretching of limbs and the stomping of feet on the sidewalk; the taking down of floppy tents and the rolling up of quilts. Wild eyes and shaky hands. The nervous look of inmates eyeballing each other in the yard. All the tension and turmoil of two days sitting in the cold November air watching people drive by and wondering whether or not we’ll be one of the chosen, one of the ten. Two days of walking in place, outside these doors, under the always-glowing neon of the store sign. The warped vigil beat our psyches down to the point that we considered taking each other down. We were getting used to the idea of walking over each other in the street should someone trip and fall. We became susceptible to every hint of blood under the skin, the shade of a thin blue vein glimpsed on somebody’s arm, the red rush in a freezing face. We started to want it.

Either that, or a sale-priced TV.

It didn’t start out like that, the dread and the malice. When we all showed up to stand outside our local electronics store, Halogen Dreams, two before Thanksgiving, we made quick friends. After all, we had similar interests, namely the 54-inch plasma whose price would be cut in half once Black Friday rolled in.

We were a veritable commune of like-minded freaks and creeps, a Hunter Thompson acid tableau set in Midwestern hell. All butch haircuts. Ropy, distinguished biceps crafted from long hours lifting car parts paired with fast-food bellies. You’ve never seen that many off-color windbreakers in one place; in fact, you didn’t know this many existed. You thought air-brushed T-shirts went out in the late ‘90s, well, not here they hadn’t. And everything made to look like it was produced from scraps of the American flag, like Lee Greenwood showed up and ejaculated...
on everyone. I called it Toby-chic, after the illustrious army recruiter/country singer. But not just the bumpkin crowd, not just the we-fuck-with-tractors-because-that’s-what-we-do crowd, also the hellraisers, the twenty-somethings with their faces covered in stainless steel and their jeans torn to shreds, thrash metal bands from before their time tattooed on their arms and shirts because music was way more real back then, man, and Metallica didn’t always used to make music videos. Cigarettes eternally dangling from their lips, check. Unyielding and unearned sense of self-importance, check. And the real lurkers, the hunchbacked gremlins of neon alleyways and the benches on Main Street, the old guys who looked like meth-awareness posters and actually weren’t that old, in truth.

This shared weirdness gave us a familiarity we otherwise wouldn’t have achieved in weeks of late-night joint-passing, let alone the two days of chittered words over instant soup and flask liquor we’d had together. It was sort of beautiful to watch, actually, in a pathetic way. With nothing more than lean-tos and homemade blankets to keep ourselves warm, it became necessary to make friends in order to pass the cold, cold time. If at least for someone to stand beside and poach body heat from. This is the way it always worked around Black Friday, year in and year out. It never took too long for the boxes of crackers to make their way around the separate groups, and within an hour of being there each person in the whole mass of bystanders knew who was a first-time bargain hunter, who was a pro, and whether there were any longtime-coupon-cutter, first time line-campers about.

Once we were in line we had nothing to do but wait and entertain each other with our pasts. I always had the feeling that I was standing at the frontier of something; maybe our cultural history, our long lost tendency to collect as a group and care about something in person. Or maybe it was just the end, that tidal, all-reaching eagle wing of capitalism swooping down to upturn the nest and ruin whatever sense of a real world we had left in us, filling the holes that remained with simulation and high-definition.

Though I’d spent the last two Black Fridays with my friends Jeff and Ron, my brothers in shopping-bagged arms, my fellow sultans of the sale, that particular year they’d both had to cancel at the last minute, Ron with a debilitating toothache, Jeff spending Thanksgiving with a new girlfriend. But it was no matter, for I’d met a true enigma of the sidewalk, a master shopper, a Houdini of the Half-Price.

He called himself The Captain.
For real.

I found him standing right in front of me in line, clothed in stylish black cowboy boots, stirrups and all, perfectly-fitting blue jeans, and a pristine red cotton shirt, impeccably-starched. A ten-gallon hat pressed tightly to his skull. Hands linked together at his waist, he was staring intently at the fluorescent sign above us all on the store wall, stiff as a statue. He was old enough to have the patience for this sort of hobby but still young enough to be anxious about it. As soon as I saw him I knew, after all these years, it might finally get weird enough.

“What are you buying?” I asked him, hesitant not to shock him out of his reverie.

It took him a few seconds to respond. “The same thing we’re all buyin.’”

Obviously he was referring to the TV. The deal of the century, maybe the millennium. A great brand, fifty-four inches, plasma screen, lifelike picture quality: for half the price. The price was the key component for me, considering my meager factory salary. My brother Chris and I had nearly fallen out of our chairs when we first saw the newspaper ad. And even more important, even more gloriously tragic: there were only ten in stock at each store! How wonderfully dramatic! People would talk of this sale in our little town of Roston for years, I thought. Lifetimes. People might name their children after those who get one of the ten TVs.

“I see, I see. You think you’re gonna get one?” I asked The Captain.

“I’ll get one.”

“Seem pretty confident.”

“Yep.”

He didn’t seem to be interested in conversing, but he didn’t object to my standing beside him and admiring the store sign along with him, so I continued doing that for a while. After about ten minutes of silence he finally spoke without provocation.

“What are you here for, son?” I can’t be more than ten years younger than him, no matter his true age, yet he insists on the diminutive.

“Not really sure. Nothing in particular.” I was trying to keep my cool, not give up that I was going to be in the hunt for that TV along with him. “Everything, I guess. Lots of great sales in there.”

“Always.” I loved the way he let that one word float on its own, let it ferment in the air.

After another few minutes of exchanging cryptic pleasantries with each other The Captain finally decided to open up a bit and tell me about himself. He never knew his parents,
reason being that both of them had died in a car accident when he was in the womb. He’d been miraculously salvaged from his mother’s dying body and sent to live with his grandparents, who had taken very good care of him until he was sixteen and shipped to military school.

“A few years there and where else would I go? Of course I joined the damn army. Prepared me to fight in the war.”

“Oh, which war?” He seemed too young and spritely for Vietnam, but too old for Iraq, either invasion.

“Which war? The Great War!”

“I don’t follow.”

“Then you’ll never follow. It’s too late for you.”

“What do you mean?”

He gestured his arms wildly, waving them around like a composer leading a symphony to some bone-crushing crescendo. “I’m talking about the Great War, boy. Between you and me. Between me and them. Between me and me.”

I kept listening just to avoid being stabbed or something. He was certifiable, a dangerous strangeness in his words that I hadn’t noticed before.

“The thing is, you’re different. I can tell. You’re smarter than the average honey bear. You’re here to learn just as much as you’re here to buy.” He produced a brown-bagged-bottle of something righteous and stared me in the eye. “What you ought to know is that there ain’t much difference between the two.”

He took a long guzzle and passed the bottle over to me. I responded, “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Son, I’ve been at this for years. Sit you down and listen to what I can tell ye.”

I half-sat against a trash can for cigarette butts and waited for him to continue. I would have weaseled my way back to my car but I didn’t want to give up my place in line, so I stayed and listened.

“Son, I’ve been all across this green, green land and I’ve seen every price drop there is to see. I’ve read every sandwich board, haggled with the kings of the yard sale, and bedded the queens of the flea market, just to get a better price. Looking for that ultimate price. The omega. The end of the road.” He was moving now, dancing around in impish circles.
I was holding my car keys through my fingers like a makeshift pair of spiked knuckles, reassuring myself over and over that one good punch could probably incapacitate him if I needed it to.

“And I’ve found it, sonny boy. Here. Now. This is it: the deal of the century!” He raised his arms to his sides at this last proclamation, inviting all of heaven and hell to strike him down if this was not so.

He stood like this for the better part of a full minute. Not able to look away, I kept staring at him and eventually he lowered his eyes to mine. I held my gaze there, suddenly not wanting to lose any of his intensity, wanting to hold on to his energy however frightened and quivering I was. I’d never seen such passion, such gravitas. Fire incarnate. Insanity, to be sure, but god such conviction, such emotion. For me, watching him was watching tears force themselves out of the eyes of a right-wing pundit expounding upon Roe v. Wade on a news critique show, emotion so overly real that I couldn’t even handle it.

Slowly he left his posture and crumpled into the still, ageless man he had been just a few moments ago, quiet and thinking of his mysteries, like an actor leaving the stage. I sensed something powerful emanating from him and I had the unyielding urge to stay near it, as close as I could get without it being strange. He gave me beef jerky and slugs from his flask throughout the night and I entertained him with made up stories about my life, which would have been much too boring to tell without the aid of fiction.

