

**FREEBIRD AT ELEVEN**

**Sean L. Corbin**

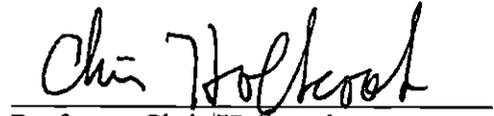
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Bachelor of Fine Arts  
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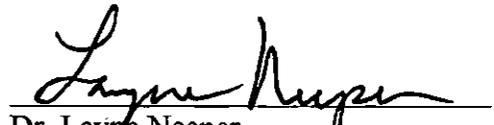
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Accepted by the faculty of the Creative Writing Program, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree:

  
Professor Crystal Wilkinson  
Director of Thesis

  
Professor Chris Holbrook

  
Professor George Eklund

  
Dr. Layne Nepper  
Chair, Department of English

## INTRODUCTION

I do not believe in genre distinctions. The division of literary work into *prose* and *poetry* is a fallacy. Do poems and prose do different things? Are their intents exclusive to one another? No, especially in the contemporary literary landscape. Poems and prose both tell stories. Poems and prose both utilize vivid images to tell their stories. Poems and prose both capture emotional, political, cultural, and spiritual truths within said stories. Written works are simply *art* – the need to divide this art into different categories is only the human desire to make as specific a label for something as possible. Now generally, the idea of genre distinctions does not pose a threat to literature. Pieces are written, called *poem* or *novel* or *essay*, and everyone moves on. This idea, however, can be detrimental to the art when it becomes ingrained in the minds of young artists to the point where one genre becomes almost an adversary.

“I just can’t write that traditional *scene-dialogue-scene* form anymore.”

That was my declaration to my professor, Crystal Wilkinson, after our Nonfiction II workshop met one night. I had devoted my artistic energies to poetry. My mind was obsessed with line breaks and rhythm and surreal images, and when it came time to write a nonfiction essay, it would freeze. There was no interest in what I viewed to be the absolute *must* of prose writing, the scene. So I vented my frustrations to Crystal on the side of the road and waited for a response. She had a simple one.

“Then don’t.”

Those two words changed my entire approach to writing.

I believe that the idea, the theme, the concept that drives my writing the most is the process of the mind, in that what I write is, by and large, an attempt to capture the rhythms and patterns of the mind. The mind does not work on a wholly linear path, does not reconstruct memories in order or even one aspect at a time: Ideas explode from nowhere and haunt the mind and then disappear again. Memories drop into the eye fully formed, then disintegrate until all that's left is the song on the radio, the color of a girl's eyes, the taste of gin and Kool-Aid. The mind rambles, basically, and does so in a way that is not entirely easy to follow or even grammatical. It's the machine that shuffles lottery balls.

This concept, the idea of the mind as a bingo cage, became the driving force for my nonfiction work and, now, my thesis project. I wanted to explore how my memories sometimes ramble on and on and on, sometimes spark in fragments that quickly fade, and sometimes stand fully realized, unwilling to fade away. All of this I wanted to do as a narrative, one with enough room to flex and explore secondary issues like detachment, depression, and relationship issues, but also with a narrative voice that was decidedly *un*-narrative. My poetry at the time leaned heavily toward cataloguing, litanies, and surrealism, toward building scenes through images that leaned more toward the emotion of the work than the literal physicality of the scene. What served as the second spark for this project, after my conversation with Crystal, was the idea of writing *poems* in *prose* form, of letting the images build on one another in that pseudo-surreal process without considering where each line would break, of allowing for syntactical inconsistencies because *the mind* allows them. I think this form is a perfect fit for this project, but

probably would not have occurred to me without permission to abandon the ideas of genre instilled in me throughout the years.

Memoir, to me, has always been a vanity project. Some are certainly worthwhile, like those of important political or social figures like William Jefferson Clinton or Mick Foley (well, important to the reader at least), but to write a memoir at twenty six years of age at first felt a little too far into the realm of narcissism. Of course, the memoir / creative nonfiction subgenre does not consist merely of summations of event-filled lives. What makes it appear so is the glut of celebrity life-stories in our contemporary literary marketplace. Memoir can be so much more, can mean so much more in the arena of art and ideas. It's an element to, I would argue, most or even all of our greatest literary works. Eliot's *The Waste Land* would never be classified as a poetic memoir, but it involves personal experiences he had in England as well as the deterioration of his own mental faculties. Ginsberg's work is not called memoir, but *Howl* would never have existed without his own personal experiences, attitudes, and political ideas; nor would the work of his contemporaries, especially Kerouac, who appeared to siphon nearly all of the moments of his life into "fiction." The subgenre of confessional poetry is merely thinly-veiled memoir in poetic form.

What elevates these works past the typical definition of memoir is their artistic exploration of themes greater than the artists themselves. *Howl* and *The Waste Land*, after all, do not define Allen Ginsberg and T.S. Eliot; they define generations. This idea, this challenge, was the final push for the generation of *Freebird at Eleven*. I could easily write about my life and make it meaningful to me. I could even make it a work that could

be appreciated by others. The challenge was to push beyond myself, so that others could not only appreciate but *connect* to what I'd written. That brought about the secondary, or thematic, explorations of the work – namely, the exploration of depression and detachment and how those problems affect the self and relationships with others. Do I believe that many of my readers can relate to the discovery of hepatitis C in my blood? No, but maybe they can relate to that frustration, that despair, that rage that comes out when my speaker-self screams at the broken refrigerator. Perhaps the specific figures mused about in “Minglewood Blues” don't ring a bell to most people, but I think the idea of cataloguing past relationships, especially after the devastating end of one, is universal.

*Freebird at Eleven* is a culmination of these three major concepts: the freedom of the artist, the fracturing of the mind, and the potential universality of personal experience. To even attempt to do these ideas justice, I pulled from many outside influences.

James Wright and Gerald Stern have been my strongest poetic influences, and their subtlety and attention to detail within great works of sprawling images and apparent non sequiturs had a profound effect on my thesis. Wright, in particular, builds incredible scenes and emotional states through a great economy of words, specifically in *The Branch Will Not Break*. It is that economy that “This May Feel a Little Weird” strives for. Stern's humor and ability to bring different threads together for a common purpose feeds “Ten and Twenty” and “An Evening of Dead Horse.”

The ideas of John Barth, metafiction in particular, weave through this project, particularly in “The Swing,” “Coming Attractions” and “Freebird at Eleven.” I love the idea of “a story within a story” and the concept of reality splitting apart to reveal its

framework. In fact, the project originally began with my soul preparing to enter my body pre-birth, but the story didn't fit the other thematic and technical ideas of the work as a whole. Plus, it's hard to argue that a collection is nonfiction when it begins with an impossible memory.

Influences from outside of literature also played a part in the creation of *Freebird at Eleven*. The work of film directors like Christopher Nolan caused the genesis of "Coming Attractions" and "Space Medicine," mainly in the exploration of nonlinear storytelling. Also, the title "Space Medicine" and the split narrative of the piece came from the work of graphic novelist Grant Morrison. Artistic inspiration comes from every area imaginable, and artists should constantly crossbreed and gather ideas from the masters of other media.

Writing and literature are many things. They serve as an entertaining escape from life. They serve as an explanation for life. They serve as a history of our species and a spirituality of community. They serve as a microcosm for life itself.

For me, the writing of *Freebird at Eleven* exposed these ideas, revealed them, let them finally germinate in my soul and grow into something beautiful. I learned how to escape life by writing it down. I learned how to explain life by picking through it word-by-word. I learned to write my history and let it stand as both mine and everyone's. I learned from this project how to dissect, how to heal, how to experiment and how to connect, even through detachment.

And I learned that the permission to grow will be granted. All you have to do is ask.

*Facts are generally overesteemed. For most practical purposes, a thing is what men think it is.*

*-John Updike*

*Detachment produces a peculiar state of mind. Maybe that's the worst sentence of all, to be deprived of feeling what a human being ought to be entitled to feel.*

*-James Dickey*

*Then don't.*

*-Crystal Wilkinson*

### **This May Feel a Little Weird**

Lights. Lights burn through a shadow covering my eyes. A voice echoes in the far far away, numbers count down, a muzzle on my face. Then the shadow takes over.

Lights. A man in a long white coat stands over me, haloed by fluorescent light. Fingers graze my hairless arms. The man grabs a tube running from a machine into the hollow of my sternum, a tube covered in ribs, a bone tube. He grabs it, says *this may feel a little weird*, and pulls hard.

Lights. An explosion of sparks in my eyes as a vacuum collapses in my chest, the tube pulls free, the skin on my face stretches, my pupils bulge. My parents gasp. A sucking sound escapes my mouth. The phantom tug at the base of my ribs is still there where the tube rippled against my bones, vibrated my organs, pulled something out of me.

### **Fifty-Six Ways to Almost Die by Horse**

1. Tie your shoes on the back porch and pet your grandmother's bloated terrier while finishing the fourth peanut butter cookie sneaked from your grandfather's jar.
2. Walk down the concrete ramp of your grandparent's porch and dodge bees.
3. Look into the dilapidated garage and smell scraps the dogs wouldn't eat.
4. Kick at your grandfather's worn tires.
5. Ease across the grassy knoll past the leather workshop where your ass's worst nightmares are born.
6. Glance into the window.
7. See no one inside.
8. Shuffle through the hardpan in front of the aged barn.
9. Throw pebbles at squalling peacocks shitting on the abandoned well.
10. Pull open the barn door heavy with oak and years.
11. Leave open the barn door.
12. Rub the dirt underfoot through your fingers and clean them on your sweatpants.
13. Smell your hands.
14. Retch.
15. Jump onto the dust-covered unplugged freezer in the corner carrying half a ton of oats destined for troughs.
16. Imagine superheroes are flying through the rafters between forgotten solitary rotted tobacco leaves.
17. Stare straight ahead into the stall and realize you are not alone.
18. Lose your common sense in a reflective black orb perched between brown hair.

19. Hop down from the freezer.
20. Go to the stall door.
21. Stick your head up your own ass.
22. Slide the wooden bar away from the door.
23. Scream “holy sweet goddamn!” in your head because you’re pretty advanced for your age but not out loud because you’re still six years old and belts hurt.
24. Scream this as the door explodes in front of a hoof the size of your swollen-pumpkin head.
25. Feel the hoof massage your scarred chest.
26. Remember that you just had surgery there two years ago.
27. Say a silent prayer to avoid more doctors.
28. Notice the weight of the hoof.
29. Recall that your grandfather told you it’s made of the same stuff as your fingernails.
30. Note that believing your grandfather will be more difficult from now on.
31. Leave your feet and bounce off of the freezer [this will be involuntary].
32. Make your first acknowledgement that Hell exists and this is it.
33. Think about the look of dinosaurs from your books.
34. Hope that that Jesus guy from bible school exists.
35. Hear your grandfather’s yells from a tunnel of light bleeding through the floating dust.
36. Connect his voice with that Jesus guy.
37. Listen to him scare the monster back into the stall with a whip and hand claps.

38. Hear the wooden bar slam back into place.
39. Start breathing again.
40. Look into your grandfather's eyes.
41. Answer his five seconds of terrorized questions.
42. Listen to his five minutes of angry threats.
43. Stare into the stall; rub your chest.
44. See the monster's eye again, staring at you.
45. Blink away tears.
46. Hear the echoes of your grandfather calling for you to follow him back to the house.
47. Stare into the eye.
48. Read the message scanning across the massive iris.
49. Get dragged back to the house to be checked out and wait for your worried pissed off father to get there.
50. Remember the monster's eye.
51. Consider keeping the wooden block closed.
52. Consider the whipping you might receive for forgetting your grandfather's warnings about the barn.
53. Consider disintegrating on the guest bed and disappearing from the earth.
54. Press the ice pack against your chest.
55. Laugh through sore ribs because you just told death to kiss your ass again.
56. Laugh until your family gets pissed, your grandmother's face stern, your father red.