And the next evening there we were, on the cusp of Black Friday, a crowd of lunatics standing noisily in line shuffling aimlessly in the cold night as the seconds begin to tick away from the last minute of our wait. On our tiptoes we could see employees walking up to the double doors to unlock them. People were slobbering all over themselves, down their collars onto their shirts. Bloodshot eyes became hard and clear, bodies tensed up. Ten seconds away. The moon burning bright as a torch overhead, though not as bright as the store’s neon sign, never possibly that bright. The neat and tidy line we’d been keeping for the past two days became a squirming mass of arms and heads, clawing at the double doors or other people, any previous alliance now forfeit as we counted that time down. Five seconds. I jumped up and down in place.
to try and spot The Captain, but must have blended in by then, having already found his perfect route to the stack of TVs at the epicenter of the store. Three seconds. Oh god, I could feel it already, the tide pushing me towards the entrance and the yelling had started. Everyone staring ahead unblinking. An employee took out his key and stuck it into the lock on the double doors and everything was dead quiet for a moment, a holding of breaths, a stilling of heartbeats. In that almost-imperceptible flash of time between the key turning and the door opening, I thought about the factory, how every day yielded the same result, how mind-numbingly similar each hour was to the next. I wondered how long I could keep that sort of life going, if I could actually do it forever as most of the other people in Roston seemed to.

Then the door opened.

A whoosh of people fell right through the empty space, pushed up against the glass by the crowd. They were trampled mercilessly by the rows behind them and I could hear their cries of agony as they were stepped on and crushed, their loss of the TV so much more painful than any stomping foot. I fought through the surging crowd and made my way into the store proper. The brightness of being indoors blinded me for a moment and I was knocked to the floor by a burly man in a purple windsuit carrying a DVD player/VCR combo. I remember being surprised that they still made those. I scrambled loosely to my knees and pulled myself in behind the corner of an aisle of books. I was safe there, nobody in this aisle. I got to my feet and surveyed the tenacity of the scene. I didn’t see the TVs anywhere behind the wall of slamming bodies, and decided that they were probably already gone.

Except for one. There was always one left, tucked somewhere dark in the storage room so that some clever employee could keep it for themselves. I knew the game. I started scanning for shifty-looking workers at the registers, creeping stock boys slinking through the aisles. And then I saw him, a dark-haired kid snaking his way through the crowd to the back of the store, his eyes darting back and forth in his skull. I lunged out into the throng and followed him.

There were laptop computers smashed all along the ground, video game discs broken everywhere reflecting light in all directions. A tremendous and constant roar from the people moving through the ever-growing mass of debris underneath them. A man wearing a two-can beer helmet was perched on an overturned shelving unit throwing Blu-Ray players, launching them at the heads of anyone who came near him. I watched a teenage boy run the length of the store holding a coffee maker only to be clotheslined at the door by a soccer mom with a mean set
of shoulder pads. Fires started going up around the store, made with ripped cardboard boxes, discarded ad flyers, and lighter flame. Most of the employees stood with their backs held closely to the outer walls, like people shimmying along the ledge of a cliff. The sneaky dark-haired kid was still heading for the back, so I tried to catch up.

The floor was littered with bodies, some writhing around in injury, some passed out from the excitement. Some of the faster and more agile customers managed to weave through the mess and crash through the glass double-doors in the front. After some of the customers made their way out of the store with their loot the mass of people began to thin and the shelves started to empty. I lost the dark-haired kid for a second and picked my way to a higher vantage point, on top of two shelves of computer games emptied and stacked lengthwise. After a few seconds I spotted the shifty kid in the blur, sidling through a hole in the back wall that had once been a proper door. I slammed my way through the moving crowd and squeezed through the hole after him.

When I found the kid he was lying unconscious at the feet of The Captain, who had probably been hiding out in there since the mayhem began. Of course The Captain had known about the final hidden TV as well. I found them just as he was spreading his arms wide and clamping his mitts down onto the sides of the TV. Triumphanty, he was able to raise it, higher and higher, until he had resting horizontally on his head like a tribal woman balancing a basket of goods. He pronounced something to the TV, something in Latin it sounded like, but then, in the thundering space of a single second, the weight of the TV became too much for him and his arms gave out with a terrifying thwack of snapping bone. The full force of the TV lay on top of him, the air in his lungs escaping in a violent whoosh.

I snuck over to the horrible scene and knelt down to the fallen captain under his prize. I shifted the TV upright, wiped it off, gave it a once over. It was still intact, and it looked like it was going to be fine.

I felt a tug of sadness at The Captain’s demise, lying there alone on the floor, beaten, broken, still and always wanting. But that feeling passed as soon as I allowed myself a closer look at the trophy at my fingertips. I imagined the unmatched picture quality, the crystal-clear sound. I saw myself in the glare of the blank screen and for the first time in years I felt alive, brilliantly and unbearably alive.
HOW I LEARNED TO READ

*Little Golden Books*
They used to litter the closets of my childhood home. Scratchy drawings on every page, a few words planted underneath for parents to read to their children. Later, sentences to ponder, making me wonder how I might have understood this phrase or that as a kid, the morals and the virtues. And what it must have been to be read to. What it must have been to sit in the cradle of my mother’s free arm as she held the book open in the other, her low voice reverberating against my side.

*Sports Illustrated for Kids*
Mostly for the pictures. Cartoon athletes. Flimsy cardboard trading cards that Chris and I kept in plastic sleeves like diamonds. Things to devote a youth to.

*Sports Illustrated* (for adults, or teenagers)
Still a lot of pictures, but words I remember, too. Athletes selling aftershave. Articles detailing how those athletes used that aftershave money. Articles selling idols, idols that I bought with belief. The bible of my young manhood, Chris and I in the side yard hitting baseballs to each other, hoping all afternoon for the opportunity to make a diving catch. Baseballs ending up in the neighbor’s pond, in the trees.

*Where the Red Fern Grows*
Made me cry in the middle of class, in the 7th grade. First sense of the way a book can affect, though I didn’t think about this at the time. At the time, I was embarrassed as hell and in danger of becoming the class wimp with the other kids snickering at me. Some kid went to great lengths at lunch to tease me about it, so I gave him a surprise right hook,
like Dad taught me. Everyone laughed and seemed to forget that I’d cried earlier. But I got mine as well afterwards, two detentions and a generous helping of Dad’s belt.

_The Lottery Rose_

Couldn’t get into this one. A boy obsessed with roses? _Really?_

_The Outsiders_

Who didn’t understand the pressures eating away at Ponyboy, in some way or another? Caught between the sins of his brothers and the straight and narrow. Big inspiration to my early, unknowing efforts at fiction, in fulfillment of creative projects for middle school English classes. All of these stories were told by gang members, and in each one somebody died tragically at the end.

_Guitar World_

Tablature in the back. Impossible riffs in the front. Weeks spent with the magazine open on my music stand, bending my wrists to match the notes on those pages. Guitar gods throughout. Another good career option, I figured, if the sports thing didn’t pan out.

The Three _Hustler_ Magazines My Father “Hid” Under His Mattress

Again, mostly for the pictures.

The “Cooking” Instructions on Microwaveable Dinner Packages

The typical way Chris and I ate in the evenings once it was the two of us. I’ve probably read more of these than any other sort of text.

High School Literature Textbooks

Abridged versions of the classics, surface discussions of plot and character in class. A few complete stories, “To Build a Fire,” that sort of thing. Some examples:

“The Destructors” – Didn’t understand it, really. But I liked the destruction of the house, that was pretty cool.

“The Minister’s Black Veil” – Could’ve done without Hawthorne’s obsessively
respectable prose, but otherwise, cool story.

“The Black Cat” – I knew that cat meant something, like some kind of literary symbol. Always liked Poe’s crazy narrators.

*Romeo and Juliet* – Ugh.

*Moby-Dick* – Well, like, the first thirty pages of it that were included in our textbook. I don’t think that counts.

*The Roston Gazette* (the docket)

Looking for friends’ names on Saturday mornings. Sometimes my own.

*Auto Trader*

Because it was free, and because I had a friend who was obsessed with cars. His dad would take us out for country rides in his battered GTO, run it up to a hundred and watch us cower in excited anxiety and laugh out loud. I didn’t know anything about cars but I liked the way they looked, as most boys do, the contour of their paneling and the multitude of hood shapes and raised spoilers in the back. Chris got the car bug, too, after a few joyrides in my dad’s pickup. Maybe this was Chris’ first inclination towards the building of tires, looking out the window and watching Dad’s near-flats bump over stones and send him into the air with a jolt. Tire-building and warehousing would be the sort of work the factory offered us both later, the sort of work Chris would come to accept as his own.

*The Stranger*, or *The Outsider*, or *L’Etranger*, or Whatever

Read this because it was on a list of optional titles for an upcoming book report project for Advanced Lit. in junior year. And it was short. Didn’t love it, didn’t hate it. Really liked the final line, even though my knowledge of existentialism and absurdity wouldn’t come for another four years. Actually, I suspect I knew as much back then as I do now. Or maybe I’ve never understood it.
College Recruitment Pamphlets
People paid to smile and oversaturated images of tall, imposing brick buildings one after another, all of them named after millionaires. Photographs of trees taken from weird, unconventional angles to make it look arty. Words like “picturesque,” “ranked,” “opportunity,” “competitive.” Spent three days with these and junked them.

*The Roston Gazette* (classifieds)
Every morning, searching for a job. Maybe lawnmowing, or roofing. Hell, retail work. Anything but the tire factory, anything but the tire factory.

The Monthly Union Newsletter
The most depressing reading there is.

*1984* and *Brave New World*
Read these together, as most people probably do. Really spoke to my inner anarchist, especially as I was tossing tires all day every day at the time. Gave up drinking and ibuprofen for a week in a misinformed boycott of anything I found to be soma-esque. Chris followed suit, though he hadn’t actually read the books. We even tried to go vegetarian for a few days. Later I realized how tough it would be to give all that up and started crunching the little brown pills by the handful again. Chris and I celebrated the end of the meat strike with as many McDonald’s cheeseburgers as we could fit in our stomachs.

Chris’ High School English Essays
As if he needed someone to proof them, and someone less capable than he, at that. I used to think he had me read through them just to show off his vocabulary, which had always dwarfed mine. But now I realize that most of the topics he wrote about were the very same topics I’d written about two years earlier, so he must have been looking for the easy way out. He was letting me speak for him, as he did when we were kids.
The Roston Gazette (all of it)

I hated poker, the sly jabs and the unlucky hands day after day, and that’s all the guys ever did in the break room. So sometimes I’d slip into a corner bench with the paper, which Chucky always brought in for everyone to read as long as he got to pick through it first. At that time in my life I could give a fuck about new lanes going in on the highway or upheaval in countries across the Atlantic. I had one direction to go, and that was straight forward, and I tried my damndest not to blink too much. But there was nothing else to do but scan every inch of the paper on break, to make time move faster, so that’s what I did.

Slaughterhouse-Five

This was an important one. This “failure,” as Vonnegut referred to it. This is the way it is for many amateur writers, I think, to be majorly affected by Vonnegut, his zaniness and his self-effacement, but it doesn’t matter to me, I still choose to remember this one as my first inspiration to try to make art. A broken story about a pilgrim trying to figure out his life and how it went so wrong, only to realize that his life was always wrong, in all times and on all planets, and he may as well accept that and get on with living it. That a life such as his is too terrible to be real. I’d never fought in a war or been taken as a prisoner of a war I was fighting in but I understood Billy Pilgrim’s horror and sadness and Vonnegut’s urge to write himself as a character in a work of fiction. To pay absolutely no attention to the stated boundaries people seemed to accept between fiction and real life. And the novel’s lovely parts, the fracture of it, the way form symbolizes content. The romanticism of using words to fight a war, to fight all wars. Vonnegut’s great humanism, his hatred for bad ideas but never for his enemies. The primacy of art and life as the same thing, how that fuels the reader’s lust for catharsis. I closed the final page and enrolled at State the following spring, government loan in hand, knowing that my immediate goal in life was to find other books like it. And with the help of my professors and a schedule full of literature classes I found them, books that shook my bones as hard as Vonnegut’s had.
Tender is the Night

Ah, Fitzgerald. Every word the perfect word, every line a canto unto its own. The real masterpiece, rich boy Gatsby and his fatalism be damned. This is the one I read over and over with headphones on while my roommate talked to his girlfriend on the phone. The book that got me putting stories down on paper, even if those old stories of mine mostly just read like a naïve, drunken, uninspired version of Fitzgerald himself.

White Noise

DeLillo got under my skin right away, with his odd structure, his sense of the fantastic, his curious plotting. For the longest time his ideas fascinated me and I became a bit of a postmodernist, to the point that I’d given up TV, telling everyone that “life was already hyperreal enough for me.” I’d laugh at the reality shows that were getting popular, to the extreme annoyance of my friends. After a while I stopped being such an asshole and moved on from the social shackles of the postmodern movement, though DeLillo stuck with me. Just recently I wrote a story called “Black Friday” about a time when I attended an after-Thanksgiving sale at a local electronics store, embellishing the piece with fictional mayhem, violence, and consumer satire throughout. Sounds like a DeLillo plot if I’ve ever heard one.

The Grapes of Wrath

A literary classic written in my father’s father’s tongue, and a story I had lived, in a modern sort of way. A story I personally understood, even though my people’s struggle had taken place over the oil-slick cement of a tire factory rather than the empty Dust Bowl fields of the Great Plains. Steinbeck helped put the working class into my prose, helped me realize how important it would be to me to write with that conscience. I didn’t see myself as a muckraker but I started putting my own past into my fiction, my language and Chris’ language and my father’s language.

The Roston Gazette (all of it, again)

Any time I came home I scanned the paper for interesting stories, characters I could mine from them, as well as to find out about the important stuff of the world, the sort of thing
that I felt should inform all good fiction. Chris laughed hysterically when I explained to him why I found the newspaper so necessary.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
Dedalus’ young, exhaustive Catholic guilt aside, this became my manual for how to think. How to read. How to tell my story, and to consider what it might mean to others. I kept my used, trade paperback edition of this book in my car as I drove, thinking that if I were to ever crash and approach the end of my life, I could have this book there to read from to make it all worth it in the end, the writing life I’d chosen. I’ve always tended towards the romantic, as I’m sure you’re finding out.

College Recruitment Pamphlets
One day I found Chris leafing through a handful of them and I started in with my college speech, trying to impress on him how imperative it was to go nowadays, how the government would gladly saddle poor people like us with mounds of debt so that we could attend. I tried to approach him on his level, knowing that he was pretty dead-set on working at the factory already, had only looked at the pamphlets out of respect for me. I remember him smiling at me as he tossed the brochures in the trash. A few days later he turned in his application to the tire factory, a mere formality considering the rubber had always run through his blood, as it had mine.

Moby-Dick (the whole thing this time)
Returned to this in an American survey class, and really got into it. Chewed through its multitudes in a week, accepting the pages upon pages of whaling details as Melville’s obsession bleeding through and cherished these typically-decried sections for this very reason. I understood obsession, need, fever. I saw myself in Ahab, in certain ways. As we all do at some point, I think. I didn’t know what I was searching for then, but the pull was there all the same, and once it became clear that the nagging feeling was simply the urge to write, the real mature, violent hunger for it that I hadn’t truly understood before, every book became sacred.
Tequila running down their chins they careened shoulder to shoulder against the bar, colored lights whirling awkwardly around them as they danced and seized in strobed anxiety. Eighties music shouted from speakers nobody could see and lyrics spilled from everyone’s lips. I was trying to corral them but there were four of them and one of me, and they were just too drunk. I’d been cradling the same whiskey and coke for an hour and my sobriety stuck out violently against them. They pounded their fists on the countertop every time the Cavs made a bucket on the mini-TV over the bar, their rubber advocacy bracelets jangling. I noticed the bartender scanning the room for a bouncer as she half-poured their next shots. The tall one noticed that she was short-changing them and yelled out over the din.

“…the fuck is that?!”

I saw some wandering eyes and grabbed Chris by the shoulder. “We need to get the fuck out of here,” I said. “Round up these three assholes and let’s go.”

He slapped each of them on the back, his band of drinking buddies, and I led the way into the crowd of endless cuffs and collars. I searched for openings we could sneak through, the rare spaces between the gyrating and those waiting in line impatiently for the next drink. But inevitably, I knew, this would end badly. The bar we were drinking in, Fritz’s, was in the middle of Roston and drew a well-dressed working class crowd; it was terribly cold outside, the full brunt of January in Ohio; there was a special on doubles that night. This meant too much of everything ugly about this sort of scene.

Sure enough the tall one fell over some guy’s feet near the door and pulled accidentally at his shirtsleeve on the way down to the ground. Soon we were outside on the sidewalk in the freezing streetlight standing across from Shirtsleeve and his three bros. “…the fuck is that?!” he yelled at us. Then, for some time after that, it was mostly obscenities going back and forth. Shirtsleeve and his crew looked like they fought their way out of a Field & Stream into a GQ: a biting contrast of full beards and black dress shoes, the same stylishly-ripped pair of jeans on
each of them. At least one of them must have been called ‘Smitty.’ Dirt bike insignia across their caps, every shirt button done up. In fairness, I have to mention that Chris and his three buddies and I all looked pretty much the same.

“…fucking ripped my shirt…”
“…dumb fucking shirt…”
“…fuck you…”
“…fuck you…”

More of this. Finally I worked my way in, saying, “Hey guys, let’s settle this down. This is stupid.”

Shirtsleeve’s eyes went wide, red and white and he took a step towards me. In retrospect I think he may have only heard me say “…let’s settle this…” because he swung his fist into my gut and I fell on my ass like a cut log. It was a haze above me but I could make out the two lines of men scrumming and moshing against each other, a fury of weaponed hands. Pale yellow streetlight flitted in and out of their twining limbs and the rest was dark, my head woozy with recoil from Shirtsleeve’s jab. My mind went back to the first punch I ever took, a hairy, ringed fist colliding with soft skull, a sharp burst of light and then black, the smell of somebody’s shit bringing me back to that world.