## The Swing

It's everywhere, the magic of a story in my head, the superheroes of my imagination bouncing in front of me, miniature, a tree for a tower, a breeze for a hurricane, heroes saving my day. *"She's there! At the top of the tower! Release her, Hyde, or taste our wrath!"* A gargoyle copied from the cartoon, a man drenched in silver shooting webs, a bird of stone, I win no points for originality but it's all about the story dragging this wood forward and back, the creaking of old iron, a horseshoe on a frame, my grandfather's industrial revolution holding me up by chains. *They swing – Silver Spider from a thread stuck to a leafy crosswalk, Covington in the air by thick leather wings, Ravenstone's fists in circles and crushing against a wall made of bark.* Blurred images of a horse creep into the background, my grandfather's Belgian grazing in the paddock, I make a mental note as a car passes by and I duck, shamed, heat rising in my cheeks and chest. *Hyde holds the girl by her arms, over a balcony of timber, laughing, the heroes scrambling, her tears sprinkling the dirt beneath like the idea of rain.* The air tenses – will she fall? Will there be failure, will there be the necessary tragedy of a hero's past? Will something surprise even me, the writer, the god of invisible freaks? I barely hear the rumbling of a truck from the barn. *Covington reaches them first, his claws lashing at Hyde's spiraling tongue, his tail reaching for the girl, who falls too fast.* The swing rocks in short, hard bursts, my feet grinding into the hard clay beneath, my eyes wide, staring at ideas, worried, watching her twist in the air into a dive, her dress billowing behind her. *Silver Spider shoots a string of web beneath her, she connects, it snaps, she falls screaming beneath him, his gauntlets empty.* Holy shit, what's going to happen, what am I going to *make* happen, could I really do it, could I really let her fall?

*Ravenstone leaps from his perch two stories from the ground, grabbing desperately, grabbing clouds and arching down, his hands empty.* I'm barely touching the swing now, a trickle of sweat creeps down my back, "What the hell are you doin, takin a shit?" my uncle's voice carries across the yard and I jump as the last sound of leather streaks down towards the ground as I stutter something, my face burning, glancing back at the ground but I can't see her body, I can't see anything but a worn truck and my uncle's shaking head, his face as he chuckles and the worry written in his eyes, I can't see anything but things, and I don't know how the story would have ended

## The Belly and The Sun

I stand beneath the final strip of wood that my grandparents call a roof, a covering on their concrete patio, a shadow draped over my face and down onto my knees, my feet bared to the sun, looking out towards the slope between their garage and the barn and sheds and horseshoe corral at the top of the hill, but not that high, no, only in the center of the slope where a plastic wicker lawn chair sits, the full-body kind, where one could take a nap if not entrapped by pinching rubber, skin sticking to the threads, I see the chair and hear Mamaw's cries echoing from the house behind me, *put that belly to the sun!* she cries, never *my* belly, *your* belly, but *that* belly, like a slab of dead cow hanging in the butcher's freezer, my great marker, my definition, the pouch of so many pancakes and bowls of mashed potatoes, roasts and bowls of ice cream, eggs and bacon and bowls of chocolate cereal, a monument hanging from thick scar tissue running down between my great tits, drifting, saying *thankye ma'am for so much love!* and so much space in which to think during classes void of whispers behind hands, ink-covered notes, initials scratched on desks,

the door behind me locks, *so much love!*, so much constant supervision, so many eyes on that scar tissue and my lips which would scream blue in trouble, my arms around my knees in times breathlessness, but never my tongue, no, my tongue has no thread to my heart, only my stomach, but yes, that is important too, like hugs on a plate, like advice specially fried in an iron pot for me, like so much future money slipped into my pockets in lieu of inquiries about my state of mind, yes, physical love, the kind that slips into a lock and turns, sliding out into a frame so that options become limited, frightening, singular, *the chair or the lock* I think, *the chair or no more homemade gravy, the chair or*

*no more love* I think and the rest is easy, my head throbs, my ears sting, my chest says sorry,

and I walk out into the burning curtain of light catching a million pebbles in its hands, their crunching beneath my feet, the fire of those hands on my back and arms still smooth for a few years more, praise god, but the fire isn't meant for that flesh, no, but the flesh in front, *put that belly in the sun!* and so I do, coughing and spitting a fresh pile of phlegm into the grass, stretching down into the chair, its fingers grabbing my skin and pulling, I lean back and close my eyes to the heat of my chest, both inside and out, wondering if the medicine has finally started working, the little white pills choked down with water and sent scraping through the withered, battered veins around my ribs, sent to loosen the membrane caked across my lungs, I'm breathing better, smelling better, perhaps they've done their work,

the sun crosses the sky slowly, drifting deliberately through a blue sea empty of clouds, inching down in its arch towards the western ripples of land where the mountains sink away, I'm sitting in the middle of a change in geography, high to low, where that little white pill burns diagonally, laying at an angle, skin soaking in the space medicine that burns, burns like a Roman candle to scar my chest into something beautiful, something ready for a seaside beach and all of its pleasures, the caress of waves on my toes without a fear of cooking, new scars to match my old scars and all healing, all a sign of health and prosperity, it *burns* though, sears through these great tits, pouring heat in and pulling something out,

and she's calling me, *think that'll be enough!*, and I stand and look down at myself and see the pink rising, the air around my nipples bubbling, I touch my scar and

feel the medicines kissing one another, mating, making tiny yellow babies that will reach out of my skin and burst, crying, into the air and bleed into an emergency room, rage against cotton bandages and white stinking creams and scream in the back of a rented van, babies terrified of the ocean, bitter against the salt, keeping me in the sand and the shade, moaning, needing medicine, something for the pain, the salt of Mamaw's tears and apologies mixing and dripping into my wounds, I hear her voice twinned, apologies *put that belly to the sun!*, but for now all I feel is a hunger for ice cream and a layer of skin blistering my chest.