Luckily my stomach was empty or else I would have been puking. I rolled around on my back for a few more seconds and then finally worked my way to my feet. The tall one and the other drinking buddies seemed to be handling their guys, but I noticed Shirtsleeve’s pale arms wrapped snakelike around Chris’ neck, Chris’ eyes big and shot red. I rushed over and started burying my knuckles into Shirtsleeve’s spine with as much dizzy force as I could muster. His grip loosened and I kicked into his teeth, and then again. He fell onto his back and his eyes started to swell and close and I was still swinging at him. Chris pulled me away and we all ran off down the street, and I was thinking the whole time of the hurt in my knuckles and the pain of life in that town and once we were far enough from the bar we slowed to a walk and the tall one smiled and slapped everyone on the back, saving an extra-strong smack for me.
Later Chris and I were standing hands-in-pockets outside of his apartment while his friends tore through a couple of cases of beer inside. He stayed in our childhood home for a while after I left town for college but our savings had run out and he couldn’t keep up with the payments with his factory salary, a sum that had grown smaller in the years since I’d worked there for economic reasons. He hadn’t cared enough to keep anything in the house, a careless act that had driven a rift between us for quite some time. All those things gone now, the photos and the toys of youth, all the memories tied to them left to whatever fragile retention we could muster in ourselves.

“Can I get one?”

Chris was looking at the pack of cigarettes I was slamming against my palm. “Sure,” I told him. “You smoke now?”

“Yeah. Here and there.”

I handed one over. He struggled comedically with the lighter so I took it and held the weak flame to his lips. The flush in his cheeks keened in the light of the fire. I leaned back on the snow-covered building and watched him drag and exhale for a moment before I lit my own.

“So what other bad habits you picked up I don’t know about?”

“Nothing.”

“Doubt it.”

“You know me.” He laughed and coughed a couple of times. “I’m the good one.”

“Always were.” The truth was that two months before Chris had had his license revoked for driving drunk. And in the opposite lane. That last part had also netted him a hefty fine for reckless endangerment. To pay it off he worked overtime whenever the factory offered it, 12-hour night shifts six or seven days a week, drinking himself to sleep most mornings as the sun climbed its tired track into the sky.

I considered what a fatherly tone might sound like and used it. “You’re drinking too much, Chris. Would have thought the DUI would set your ass straight.”

“Nothing else to do here.”

I saw this as my way in, a chance to give him the same college speech I’d been giving him over the phone for months. “That’s why you need to go somewhere else, man. Somewhere with a university.”

“That ship has sailed.”
“You’re only 21, for Christ’s sake.”

“I’m not cut out for that kind of thing. I was put here to do what Dad did, and I’m fine with that.” He turned his face away from me, dragging heavily on his cigarette. What had happened to the little blonde-haired boy who didn’t speak unless I spoke first, who followed my lead wherever we went?

“Chris, you can’t be serious. You want to continue that piece of shit’s legacy?”

“I don’t know.” He tossed the rest of his smoke into the snow drift, pushed his hands into his pockets. He stepped away from the wall and there was an outline of his form in the snow where he’d been leaning a moment ago. “It’s easier this way,” he told me.

I wondered if he was a lost cause. “Why haven’t you called?” I asked.

“Been busy.”

“Excuses.”

Chris looked intently at the empty street. He hesitated before sharing his next thought. “We’re different people now.” He brought his eyes back, squinted them at me. “I never know what you’re talking about, ranting about your writing and books and shit.” His gaze softened. “What do we have to talk about?”

“Fuck if I know, then,” I told him angrily. I didn’t know what else to say. I crushed out my cigarette and got an urge to cover Chris’ outline on the wall with fresh flakes, the absence of snow bothering me. Chris watched me cockeyed as I pushed new snow over the empty space.

We didn’t say anything to each other for a few moments. Chris was hundreds of miles away, it seemed, though I only lived twenty minutes out of town. I was upset with him for letting us drift so far apart, not taking any of the blame myself, of course. I had abandoned him in Roston, after all. “Let’s get back in there,” I finally said, motioning to the door of his apartment.

A few hours later and we were through the beer and Chris’ bros had all passed out on whatever soft surface they could find. Chris and I were the only ones left awake and soon Chris’ face began to lose its color. A frightened look came over him, his eyes bloodshot and bulging, a horror over his features. I realized then that he was going to be sick.

“We better get you to the bathroom.”
He opened his mouth to reply and great strings of puke came out, a hulking splat right on the carpet. Smell of deep-fried chicken and dirty dishwasher. I tried to usher him to the toilet but the heaving wracked him and he couldn’t move but to purge. I steadied his shoulders and tried to stay out of the vomit. Eventually he gave and I pushed him into the bathroom where he slid slowly to the floor, exhausted, emptied, spinning. In a moment he wrapped himself around the toilet bowl and started to go again.

“You okay?” I asked stupidly. He wasn’t able to form much of a response, so I pulled a chair up in front of the open doorway to the bathroom so I could sit there and watch him for a while. But the smell of the puke started to creep around the apartment and I figured I should try to clean it up.

“Do you guys have any cleaning stuff?”
“Not that I know of.” Heave, gurgle.
“What do you guys clean this place with?”
He hung his head over the bowl, spitting. I rifled through the cupboards and drawers and found nothing but tissues, so I took the box and started sopping up the mess. I told myself, He gets one. On his 21st. Just the one. After a half an hour I’d gone through the whole container and gotten rid of everything solid, though a large stain remained on the carpet. I’d guess that it’s still there today.

Coming back to the chair, I noticed Chris lying down on the bathroom tile in the fetal position.

“Chris?” No answer. “Chris? You alright?”
He managed a croak. “Yeah, I guess.”
“You gonna sleep there?”
“Ughh...”
I found a blanket behind his tattered couch and grabbed it; there were some flattened, coverless pillows and I took them as well. I thought to grab a bottle of water for him to sip from as he lit awake over the next few hours. Or to at least look at as an eventual refuge from the hell he was in, once he regained the fortitude to keep the water down. When I got back he was out, his chest laboring slowly up and down. After putting the pillows under his head and the blanket over him I sat back in the chair. I watched him for a while and started to worry. I hovered around every breath. I couldn’t decide whether I should take him to the hospital. I also couldn’t get
Shirtsleeve out of my head, the pale arm wrangling Chris’ neck, the shivering body, the angry red face. I realized that as hard as I’d tried there was still some of my father running through my veins, and I began to panic. I wondered if I ran out into the street and started yelling after him, Shirtsleeve, Shirtsleeve, Are you alright, if he would hear me and know that I was sorry. Of course, this was a stupid, drunken idea, so I stayed there in my chair and kept vigil over Chris until I felt more comfortable leaving him alone and then wandered off to find something to pass out on myself.

I woke up the next morning to Chris saying my name from somewhere in the apartment but I couldn’t open my eyes, couldn’t move. I sensed the light outside my eyelids, felt the sun beating down on them, but they stuck tight. I wriggled and wriggled until finally I willed them open. I sat up on the floor and searched around for Chris.

He was standing behind me. “You awake?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He wouldn’t come around in front of me. “I guess you took care of me last night.”

“Yeah. Cleaned up your puke, too.”

“Thanks.” His voice was embarrassed, thankful.

“Hell of a night, huh?”

“First time I’ve ever been sick from drinking.”

“Welcome to the club, buddy.”

“Right.”

I pulled a cigarette from my squashed pack and walked to the back door, opened it and was assaulted by the rush of winter air barreling into the house. “You want one?” I asked Chris.

“Naw, I think I’m good on those for a while.”

“Good idea.”

I walked out into the bright sheen of morning, head still groggy. There was new snow coming down, great big heaps of it sticking on the tree limbs and covering parked cars on the street. I took a long draw from my cigarette and peered through the kitchen window. Chris
passed through and tossed the empty cases of beer into a black trash bag. In my mind he does this with an almost unbearable amount of grace.

I continued to pull from the cigarette and after a few minutes Chris appeared at the back door with the trash bag full, threw it in the overflowing dumpster.

I walked over and grabbed him gently at his shoulder, to hold him still. “Well, I’ve got to start heading back. Can’t go too fast on these icy roads.”

“Alright, thanks for coming down.”

“Sure thing.” I went and opened the door of my car but before I got in I asked Chris one last time. “Are you sure you won’t go to college? Move out of Roston? You could come live with me and take your pick of the schools nearby, if you wanted to.”

He smiled a wide, aching smile and thrust his hands into his pockets. “I’m where I need to be,” he said, laughing.

“The offer always stands. You got that?”

He retreated to the door of his apartment but before he went in he yelled out to me.

“Goodbye, brother.”

That word, brother, it struck me and worked its way into my chest. I couldn’t remember him ever using it before, and certainly not since we’d gotten older. There is an eloquent, gritty poetry in those two syllables, the harsh friction in the br and the steady resolution in the other. By the very nature of the word’s hard euphony it seems destined to represent something falling apart, something desperate to put itself back together again.

Three months later I’d find out through a phone call that Chris had died, the result of a freak accident at the tire factory. He was driving up in Warehouse 4 and a loose stack of tire-filled skids fell on his forklift, crashing through the roof and his skull with a thousand pounds of force. I cried and cried and took responsibility for it, told myself I should have dragged him out of that musty apartment by his hair and thrown him in the backseat of my car, sped off down the road out of that fucking town. I’d failed to protect him after all, and now he was gone.

Brother. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with the word on my tongue. Sometimes I say the word out loud over and over to try and reclaim some of the beauty of that final moment, when Chris called me to himself.
IN THE TOWN, IN THE DARK

On any other night I might dream myself alone in the town in the dark and think nothing of it but tonight the dream takes on the texture of reality, a tempered lucidity I have to adjust to. I hover over growing rain puddles in the streets, surrounded by a void so permanent I can see in it, well enough to know how close the clouds have crowded in. They shock me to the ground with their lightning. As I go through the neighborhood face after face stuck to the windows in every house, wide white eyes watching me go along. They’re just happy to see another face something like theirs in that it’s also got wide white eyes and a desolate aspect, in the sharp angles and the dizzy curve of beard, in the hollow ache of the cheek. Teeth chattering at the breeze. They recognize other features of themselves, hands snapped tightly into bare pockets pulling a jacket in to the body, a figure undefined from cheap food without nutrition, a head-forward gait picked up in lineman drills, a sullen calm, a wild scar of chestnut hair. A hazy silhouette of a thing in contrast to the rigid definitions of the houses and the lawns and even the wind and the dark and the night itself but somehow only seeming to exist because of those things. In the houses dishes molding in the sink, blue light glaring from blinking screens in blind-hidden bedrooms. A crack on the jaw, a scream from the impassioned well of a throat. I know that I am these things, I grew from them, outward from nothingness and into the town.

I know this is a dream but I wonder where it comes from, how the town still so easily takes my imagination hostage, its language and ideas bleeding into my own.

All the streetlamps are out of order, the storm having rolled on through without abandon. We’re left here refugeed and wet, holding our hair and the torn pieces of roof we keep picking up from the ground. I reach the end of the suburbs and come to the town proper where the storm had been worse and where there are more people out, sifting through soaked stacks of vinyl siding and soggy insulation or just wandering in circles with their hands on their heads or stuck to the outside of store windows staring dead-faced in. I walk through them and they don’t react, caught in their agonized tableaux, and I wonder if they can see me. If I have become a ghost in my own
life. They don’t see that I’m also part of the throng, that I’m searching as well, and even if they knew they wouldn’t care. There’s something about grief that renders voices indistinct, keeps us deaf and blind to our own brittle piece of desperation like the prisoner to the iron ball.

I try not to think about how beautiful the town looks decimated in the dream, in its violent contradiction from my waking memory, orange-rind the color of the sky over the open rooftops from the reflection of fires in the street and the gentle sway of buildings on crumbling foundations, as if the wind alone will topple them, to the distant red and white flash of lights up the road and the howl of siren we all know we must hear in order for anything to be saved but we cringe at the sound of for this also means that the storm was real, that we’re truly standing in ruin, at the last boundary of civilization. Beyond which we know nothing. I think perhaps that the storm symbolizes the uprooting of my own life, the death of my brother and my sudden inability to find meaning anymore.

Why not tell my story with a storm, with the veil of a fiction?

With my head down to the wind I start to think about what I might miss if the town were to actually combust like this. First the ancient post office forged from the work-dirty hands of long dead men and women where we sent sympathies and our money and our thoughts out to the world, the library nearly obsolete with our computers always talking, those very screens themselves for the time we lost in them, the selves we fashioned through them. It seems anything can be lost, the guitar still holding its note in the corner, the vintage lamp flickering for its frayed wiring, the roltop desk rotting away in the basement once used for school work, the newspapers and gossip magazines and keepsakes and junk almost indistinguishable now that they’ve dissolved in the rain. First, the things. Then, the memories buried in those things, the arms around the last girlfriend holding the guitar working desperately for an A minor and a kiss, the mother meticulously patching together the shards of the lamp broken in a childhood romp, the desk covered in loose pages of lyric. All the things and all their pasts. And finally, the faces. The warm ones, that radiated their warmth like burning coal, the bright ones and the pretty ones, but also the staring ones, the ones that brought a twinge of fear in our gut and made us walk the other way, the leering ones nestled above suits and ties, the ones that only ever grimaced. All the faces and all their pasts. I think of these things in my apocalyptic dream but aren’t these the components of truth, the details, the possessions and the faces they are tied to, the descriptions of
whole lives done in mere sentences? Is there so much difference in those things and their image in my dream?

I have a story to tell, but how do I tell it?

I’m still walking when I see my best friend from middle school scrounging through the remains of a shattered electronics store window display. We used to take his four-wheelers around the pond and ride in his dad’s GTO and smoke his mom’s cigarette butts on the back porch. I never knew what happened to him once we got to high school, I never saw him there. Then one day at a party he showed up out of nowhere and passed around a bottle of moonshine and muttered incoherently about his recent time in jail. I woke up in a daze the next morning on the bathroom floor and half of the valuables in the house were gone, my middle school friend along with them. I haven’t seen him since but there he is, suddenly, feeling around in a pile of glass for anything whole and unbroken in the storm-wracked town. I reach him and tap him on the shoulder. I don’t know what I thought I was going to say but I ask him, How are you? He jumps, startled to hear someone speak to him. It takes him a few seconds to recognize me, but when he does he wraps his arms around me and tries to hold me. I tear myself away from him. At first I don’t know if he meant to embrace me or steal my wallet. But I look over his face and he looks hurt, destroyed even, and I feel disgusted with myself for having pulled away so instinctually. His eyes are dark holes in the pallor of his skin, hung loose over the shape of his skull. Something beaten into him, pounded into his mannerisms. His features twitch autonomous of his doing, his mouth chewing at something not there, the teeth loose in his gums. A wash of sympathy comes over me but I have more to see in this dream so I walk quickly away down the street and leave him. I look back over my shoulder and see my old friend following after me, that same look of rejection flaring in his eyes, but after a minute he stops and turns back the opposite way, plunging his hands again into the litter of glass.

My friend’s story is real. But there is embellishment, there is conjecture. I don’t know whether he stole those things or not. I’m left to my best judgment for that.

I’m at the last reaches of the town, where the factory pukes tire smoke and the street buckles under the weight of all those trucks. Now the factory is silent, the street hums distantly of the memory of those burdened wheels rolling over. No one pouring out of the doors of the buildings, exhausted and hungry and reaching for their car keys. No train cars lolling in to the rail door to be filled with rubber for the west coast. No sounds of machinery, no screech of work.
I walk past the building and come to the highway, a few cars stranded on the black stretch of road between the downed trees and utility poles. The wind is stronger out here without the buildings to cover me and my body shakes as I walk. No fire to orange the skyline out here, simply dark and cold. When the shiver hits my bones I remember another dream I once had about the end of the world, a sky drenched in black and a screaming mass, the feeling in my dream stomach like a poisoned fruit making me nauseous and finding its way to my veins. This feeling had been real, I had woken up to reality sick and bowled over in bed.

In my life there had been a few ends of the world, and that same sick, dream feeling every time. And anger, and despair, and depression. I continue down the highway in this particular dream, this particular fiction, and the wind starts to let up and the thought of the earlier dream fades along with it but the nausea stays with me, down somewhere deep, virulent and spreading.

When I first left the wreckage of my childhood home earlier in the dream I didn’t know where I meant to go aside from away from that destruction but now I realize that I’ve been heading for the cemetery all night, a few outlet roads off the highway. I finally get there and I’m nearly worn through by the cold and the icy rain that’s started to fall again. It’s as if I’m losing structural components, breaking down into something more compact, with less wasted matter. I start to feel at home in the dark, in the mystery of things. The gates come open easily enough and I scan the scattering of gravestones. Most are crumbling and falling to pieces, the storm having ravaged the area and splattered stone everywhere. The ground is opened up in places, direct hits from bolts of lightning. In disarray, just as the fractured town, this place is disturbingly beautiful. A dissembling of the past, a re-creation of its image in my head. I find chunks of etched rock and reunite the matching pieces and discover the names of people I once knew, or that I think I knew, or that sound familiar. Every stone a story and every grave a character.

Ice rains down and pummels lines of experience into my face. I sit down in the detritus of cut stones and ground. All the names and all their pasts. All these graves overturned, uprooted, shaken up. All these stories waiting to be told.