## Coming Attractions

It's the gin, the gin slipping down my throat and burning my tonsils, the sweet bitter taste of something serious passing over my tongue for the first time, like kissing god, that brings the head change, that dims the low hum of my classmates rumbling through a friend's basement, that illuminates the German pornography shining silently from the widescreen television covered in VHS tapes, that calms me for the first time in crowds, lets me rock in the recliner with a stein of gin and red Kool-Aid on my knee and forget all about the dark hallways of McNabb Middle School, the loneliness of a walk amongst friends and *her*, finally lets me forget about *her* and the way her smile pities me in our one class together, finally lets me quit thinking about the eighth graders and their laughter directed towards the junior pro football jersey I wore to school a few weeks ago, finally lets me relax, the strange sensation of a resting mind.

I think people might be fooling around in the next room, groping each other like only twelve year olds can, in the dark, trying to be loud and quiet at the same time, quiet just in case their partner figures out that they don't know what the hell they're doing, that maybe this isn't all it's cracked up to be on the widescreen, maybe a mustache is necessary for orgasm, yet loud so that everyone else knows *something* is going down, *something* is happening in that tiny black room, *something* that will easily be imagined into existence and then confirmed in the morning, or perhaps on Monday in the lunchroom, *something* is something I will hear all about and turn green over, looking over at *her* while I chew my hamburger and wish my hangover would just go away already, the hangover I am already learning to mask, my first taste of the arts.

My glass grows warmer and warmer, the drink not nearly as appealing, the burn more pronounced, and yet I still keep tipping it back against my lips and setting my stomach on fire, still keep holding it up and flashing red teeth to everyone who walks by, the *cool* kids, the ones I've always wanted to know, the group I've desperately fought with my parents about Abercrombie sweatshirts for, the people who need to see how *cool* I am when my inhibitions are torched away, the jokes I can make, the lurid nonsensical enraged rants I can spew for their entertainment, the best drug, the only way to make it through sixth grade, that and an appreciation for foreign cinema.

I hear everyone out in the driveway, a basketball slamming against the concrete, but my feet won't move, the glass is too heavy, I suck at basketball anyway, and something strange is happening, the television is dimming, changing, twisting colors into a fog through my thick lenses, and I see myself on the screen, slightly thinner, a plastic water bottle full of vodka in my hands, the owner of the drive-in calling our parents, my father yelling at me in our front room beneath the stairs, and I see myself in a future friend's recliner, watching Cinemax at midnight, cracking open a pint of Old Fitz, and I see myself in our dining room, lying on the carpet staring into a bright light as our computer chair creaks beneath the weight of two friends making out, and I see myself in an open field holding a gun and a cup, firing at an innocent pink bear propped up on a box, my future friends shaking their heads, and I see myself holding a piece of paper and desiring a drink despite an instant vow of sobriety, and I see myself falling again and again, sitting on a future friend's couch drinking vodka straight and watching a football movie and puking, projectile vomiting into a trash can on a sidewalk outside a Mount Sterling saloon, sitting on my future porch couch with a bourbon and coke in one hand

and a book in the other, I see myself gripping my side, I see myself on the screen, much dimmer now, as if I've reached a point in the movie that hasn't yet been filmed, as if thirteen years of post production have passed, I'm staring back at me, tired, I'm screaming, but the television is still muted, the colors running yellow.

The back door opens and the screen reverts to sex, my friends spotted in sweat, the girls staring vapidly at the boys, and I feel the weight of the glass on my thigh, heavy, like warnings that sink down into the back of my neck, like bonus scenes wiped free of dust and inserted in the middle of a movie, like memories of something that hasn't happened yet.

**Electric Text***I*

My mother is going through the mail at the counter in the kitchen, something is heating on the stove, the news is blaring from above the refrigerator, and I watch her flip through bill after bill after bill and a thin white envelope appears with my name on it, an envelope drenched in bureaucracy, the red logo of the Central Kentucky Blood Center stamped in the upper left corner, and my mother asks me why I've got a letter from the CKBC and I shrug, telling her that I gave blood a few weeks ago at school, after my seventeenth birthday and she smiles, proud of her son's good deed I suppose, and she turns to watch a story on the news as I rip open the envelope with my pinkie, slip out the single piece of paper inside and make the counter tremble as my ribs skip into my eyes.

*II*

I'm sitting here in our frayed green chair beside the kitchen table that my family's had since I was still shitting my pants, sitting in this chair still covered in the hair of a dog that died over a year ago, sitting here staring at this piece of paper and thinking about waste, about what a waste this paper is, that a tree had to die a painful, eviscerated death to produce this abomination in my hands, this single sheet of paper rustling in the breath of a ceiling fan a few feet away in the kitchen, where my father sits, thinking whatever it is he's thinking, thinking of shock definitely, thinking about the end of his last name perhaps, the two of us sitting together in two different sections of the same room while my mother types furiously on the keyboard in the corner, developing cataracts from the computer screen, straining against the electric text to find something, hope maybe, maybe

a reason, maybe a reason to start breathing again, her typing the only thing in my ears, the paper the only thing in my eyes.

### III

Our cordless phone is jammed into my ear and I guess I'm talking, talking to the girl I've been talking to, such a strange term – *talking*, the new way to say *courting*, only stripped of any responsibility because my generation can't handle anything too serious – talking a little but mostly listening to Ashley on the other end but not really listening, a faint hum filling my head, I have no idea what she's saying but I feel the need to interject and so I do, I tell her, I tell her what that piece of paper says, that I have hepatitis, that the world's over, that I feel like an angus steak that's fallen into mud, and there's silence for a second, then the same breezy voice that slipped around the hum, only this time I hear her completely and am not pleased, livid even, with her "so what" attitude, her proclamations that it's not a big deal and that I shouldn't worry, and I'm not worrying at the moment because I'm pissed, unable to believe that this girl I've made out with, this girl I've thought about constantly for months gives less than one shit about me having an incurable disease, goddamn her, I think, and what I don't think is the obvious, what doesn't occur to me is that she may be trying to keep my spirits up, trying to support me, what I don't consider is that she's showing me it isn't a big deal and she's not afraid of me, but I don't think about possibilities because all I want to hear right now is her world crashing down, too.