I will try and try to write them. They will escape me like suffering and find comfort in the page. The dead will roam the earth.
HOLDS

It was a very strange day. I kept seeing you everywhere, walking alongside me through town to the church where Mom would have wanted your funeral to be, sitting a row in front of me as the service transpired, on the march back to your newly-dug grave. I sat beside Grandma and held her hand as the priest did his best work to save your soul. I felt her tremble every time he said your name. I wondered if she loved us more than we ever knew, if perhaps my stubbornness at keeping you to myself in our old house denied you from her, if she could ever forgive me for that. I could hardly deliver my speech about you when it came time because you were there in the front pew and it was embarrassing to say such empty, hopeful things while you were in the room.

At first I thought you were there simply to fuck with me, something I knew you’d do if given the chance, and I tried to laugh your presence off. But the more I watched you the more you seemed confused, or unwilling to believe that you were dead, that all of this, the full church and the tears and the black clothes, was for you. It gave me great sadness to watch you misunderstand.

Everyone gathered around the hole your body was to be put in, your grave right next to Mom’s. The priest gave his final prayers and a chorus of cries started, hands were folded and unfolded, and then everyone left. I watched this all with disbelief, realizing that this was all there was to death. As they slid your casket into the dirt I saw someone standing behind a tree at the other side of the cemetery, hands folded, watching me from that distance. I recognized his slouch, his matted hair, his jagged smile. If I had walked a few feet in his direction I bet I could have smelled the whiskey from there. I had always wondered if I’d ever see him again, whether he ever thought about us or cared how we were doing. I even entertained the thought that he had stayed in Roston all that time and had just hidden from us, needing his cowardly distance but unable to tear himself away from the gravitational pull of the town, tethered to it like we had all been at one point or another. But in that moment I chose not to believe that he was there, that I
was only imagining him, because this is fiction after all, even if it’s the truth, and I can leave him out if I want to. This is not his story, he’s had his chance already. I chose not to see him there behind the tree and he disappeared before my eyes and then it was just me, staring at your bland tombstone and what was etched onto the surface. Your name, the years you had existed, and nothing else. What more was there to say?

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I caught up with my old buddy Driscoll after the service, found him in his dirty little apartment in the middle of town. The first thing I noticed in Driscoll’s apartment, the first thing everyone notices, were the four cats roaming about the place, all of them some kind of deep gray or jet black. Their eyes were cloudy with disease and they hissed at just about anyone who went to run their hand over them, but aside from that they were uncommonly well-behaved. This is something I felt I was expected to note, out loud, after I’d been in the apartment a few minutes, with the proud way Driscoll was commanding tricks from them. Driscoll trained them rather seriously, I thought, as I listened to him bark orders and shoo them off of the furniture with a visible sense of accomplishment.

“Should I take my shoes off?” I asked.

“Do as you please, friend. And please have a seat.”

One of the cats was called Whisper. He was a skeletal little tabby whose name reflected his muffled meows, the result of a traffic accident involving his voice box and a charging two-door. Driscoll told me that once he came to know you he’d sometimes crawl up your front and murmur in your face. I wondered if this was some form of supplication.

“Get the fuck down!” he yelled at the cat as it curled its way up my chest.

“Don’t worry about it, man. He’s not bothering anybody.”

“That’s not the point. They’re just now finally startin to learn some manners.” The cat continued up my shirt but Driscoll caught it by the nape and tossed it in the corner. I watched the cat soared through the air, almost coming into contact with the wall. But it landed on its paws just short of it and looked back at me undeterred.
I followed Driscoll into the kitchen, fast food wrappers crackling like eggshells under my feet. I sat down across from him, a jug of cheap whiskey between us. Driscoll grabbed a couple of glasses from inside the broken cupboard door.

“Good to see you back home for once,” he said.

“Well, sort of. Not for this.”

Driscoll nodded and filled two glasses to the brim. He held his hand up in the air as if to give a toast but just swallowed the glassful without saying anything. “You ever going to move back to town so we can hang out more often?” he asked.

“What the hell would I do here?”

He refilled his glass and eyed me as if he was worried about me for not having downed mine yet. I allowed the coercion and drank.

He picked up one of the cats and started petting it. “I never understood why you ever left the factory.”

Bile ran up through my insides into my throat and my brain started getting hot. I steeled myself against the anger, though, realizing in time that Driscoll’s comment was only part of a routine in his head. He was no longer able to formulate new thoughts. A set number of things he could say, a euchre hand he could pull from. It hadn’t been long since our high school days together but in those few years Driscoll had aged violently, the shit he sold and took leaving him nearly senile at 25.

I didn’t respond to Driscoll’s comment. After a few moments, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Whisper again, creeping along the wall towards me. Driscoll took note of the cat’s sneaky trajectory and yelled out at him to get the hell away. “One more time, kitty, and you’re in trouble,” he told Whisper, eyes wild.

I looked around and wondered what kind of creatures lived in the pockmarked walls of the room, all turquoise paint peeling and studs showing.

Driscoll noticed my gaze. “This place is really startin’ to fall apart,” he said.

He told me that he sold to keep up with the rent and because he was only a few years in at the factory downtown which meant a lower wage and finally because he didn’t care if he went to jail. In between his stuttered phrasings I made up stories about my times at college, about lit. classes and idiot professors and frat parties. I started in with the old high school stories, the ones we’d already told each other a million times. Driscoll nodded along in understanding, in his dull
rhythm. He mumbled “umm-hmm” to the beat and watched down the hall to keep an eye on his cats.

I’d been telling stories to Driscoll for a while when Whisper took advantage of his master’s lapse in attention and snuck over to me under the table. Splotchy and withered he approached my leg and sniffed the air around it, as if grasping for a thread of heartbeat in my skin. Looking to steal some of that pulse for himself. After another party story I grew bored with my embellished past and asked Driscoll about the cats, the one conversation topic he was entirely capable with.

“I try to feed ‘em twice a day, keep their water fresh. If I didn’t do it no one else in the world would because I’m the only one who gives a shit about them. So I have to do it.”

All the while Driscoll was speaking Whisper was at my feet, gliding over them the way cats do. He got brave again and started climbing my leg. Driscoll stopped midsentence, holy terror in his eyes, when Whisper breached my chest.

Driscoll’s mouth opened and sounds came out. In his wild eyes a shock. He looked as if he’d maybe just been drifting along all this time and finally he’d burned his last bit of sense down to the shadow of its core, every feeling frayed and dangerous like a snapped wire. He reached across the table after Whisper but the cat was too quick for a lash this time, sped off through a hole in the drywall.

It was chaos from there. A tired screeching from Driscoll as he ripped at remaining bits of wallpaper with his fingernails, the horrible contrast of anger and overworked love in his yell. The clash of pans and silverware with the linoleum. The steady bump of fists beating under the floor from the apartment underneath, asking for quiet. I was up on my feet trying to restrain Driscoll before he tore the whole place down to the ground. All under the swath of black night sky above us, choked air part tire smoke and part hay allergy, the confluence of nature and what our town had worked it into.

“Driscoll!” I yelled, “Calm down!”

I got him back in his seat and tried to talk to him but he didn’t care, kept flailing and gesturing towards the wall. “You gotta help me!” he was yelling. “You gotta help me!” He was delirious with it, the idea of losing the cat.

Driscoll and I started rooting around in the holes in the wall, bending our ears to the dark interior to listen for any signs of Whisper. In just a few moments we heard his fractured meow
and Driscoll’s eyes lit up. “If I just reach in through here I think I can get him,” he said. He planted his body against the wall and stuck his arm in as deep as he could, raising himself up slightly to allow his arm to get even further in. His want made me ache, his palpable fear of absence. I imagined he felt much the same as I had earlier that day, when I’d stood in the cemetery and lamented how simple and bare Chris’ gravestone was. I was no longer certain that Driscoll was really all that lost.

“Aaah!” he exhaled.

I watched in amazement as Driscoll pulled the cat from somewhere deep inside the hole, an exultation of relief escaping from his chapped lips. Tears ran on his face as he drew the cat closer in, wrapping his skinny arms around it as tenderly as he could. I watched Driscoll regain himself, little by little. After a few moments he felt secure enough to let Whisper go and he poured himself another few fingers of the whiskey and took it down, in celebration.

“Oh man, these cats,” he managed between heavy breaths, “these cats never learn.”

I sat back down and watched Driscoll’s fingers tremble. I tried to resume our conversation, just to break the silence in the apartment, but we were past it. I could tell he wanted to talk about deeper things than that. But I was in no place to talk about real life that day, and had even less desire to listen. I left him to his whiskey and his silence.

Roston bloomed in pinks and blacks and purples as I walked back to my car, shaded by the dark, penumbral sky and the bleat of occasional streetlamps, the smoky, carbon mist that always sat in the air about town. The trees planted into the sidewalk shivered in the wind and spun their leaves as if they were dancing. The town felt alive, tugging at me as I again tried to leave it.

I made it back to my car and found a black cat hiding behind the front right tire. As I got closer I realized that the cat looked exactly like Whisper, the same beaten body, the same sick, imploring eyes. I opened my car door and reached slowly under the car, careful not to startle him. I picked him up and cradled him gently at my chest. I pressed softly on his fur to try and calm the bustling nerves the streets had bred into him. Eventually he relaxed in my arms and I
begged him, over and over again, to tell me what I should do. After that day, after that life, I was no longer certain.

The cat did not answer and I let him back out into the night. I figured he would find some way to piece a life together in that town, however mangy it was, just as you had until the day you died.

I started the engine and drove away from Roston and never went back.
The ghost moved into my apartment just as I was starting to lose confidence in my writing. Unannounced, and without any kind of ghostly fanfare, it fluttered in through the door, dripping something all over the carpet. I was sitting at my desk and as usual I was typing, relentlessly, recklessly, endlessly spilling shit all over the page, viscous stuff whittled almost unconsciously out of my fingertips. For weeks my life had been pouring out of me, in long, whirling paragraphs, but none of it seemed to fit together and I couldn’t get a hold on what it was I was trying to accomplish. I wanted, desperately, to write about growing up in Roston, a village in nowhere Ohio dominated by a visual ubiquity of fast food restaurants and the smell of rubber exhaust from the tire factory. And I wanted to write about my brother Chris, who died in an accident in that very tire factory. A place that had tried to claim me as well with its numbing grind and that still called out to me in the dark from time to time.

But mostly I just wrote sentences and sentences and sentences. Empty cans of diet Coke stood guard around the computer as I wrote, packs’ worth of cigarette butts rotted in the ashtray on the landing, dishes beyond dishes fermented in the sink. These were the fruits of my labor. Those and the dozens of failed documents, the false starts. All that time and work bottled up into jars which contained nothing.

The ghost flickered around the corner of the doorway and scared the lights out of the room. I woke up some twenty minutes later and it was still there, standing just across the threshold of the doorway. I shuddered into the opposite corner and watched it through scissored fingers. To describe it is a challenge for words: the relative shape of a human body with arms and legs and a head, a watery, quivering aspect to its transparent white surface, an ambiguous and undetailed face that I, for whatever reason, still saw as a face. It was the smell of the thing, the burning, metamorphic rubber and oiled steel, that made me realize I knew this ghost. At the
factory they told stories about a ghost haunting Warehouse 4, roaming its broken stacks of tires and factory detritus and blowing a cold wind through the room. I’d never seen the ghost while I worked there, had always wondered but had eventually come to deny its existence. But the churning, sick-sweet smell of tires rotting in those old warehouses, Warehouse 4 in particular, was the same scent the ghost brought into my apartment. I hadn’t worked at the factory for years, but the ghost had decided to follow me home after all that time, bringing its rubbery smell along with it.

Hey, it said.

The voice seemed to come from somewhere outside of it, the air just beyond its ripply form. It had the strange quality of sounding both masculine and light at once, containing hints of both a deep bass foundation and a clear trace of soprano overtone. White neon goo was still dripping from the figure onto the floor, a substance I’ve since come to find out is ectoplasm.

It spoke again. How’s it going? it asked.

I figured such supernatural absurdity deserved a properly absurd response.

“Not bad,” I told it.

Its face area swirled in disbelief. Not bad?

“Are you some sort of ghost?”

Sure, it answered abruptly.

“You’re seriously a fucking ghost?”

It rolled the foggy, translucent area where its eyes would have been.

I look like a ghost, don’t I?

“I guess, though I –“

Well, then, I’m a ghost.

“Why are you haunting me?” I remember sounding utterly pathetic, whining like a surly captive.

Kid, it shot at me, with a sidelong glance or something like it, you need hauntin.’

It took some time to get used to the ghost always being there. It did nothing but sit at the end of my couch and watch me, speaking in riddles and tongues when I tried to talk to it. I was
paralyzed to leave my apartment so I called in sick at the library three days in a row. I didn’t sleep a second of those nights, afraid to shut my eyes and not be aware of what the ghost was doing, how close its silvery shape was to me (or, if I did sleep, then I dreamed I was awake on my couch, looking at it in terror; this, as you might imagine, wasn’t particularly restorative as far as sleep goes). The best I could do was get up occasionally and tiptoe into the kitchen and keep my head wrapped around the wall so I could watch it as I darted in and out of the refrigerator. Even though I knew it was there in the other room, that it never left, I wouldn’t take the chance of letting it sneak up on me, as silly as that sounds now. Just the thought of that misshapen fog of a thing sidling up behind me in the dim light of my hallway kept my nerves buzzing.

But after three nights I couldn’t keep my eyes open and alert any longer so I allowed myself to fall into a deeper sleep on the couch. The ghost was present in every one of my dreams. When I woke up it was sitting at my feet, whispering its mysteries to no one as usual. But it was more like hovering, because though I could feel its physical presence, a hint of breath and consciousness, it didn’t seem to be composed of anything physical. The sun peeked through the living room window and shined right through the ghost and its quavering composition refracted the rays like a kaleidoscope. It struck me that this ghost must exist between particles in the air, that, according to what little I knew about science, it didn’t really officially exist at all.

“I’ll ask you again,” I stammered embarrassingly. “Why are you haunting me?”

It shifted its facelessness towards me.

Because you can’t write.

I was dumbfounded. “And?”

And that’s what you want to do.

“Right.”

About your life.

“Right. I know all this already. But what the hell are you going to do about it?”

Whatever you need me to do.

Growing increasingly agitated at its withholding responses, I got up from the couch and paced to the other side of the room and stood in front of the blinded window’s gentle morning heat. I had to be at work at the library soon, and I was out of sick days. I looked like hell. I couldn’t show up looking like a guy who hadn’t slept in nights because he was up talking to a ghost.
“You say you’re here because I’m struggling to write,” I said. “This isn’t helping for shit, I have to tell you.”

I’m only trying to keep things lively.

Ghost jokes: they’re not particularly good. I plopped down into my desk chair and wheeled it in front of the ghost, still exhausted. “You’re creeping me out. I can’t get used to you, no matter how much I try to imagine you harmless. I don’t know why you haven’t dissipated into a cloud yet, or floated out through the door. You’re ruining my life.”

I felt a wave of solace come from the ghost and hit my skin, a feeling directed from it to me, an olive branch. My muscles relaxed involuntarily. The ghost said, I promise you I’m here to help.

I sat back into the fold of the chair, loosened my grip on the armrests. I looked it in its face area and said, “I don’t know if I can do it.”

Sure you can.

“It’s not that easy, just saying it like that. I have to work at the library to –“

A menial job, you can think about the writing as you do it. That’s why you took the job in the first place, remember?

“But I don’t know how to do it. I mean, I’ve written stories before, in college. But they didn’t mean anything. They were for fun.”

What do you think this is?

“Hard to say. I mean, I had so much momentum after college, so much inspiration to put words down and try and turn them into something like art. But then Chris died, and everything went to hell. The project fell apart, a dozen times over. I can’t live with anything I write, because none of it seems to weigh enough, nothing I can say will ever be enough.” I searched outside the window, my gaze awkward and romantic. “And all of those memories ought to stand for something.”

Okay. And what do you suppose that is?

“Maybe a call to arms for the people still living in Roston. Or maybe it’s about recording the names. Documenting the life I lived there, with what power words still hold. With love and tenderness.”

Alright, alright, the ghost said. Dial it back a little, Keats.
The ghost’s jab stung a bit but I pressed on. “Hey, I care a hell of a lot about this.” I stood up and paced back over to the window, peeked around the blind at the busy parking lot below. People slamming car doors according to their morning schedules, people coming home or leaving it. “I feel this nagging urge to do something.”

That’s what you’ve been trying to do ever since you left Roston. Something.

“Yeah. I have no idea what it’s supposed to look like, how it should feel.” I picked a novel up from my coffee table and fingered through it hastily. “Is art even the answer?”

I can’t say, unfortunately. That’s kind of on you.

“Right.” I put the novel down and stared back out at the parking lot. Fewer cars, less movement. At the end of the lot I noticed a beater from two decades ago wasting in the sun, its side mirrors clipped, front grill bent inwards, tire rims bulging. This was an ugly car at any other time of the day, but the sun was hitting it just right at that moment. At that particular point in time the crippled metal reflected the sun’s light everywhere, an infinity of rustling diamond, a field of shattered glass.

I turned around and faced the ghost. “It’s got to be broken, I guess. Fragmented, split, cut.”

Go on, it commanded.

“It’s got to be real,” I said. “Or, what I thought was real when I was there. My version.”

Soundin’ good, it said.

“It’s got to be Truth,” I said.

Oh god, the ghost said, rolling the fog where its eyes would have been. Please tell me you didn’t just capitalize the T.