### IV

I open the fridge and the entire door falls off, mustard and jelly shatters across our new wood floor, and I can't help yelling "Why does everything break in this goddamn house!"

✓

I'm lying in my bed, staring at the little ripples of white paint above me, wondering why paint spikes became such a hot ceiling design, why I have to have so many sharp edges around me now, doesn't that damn ceiling know how dangerous it is to cut me, and my mind turns, ripples like the ceiling, throbs, plays images against my eyes, short stories about all the reactions I'll encounter in the coming days and how can I tell everyone, how can I tell my friends, we've just started getting really close, and what if they run screaming and I have to eat lunch alone, what if my teachers are afraid of me now, what if Ashley comes to her senses and gets the fuck out of Dodge, and what if I just sneak downstairs and grab the letter off of the island and set it on fire with my mother's lighter, what if I watch the smoke reach into the curtains, what if I watch the ashes dance into the drain of the sink, what if I just burn the evidence, the only proof that my blood is radioactive – will that take things back to how they were the day before, will that purify my liver, will that make everyone forget, or will that turn me into ash, will that obliterate me, since all that I am now is a sheet of paper?

**Ten and Twenty**

We all wore ties to be ironic – Thom in his trucker’s hat and short-sleeved plaid shirt and Christmas tie, Kyle with a few spots of fur on his chin inches above the collar holding the red-checked tie, and me in the wrinkled white button-up and flat green tie, a cigarette dangling from my lip. The ties were what gave the night its start, its energy. The Spider-Man party hats helped top off the laughter that came from our chests every time one of us turned his head. We made everyone put on a party hat, and when one snapped its rubber band against my Nana’s face, we choked on our laughter just enough to make sure she wasn’t bleeding as she muttered under her breath and reached our communication quota. My brother-in-law turned his head into a cardboard jack, with five of those goddamn hats stretched across his massive head. The ice cream cake was decorated in a staining Spider-Man mural. There was even a Spider-Man toothbrush in one of my gift bags. This is how we celebrated my twentieth birthday, twice as much as ten, by reaching back a decade and pulling it into the present. Laughter bouncing off the walls, splashing into the cake, laughter covering our faces with icing and chocolate crunch. At one point, the laughter was so much that I had to roll up my sleeves to work towards settling myself. I exposed the plastic hospital bracelet on my right wrist just long enough for my mother to notice and jerk my sleeve back down. She didn’t want my grandparents to see, but I couldn’t care less when there was so much laughter in my lungs. We had to hide the bracelet from prying eyes, in case someone would think that pure liquid joy wasn’t running through all of our veins. So I kept my sleeves buttoned and kept tugging at the time rope, pulling into the present innocent years when taking ten little white pills, half of twenty, and waking up in an emergency room and pissing in front

of Thom and hearing my dad charge into the waiting room with the wrath of God pointed directly at every one of my friends and drifting off again and waking up in my parents' guest bedroom didn't seem like a situation any of us needed to prepare for. I kept talking on the phone to my insane aunt and making goofy faces to my friends while they took pictures of their distorted faces through the fishbowl in the kitchen. I kept eating superheroes and trying to rip the plastic covers off of DVDs. I kept that flat green tie on, just to enjoy the irony.

**Freebird at Eleven**

I'm watching my two best friends drink hooch in the foyer of the Ramada in Mount Sterling while my uncle turns back a pint of Crown Royal and my father bellows like Paul Revere.

"Freebird at eleven! Bon Jovi right before it!"

My friends and I crack up at my father's excitement – he's a child on Christmas morning if that child has been drinking bourbon for four hours. The DJ has bestowed upon my father the most precious of gifts – the inclusion of a deep-fried southern symphony to the jubilation that is tonight. My sister scoots past us in jeans and a t-shirt, her long white veil still pinned in her hair, flowing behind her like a trail that says *this is the path of happiness, follow me to make our parents proud*. My fiancé is hanging around the doorway staring at her. I know what she's thinking.

Kyle puts down his red plastic cup and gets pulled into a conversation with my father and one of his best friends, Jimmy, about the artistry of playing guitar. Kyle and Jimmy seem uncomfortable, but that could just be the half-gallon of alcohol shared between them. Thom takes a drink and laughs.

"Your dad's having the most fun I've ever seen anyone have," he says.

"Well why wouldn't he?" I say.

My father has spent way too much on this wedding, and I know this because he says it frequently. And whenever he does, he gives me a barely noticeable look, one that says *and I'm not spending it again*. He's a traditional man, a man who will open his heart and his wallet whenever needed, unless tradition tells him otherwise. He once told me that there wouldn't be one penny from his pocket going towards my college

education, even though he was the loudest voice pushing me into the universities. Of course he'd buy me groceries or give me gas money, but nothing towards the actual bill. College is something you work for, tradition dictates. The bride's family pays for the wedding, tradition dictates. There won't be anything from my parents for my wedding, and to be perfectly honest, I wouldn't expect it. They don't agree with my engagement as it is. I guess there's something about being an unemployed college dropout that tells them I'm not ready for that kind of responsibility, or maybe the fact that I'm on my third go-round of dating my fiancé and they're not exactly charter members of her fan club isn't helping, or maybe everything about me has simply congealed into a thick mass of disappointment and they'd rather I didn't continue adding to it and turning myself into a massive pimple.

My entire family is dancing to Tom Jones' "You Can Leave Your Hat On." It's one of my father's favorite songs. Uncle Barry is dancing on top of a chair, the world's skinniest, hairiest striptease. The family is dying from laughter, as is Thom. I may just be dying. I need a drink but can't have one because I have to drive home later and also because my entire family is standing guard over the alcohol like it's gold at Fort Knox. With an incurable liver disease, I've gotten used to things like that. Doesn't help my thirst, though.

A slow song ushers Barry off the dance floor and all the couples rush over to the parquet to hold each other and pretend their love is the same as my sister and brother-in-law's. This is the true meaning of weddings – a reminder, a wake-up call, a knife buried deep in your chest and twisting and turning up the pressure on an already damaged heart.