Nights and weekends. Weekends and nights. A couple of stories that didn’t belong, because they had no focus, or I couldn’t figure out what I wanted to say with them. A couple that didn’t belong because they knew exactly what they wanted to say, but some of the stories between me and Chris were meant only for the two of us. I couldn’t give all of that to the writing, because some of it was too precious, too fragile for the scrutiny of reading eyes. I kept a running list of details that might be included—that might make a story just on their own. The
color of my mother’s hair in the last months of her life. The way her smile sometimes shone through in my brother’s smile, those moments all the more affecting because he had no idea how much he resembled her.

The writer’s block began to clear, not entirely, but with a gradual certainty that allowed me to press through every moment spent at my desk. After the ghost moved in I worked with purpose, with clarity. It became my guru and my consultant. The thing followed me everywhere, commenting, advising, critiquing. At first it was unbearable, since his critiques weren’t limited to my literary output (countless times I had to explain that I didn’t care if whole wheat was better than white, you couldn’t expect me to eat grilled cheese with wheat bread, so fuck off), but I eventually got used to the constant presence. In many ways I treasured the ghost being there, the feeling of its company akin to the uneasy reliability with which one might consider an alarm clock, assuming the alarm clock also sort of scared the shit out of you from time to time. It did break me out of my stasis, after all. If there were days I didn’t feel like writing, it chided me and made me feel guilty until I at least sat down and put on some music and zoned in. Typically this was all I needed, silence or white noise or some kind of melody and time to think and the writing would usually come eventually. On the shitty writing days, when I’d rewrite the same paragraph ten times or only get a page out of myself, I’d walk away from my desk exhausted and find a beer waiting for me on the coffee table, and the ghost and I would just sit on my couch and watch bad horror movies for a while.

And on particularly tough days—when I lived back in that place again, as a scared child or as a scared teenager or as a scared adult, or when the work brought up those old pains I thought had healed—the ghost did its trick again, and projected whatever it was it projected to wrap around me and comfort me.

There, there, it might say, tenderly. There, there.

II

During the week I worked at the library where I re-stacked books and drank coffee and showed people where the DVD section was. I spent my breaks at desks hidden away in the
corners of the building so I could scribble notes to myself, ideas for further stories or revisions for existing ones. I spoke to my co-workers in single syllables, I rarely went out to lunch. Even if I had wanted to spend time making friends the ghost would have been there, wagging a translucent finger at me, reminding me of the work to be done. Shuffling behind the shelves, silently and mysteriously, I was becoming a ghost myself.

There was even a girl, a librarian with long dark hair and a shy smile. From the time I started at the library we watched each other around the corners of the stacks, through openings between the books. I escaped the ghost a couple of times and ate turkey sandwiches with her in the stairwell. When Chris died I took a week off and when I came back to work she met me in the stacks. Her eyes were wet and shining and she felt for my arm.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I wasn’t used to being asked that sort of question, so I just answered, Yeah. She hugged me and it felt wonderful to let her, to be so close. A few days later I got a sympathy card in the mail from her, with a nice handwritten note inside.

I wanted to call her but I didn’t know what to say, what to ask from her. The ghost was always there and the writing took every spare minute. Sometimes I came away from my desk at three in the morning sweating, and sometimes I didn’t eat for a whole day and didn’t realize it until later. I didn’t think she should have to deal with a person like that.

Though this was the life I chose, I thought, a life that had been a fuzzy-edged fantasy as I read the classics by lamplight (desk lamplight, mind you) in college. I began to feel the loneliness that comes with writing, the isolation, when most of the language I heard in a day came from the piles of books lying open all around my apartment, or from the ghost that haunted me. But I could feel the isolation working for me, too, giving my mind the space it needed to work through the writing. There might be time for that other life later, I told myself. I would call the librarian when that other life was possible. But right then the project was coming to its close, the end was nearing, and I had work to do.

One day I sat down with the ghost and opened myself all the way up.

“Can I tell you what I’m really afraid of?”
Of course.

“More than anything I’m afraid of the day the writing stops.”

Writer’s block? You haven’t had any trouble with that since I’ve been here.

“No, no, the day it stops for good. When it doesn’t come out anymore. Because that’s what it feels like right now, like it’s pouring from some spout in my head. Someday that spout’s gonna dry up. Someday this story will be told, in some way, and the project will be over with. And I’ll have to live with what I’ve put down, whether it’s good enough or not. I’m terrified of that day, when I realize it’s over.”

I don’t think it works that way. The spout’s not just going to ‘dry up.’

“I watched a similar thing happen to my mother. Not with writing, but remembering, thinking. A month after she fell for the last time she told me she needed to start writing things down because she couldn’t remember them otherwise. She wrote notes to herself for a few weeks but eventually she forgot even to do that and just gave up on remembering anything new.”

Must have bothered you, watching her mind go like that.

“Of course. But she got to keep the old memories, the ones that probably really mattered. The ones that reminded her of what kind of person she had been. The last time I saw her, and I’m not trying to add grandiosity to this, it’s just true that it was the last time I saw her, she kept talking about cooking a meal for the nursing staff at the hospital for all their help. Telling my father that she needed to get a hold of a nice ham and get it sliced, first thing. It was all she cared about, as she died in that bed. He assured her he’d take care of it. She was being moved into hospice that night.”

So your father was there?

“Yeah, he was there. At that point.”

What was hospice like?

“I was too young to remember it all that well. Or I’ve repressed it. I don’t know.”

And your mother?

“Only pieces. Transmissions here and there. She’s been gone much longer than she was there, in terms of my lifetime.”

You must remember something.

“I can’t even remember what she used to look like, before she was sick. I’ve got all of these moments in time with her, the things I’ve written thus far, but I don’t have her anymore."
She had blonde hair, I know, but I don’t see its texture. Blue eyes, like mine, but again, I can’t actually see them. I’m just imagining them. Her face is a cloud of features that never settle into place.”

Are you afraid that will happen to Chris’s face, too?

“Sure I am. Maybe it’ll happen in a few years, or maybe fifty years from now. Someday he’ll be a ghost just like her.”

III

And then one day it was done. A handful of drafts and revisions gone by and the project was complete. I’d had breakthroughs, I’d had marathon sessions in which I’d written twenty pages in a single sitting, I’d given my brother his eulogy, I’d put some of my life into words. It had been an exhausting experience, and when I first took in the sight of the finished manuscript I almost jumped out of my chair in excitement to know that it was over with.

But as I read through the final draft, trying to make sure the story made sense, to see if I had accomplished whatever it was I’d set out to do, a frightening thought occurred to me.

The ghost was still there.

I figured that as soon as I finished the book the ghost would depart, that its job would have been done. But I looked up, and sure enough it was staring back at me. I watched the ghost for a minute and finally asked it why it was still with me.

“Oh, I’m here for the long haul, it said. Until it’s done.

My face bunched up in misunderstanding.

“But, it is done. It’s right there on the desk. All of it.”

The ghost’s facial area mimicked the confusion on mine.

You sure about that?

“Pretty goddamned sure.”

Well, then, how do you feel?

“What do you mean?”

Do you feel any better? Did it cure you?
I had always thought it would. I honestly, truly, thought so. With the manuscript sitting there on the desk, pristine and freshly-printed, it seemed like all complications ought to have been resolved, that things would have finally converged in that beautiful way literary critics say they do at the end of great books. But my whole life was still there, in my head, and it still gnawed at me, even stronger than before.

I was devastated. Crushed.

“So, why then?” I said, agitated. “Why’d I even do this? Why’d I put myself through this, this difficult work…this…?”

I was up and pacing around the room, unraveling a little.

“It’s at least as difficult as factory work. And I’m definitely getting paid less.” I sat down in my desk chair with a defeated thump. “Why not just go back to that after all?”

The ghost floated closer, almost touching me in its proximity.

Factory work doesn’t mean anything. Right? Haven’t you sat there and explained that to me, over and over again?

“But it’s easy. It’s simple. Even if I don’t care about it, at least it’s stable, reliable. Predictable.”

Is that what you want?

“I never thought I did. But I don’t know anymore.”

In my head I built that life. Waking before sunlight, dew running down the windshield, machinery crashing as I walked into work. My body old before my mind, knee surgeries, bent back, my body used up. Liquor to drown it with. Perpetuating the history of that place.

How could I ever hope to bring my mother back, living this way? How could I ever learn to forgive my father? How could I keep Chris alive?

I picked up the stack of paper and started working back through the manuscript again, penciling in notes, correcting mistakes, expanding and expanding and expanding long into the night. And the next night, and the night after that. I learned that to choose to write about it is to choose to be haunted. That it would always smell like rubber in my apartment. My ghosts would still be there, on every page, in every memory.

It’s possible that I simply haven’t found the right way to finish the story, and that once an ending comes to me, the ghost will disappear. And take mine with it. And when that day comes,
when the ghosts finally leave, I only hope that I’ll have written something worthy of them, something that will stay and haunt me in their place.