Pressure. The air is thick with pressure, to where the neon floodlights from the DJ's table struggle to break through.

My fiancé pulls in close against my chest and I can feel her smile through my cheek.

"Shouldn't we go ahead and go change before it gets too late?" she whispers.

I can think of only one response: "Why, I believe you've got a good point there."

We slip away from the dance floor and she grabs her purse as I tell my mother what we're doing, or at least all Mom needs to know about it. Mom gives me a stern look.

"Be back soon," she says.

"Of course," I say. "Back in a second, promise."

I am determined to keep my promise so we don't waste any time at the house and I'm not really sure we need to rush anyway to get back quickly but we don't even make it to the stairs and I've never seen the house so dark and the living room floor is cold and I don't have a condom but the only condom I need is on her left third finger and there's nothing but silence and grunting in the air and we're done.

"You know that's going to be us next year," she says, slipping her bra back on and pointing across the photo-covered television stand in the vague direction of the hotel.

"What, two old people covered in dust?" I say, wiping the sweat from my forehead.

"No," she says, agitated, "not the picture of your grandparents. Married. We'll be getting married! What's wrong with you?"

She's pissed because that's our trade – I get three minutes of ecstasy and she gets hours to talk about marriage and all the babies we're about to start producing – and I'm not playing along.

“Nothing,” I say, “I'm just tired. You ready to go?”

“Thirty minutes, told you we'd be back quick.”

“Why do you care so much?” Mom says and hugs me. “I'm glad you're back.”

Dad, Jimmy, and my uncle Brent are laughing heavily and dancing with my sister's high-school friends. Kyle and Thom are sitting at a table sipping hooch and laughing.

“I miss anything?” I ask them.

“Just this,” Thom says, pointing at my father. “I love your dad.”

We all check our watches. It's a quarter 'til eleven.

“Bout that time,” Kyle says. I see a four-year-old at Chuck E Cheese's in his eyes.

We bullshit for a few minutes, making fun of our other friends, and I sneak a quick sip of the hooch. We marvel at its wonder. As I look over towards my fiancé and smile, the DJ lowers the lights and we all hear the strum of an acoustic guitar twang across the reception hall.

“Well, if you have to choose a Bon Jovi song, ‘Wanted Dead or Alive’ is probably the least embarrassing,” I say. Then my father throws his fist in the air and everyone begins to swarm the dance floor.

A noxious bellow thirty voices strong rumbles from the throbbing crowd. They are all cowboys, it seems, and on steel horses they ride. All wanted, dead or alive. It's infectious, the neon-bouncing cloud of sweat and catharsis that sits on their shoulders and permeates towards the ceiling and out against the white-covered tables. I smell it, Thom smells it, Kyle smells it. We drag our feet, struggling against the inevitable desire to be a part of this legion, wanting nothing more than to sip warm liquor and pray for a Radiohead song, but it's like a finger curled into our nostrils, pulling us across the carpet to the parquet, and we follow. We join the masses. We become cowboys in dress shirts and khakis, cowboys in thin ties and Harley Davidson boots. We are outlaws to our own cultural attitudes.

The final strains of the guitar fall silent, and everyone stops breathing, anticipating. Sweat trickles down into my boots. I feel my fiancé's hand on my back. I acknowledge her. Kyle is sneaking a quick drink from the table, in a rush to get back. Thom is talking to some of my sister's friends from high school. My father's bellowing like Ric Flair, saying "woo!" and clapping. Everyone is trying to catch a break. And then it happens. The organ fires up. Acoustic guitars strumming, drums snapping. It is eleven o'clock and everyone is going to experience a wedding-night orgasm.

Van Zandt asks us all if we would still remember him, and we whisper "yes." I think my father might be crying. The collective has split into a sea of pairs slowly shifting from foot to foot, cheek to cheek, foreheads pressed against shoulders, lips pressed against lips. This is everyone's first concert, everyone's prom, everyone's wedding dance. I see my parents holding each other. I see my sister and brother-in-law

pressed together tight. My hands are around my fiancé's waist, our hips one, her face in the crook of my neck. I am completely, absolutely, one-hundred-percent drenched in this moment, and completely detached. That's how I always seem to be, and lord knows I can't change. I'm thinking about the fluorescent purple shots arching across my face, the fog of perspiration, the dwindling numbers of my bank account, my friends dancing with people they've never met, the thunderous condition of my car brakes, the screaming electric symphony in my ears, the descriptor beside my name that says "unemployed," the scraping of dishes on the tables as the caterers start to clean, the empty August two months away when my friends go back to college and I continue waking up in my parents' home, the little arguments between me and my fiancé that echo in my ears, how easily we all paired off for this song and if it should really be that easy, the ever more frequent stuttering of my heart, the emptiness of the hooch table for the first time tonight, my cracking and decaying ideas on life, the dry bit of icing on my uncle's lip, how sharp my fiancé's ring is, how it scrapes into my hand like a Brillo pad, how I need a shower, how I need to scrape everything clean.

We're all sore, all covered in saltwater, all dragging our feet out the door of the Ramada and towards our cars and towards our beds and towards our well-earned rests. I kiss my fiancé goodnight and she rests her forehead on mine and whispers "I can't wait." I lie and agree. Kyle and Thom are helping each other to the car. My aunts and uncles all laugh and hug and kiss my sister and brother-in-law and mother and father. They forget about me and I don't mind. The boys climb into the back seat of my station wagon. I go back and hug my family, tell my sister congratulations, tell my parents

goodnight, tell them I'll take care of the house while they stay here for the night, tell them how wonderful everything was.

Driving home, Thom and Kyle are muttering ridiculous things about girls at the wedding and how delicious the hooch was. I'm laughing with them and making fun of Barry, focusing on the road, and thinking about how epic the evening really was, how there will be nothing that could ever top the energy, the collective passion of that reception hall. In a year's time, I'll be trying to duplicate the evening and failing miserably. I'll be standing in a rented tux and looking at my exasperated family and my fiancé's conservative, anal family sipping sparkling cider and casting uneasy looks at my uncles. I'll be smiling thankfully and shaking hands with strangers and looking at my fiancé and regretting every goddamn minute of it all, knowing there will be no Freebird at eleven, no Bon Jovi right before it. I'll be sore from factory work and weary from meticulous wedding planning and tired of the whispers of having babies nine months later. I'll be jealous of my sister all over again, hating her perfection, her common sense. I'll be moving slowly, trying not to let my heart burst through my chest. I'll be in misery, knowing things just couldn't be the same.

When we get home, Thom and Kyle crawl out of the car. One of them proceeds to vomit all over the grass beside our sidewalk. I don't notice who – I'm too busy staring up through our chestnut tree, wishing I was brave enough to fly.

**Space Medicine**

She rode in my backseat as I argued with another girlfriend, and she was all I wanted then, the only star in the universe.

And she sat beside me, legs crossed, in the gym of my elementary alma mater, watching her brother play bass, laughing as my best friend shredded his guitar behind his head and ten year olds screamed, her hair a little curly, I liked that.

A rose petal drifts to the ground, ripped through the window of a van, wilting. It curls through the air like a paper airplane poorly made, arching towards February clouds then diving to the pavement.

I stuttered something, something resembling a request for numbers in a shadowy atrium full of peers, she gave them to me, my heart skipped.

A movie blared in the background, huddled together with a foreign youth group, our first kiss broke an elder's heart, destined for weightlessness, only a wet warm vacuum without light.

My stomach rumbles, bones ache, muscles bubble.

*Pippi Longstocking* played on her faded basement television. We made our initial explorations. We charted the uncharted, floated through a thick atmosphere beneath blankets, together for eight hours now, a good start.

I shook her father's hand, *nice to meet you*.

My heart skips, beats, flutters, skips against a bone cage.

I held her on my waist, the steering wheel digging into her back, my mouth on her neck, her bare chest, the sun crept past the horizon, the church parking lot grew dark, Jesus wept.

Drifting back and forth in a swing, Freed-Hardman University, our first *I love you*.

My skull is pulling apart, trying to escape, my mind leaking from the schism, sliding down my neck.

We sang together, alto and baritone, music in a sanctuary, fingers interlocked, a week from graduation, my hair against my shoulders, hiding slouches.

I joined the church, marched middle school kids down a campground hill, refused to let her have lunch with her best friend, bowed my head at a crowd of anger, a diploma in my pocket, the air was lighter.

No gravity.

A panel wall in a church basement exploded with cracked sterling silver ringlets, thick bands, ground teeth, rejection, my stammering tears.

We were sitting in my car, my yelling confined to my head, her patient explanations a sharp stick in my throat, away with the second chance, I had to get ready to transfer, I had to move on to late-night deep dish and twelve-packs, pills and spinning lights.

There's atrophy in my legs, the anti-bends, call the doctor, cut the gravity away.

She was behind me, a few steps higher on the staircase after surprising me on the cold hill, her voice gentle six months removed from my passenger seat, my posture strained on the cold stone, straining not to look back, knowing I wouldn't be able to stop, her hand on my back, new boyfriend nowhere in sight.

My broken secondhand futon shook beneath us, my dorm room frozen, littered with soda cans, the television' buzzing snow. My muscles bubbled.

The pressure presses down, down into my shoulders against a jewelry case, down into my bank account, down, down into my feet, unable to run.

We danced at my sister's wedding, surrounded by neon, her head on my shoulder, dark.

Floating, exposed to radiation, the pressure.

Screams through a cell phone, her disgust at a homemade meal on a night of romance, no need for a balanced checkbook, sustenance through our lips, she sounds fifteen again, I sound decaying, my eyes nearly at capacity, the pressure changes. I yell *bitch* into the receiver, crows scatter, dead weeds sway in a photographer's background, I feel nothing.

I need space medicine.

All I do is drift, ice forming on my fingers, a warmth on my scalp from a star too distant to bathe in now, maybe later, after treatment, after a fifth of orange nutrients, pawning my rings from her fingers, delirium.

*Can I have one last hug* she asks in the parking lot of my office, holding a box of her shirts from my room, I cave in one last time, twitching, not recognizing the release valve.

I drop my phone into my pocket, see a van through salt lenses driving down the highway, shedding flowers.

## Minglewood Blues

1. **The First One:** Beautiful, a gift amongst the derision of threadbare sweatpants, my first phone call, we watched *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* together with our voices, the cord stretched nearly flat through my parents' doorway, my sister slamming her fist against the frame, we never had enough time, only a respite between horror stories, a year and then only the ghost of you
2. **The One Who Used Me For Birthday Presents:** Fuck you.
3. **The One I Kept Missing:** The patch of freckles across your nose, we shared a "best friends" broken heart locket in fifth grade, I wore it until my sternum grew red, it went on too long, I chased you through a jungle gym, you chased me through pre-algebra, and then you were a face of glass I saw others through, then an empty chair, another patch of wind
4. **The One Six Times:** Off and on, one of us a chair and the other an ass, I'm not sure which, until a conversation about god and fooling around, you called Christ and I called bullshit, your wedding was lovely, the shotguns didn't fire
5. **The One With Frozen Lips:** At least your mother seemed to love me, but your toughness, that cold shoulder covered in red, and again with this Christ, goddamn the exhaustion of competing with a savior, our first kiss was our last, my lips like a vice, awkward, the sounds of fucking above us, and all we could do was brush our frowns together
6. **The One With Empty Hands:** I learned the romantic qualities of System of a Down in your driveway, you taught me how to kiss after the movie, feet away from your front door, and again when you had the flu, after *Breakfast at Tiffany's*,

beneath the porch light, even through the viruses on our breaths, but the touch of white gold across your knuckles, the black stone above my graduation date, as contagious as your lips

7. **The One With A Perforated Teddy Bear:** The grooves of a handgun humming in my palm, cracking, a black button exploding in a cloud of cotton, the fabric that scratched my ribs as I slept now tearing in two, goodbye six weeks of musicals on a couch, shot away with a .22 and a fifth of vodka, a campfire, the heat in my chest
8. **The One Who Returned My Bleeding Heart:** Once in a Sunday School classroom, all the links and crystals of cracked jewelry crashing against a panel wood wall, and the yelling in god's house, months after we took each other for the first time on a surprise trip home from college; and again the exchange of jewelry in the parking lot of a photography studio, my sobs echoing through a dressing room where my boss could hear after an hour-long smoke break spent screaming into a cell phone, the luckiest cigarette, as all the florist vans cruised by, the center of February, the story that wins all "worst breakup" contests, thank you for that, roses in a cloud of shit.

**An Evening of Dead Horse**

I have to get out of this brick box, freezing, I am throbbing with the urge to dance, to walk barefoot through a tobacco patch or simply the heat of a burning television, central heating in my mother's den, a bowl of white potato soup, I don't need flowers, only cotton slippers and my father's dog curled in my lap, hot coffee, the glow of leftover Christmas, a path towards something like home glistening across a hill of new hay, anything to prove my heartbeat, anything but a cold steam tomb

and as I leave my reclaimed womb of the country for a second-story shack on High Street, I find you halfway to Papaw's – breathing steam; not breathing; steam drifting – and I speed to the shadowed house, slam my fist on the storm door and step aside for the old man with my mother's eyes, crusted over, and we come back to you and the car – shattered windshield; broken headlight; stumbling driver – and the man bellows about payments, high on pills and cheap vodka, Papaw's spit falls at his toes as this man screams sacrilege above your body – blood trickling; pavement bleeding; red crackling to black – and the sheriff arrives in the fog and asks about my grandmother, the driver's proclamations muffled in the back of the squad car as we wait for the bells of the tractor – chains drifting; locking against hooves; shattered legs tight – and the sheriff pulls away, the tractor lurches into the field, the old man ready for bed, and I, only I watch the trail of black blood stretch from the highway to the barn

and now, back here, back standing on a layer of my year-old junk mail, back shaking in my only room, I see my stubbled face cracked like aged plaster, a sliver of gray on my chin, swollen eyes splintered in veins, red rosatia, I am bloated in a smeared

mirror, coughing, showing my chipped teeth, decaying, my ankles sore, taut, waiting to be dragged through the streets, leaving a dark path on the dewy asphalt.

**There is Nothing More to Say**

In the morning I slide off of the couch like spilt pudding down the kitchen drawers, slow, thick from refrigeration. The chill from outside the single afghan deemed suitable the night before reminds me that heat rises and the room I sleep in at my parents' house is underground. Sandpaper creeps up my calves. The tile in the bathroom is like cold limestone against my feet. I remember the cold tiles in the hospital, the purified air circulated through the halls, the mini-fridge with a week's worth of soda in the corner of the hospice room. I brush my teeth, slinging pale blue paste against the mirror.

I pass my sister on the way to the shower upstairs. Her eyes are swollen, and I remember my nephew. Sleep was hard to come by for everyone. She looks at me and smiles a smirk never meant to be a smirk, only her best efforts. Her footsteps smack against the panel floor towards our parents' room. I step into the guest bathroom, lock the door, and catch a glimpse of my bare body while the water fills the nook with steam. Swollen around the midsection, weak legs, purple domino mask beneath my eyebrows. I remember the varicose veins swelling against Nana's skin, her skin that stretched out tight to make her legs Italian sausages. I remember sitting in the hospital room years ago, reading Stephen King and fearing more the shallow gasps and whimpers echoing from her bed than anything in the text. The memory of sunken sheets below her left knee slides past. The shower is ready. I rush in.

The burn of the water slips down the curves of my body, covering my skin in Dial. I grind the apricot facial wash into my cheeks and forehead and wash it away,

watching the grains tremble in circles down the drain. There's no shampoo and I don't need it anyway. Turning the levers inward, I pull a heavy red towel from the ring beside the stall and pat my chest and legs dry. Water drips onto my feet. I remember the warm yellow drip on my sandaled toes, standing in the hospital years ago, when Nana still stood to greet me in the doorway. The stains of urine followed my white socks into the garbage. A week ago, Mamaw reminded me about this. I pull on my plaid boxers and go to the kitchen for a cookie.

There is a box of fried chicken hiding between the mounds of flowers on the counter. On the stove is the spaghetti my father's company sent. My cousin's country ham is in bags destined for the fridge. I bite into the soft batch cookie and sip some milk from a coffee mug. How many more times will I hear about her famous fried chicken Sunday dinners this week? And every time, my mind wanders to the five-layer strawberry cake she made for my birthdays. The cool burst of strawberries between my teeth, the taste of thick grains of sugar trembling in circles down my throat. I swallow the cookie and go downstairs to get dressed.

I slip into the new black trousers and fill the pockets with my keys and wallet and change. The blue dress shirt my mother bought yesterday hangs in the window. I pull it across my shoulders, feel the smooth fibers rub against my arm hair, and tuck the remainder into my pants. The new black dress shoes pinch my toes and I wince walking towards the mirror. While I tie the new black-blue tie around my neck I can't help but yawn from the sleepless night, my mouth gaping open as I pull the tie closed. I

remember the way she laid there four nights ago, her eyes closed, her skin pale and cold. Her mouth hung open like Carter Caves, silent. I wanted to say something, to fill the room with words, but all there was was silence.

I reach the top of the stairs and meet my family, clean-shaven, eyes swollen, ironed and exhausted. My mother smiles and checks my tie and hugs me tightly. My father puts his arm around me and checks the time. In the guest room my nephew is looking for horses and my sister is helping. The family gathers together and makes driving arrangements. I decide to drive myself to Owingsville. I remember passing the nursing home twice a month, driving towards the bank or the doctor or my mother's office. The car never made the turn up the hill. It was the lack of conversation as much as anything else that kept me from making that turn. It is the lack of conversation as much as anything else that makes me drive alone to Owingsville. There is nothing more to say.