

**CREATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
four pieces

# WHAT IS THAT SONG, YOU SING FOR THE DEAD?

Xavier Corr

*The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For full text, please visit [www.honorsjournal.com](http://www.honorsjournal.com)*

## POT KETTLE BLUE

Silhouettes draped along the room. Smoke trailed through in a haze, bathed in maroon and marmalade. Beams of alabaster pierced through the dense fog, illuminating the corner "stage." Some old coot was wailing on a sax. The notes could rupture an eardrum; they rang so bold in that run-down dump. Nevertheless, I passed out in my drink.

Northbound - 1923

The walls shook. *I shoulda left sooner.* I could hear the engines bellow as the train pulled out.

"There's nothing I can do. Boarding's over. Train's already leavin' can't yah hear?"

"C'mon there's gotta be something!"

"Sorry kid."

"I got people expecting me! I got this old ticket! Ain't it good for something? I need to be on the next one out!"

"Don't you and every other negro come walkin' in this station. Nothin' I can do."

Stepping away from the counter, I made my way outside. Crowds dispersed as the final departures exited the station. I drifted towards the rails, found a hillside, dropped my bags and slumped against them. The sky was on fire, brilliant red clouds bursting overhead. So was the bench, scorched by the unrelenting sun. I stood up.

Hours passed; I had dozed off playing that old tune ma used to sing me when I got low.

*Hey boy, I see ya crying. Ain't you all alone?*

*I know ya feelin' scared. So boy, come on home*

*Cause you got me. You got me, boy. You don't have to cry.*

*There's no need. No more need boy. No need for you to cry.*

*Plenty of need ma.* By the time I woke up, the sun had gone. Lights flickered from the overhang, the air still ripe with warmth. The ground shook. Blinding white enveloped the horizon, roaring steel and bellowing smoke; I couldn't breathe. Why was it on the track? Why was I on the track? I tensed up. I couldn't move! *Stupid! JUMP!* Evidently, it was a cargo locomotive, stopping briefly for a change of the guard, something of the sort. Must've been the adrenaline: I hopped on board an open car. It was murky, dim; a handful of sun cracked through the side-door. It didn't occur to me how sparsely I'd eaten until all I could do was sit and crave. Wind blew in on occasion: nasty wind, frigid, biting. I'd never known the breeze to be so unkind. Singing was too much with the dehydration, but I hummed best I could, plucked out some strings.

*Hey boy where's that river going?*

*Upstream, over hill.*

*You say you're going there, and I know that you will.*

*So long to ya dear. So long. Unto you.*

*When y're gone, I'll be here. Right here.*

*Next to you.*

Centuries later, we stopped. I slide the door open: no one. *Thank god.* It was cold, nearly dawn. I wandered off into some forest. My stomach was burning now; the trunks were far too taxing, and thus, abandoned again. I happened upon a stream: water! I inhaled. Following that, I must've lost consciousness.

## VIA CHICAGO

"What's this now?"

"Found him in Burnham Park. Kid was out cold, looked pretty beat. We carried him

to the car.”  
“What’d you do that for?”  
“Was I going to leave him there?”  
“What’s it your problem?”  
“What’s it a problem?”  
“You pick up some goon in the street and don’t think it’s a problem?”  
“I wasn’t gonna let the bastard rot! Neither would you, so lay off.”  
“What’s next then?”  
“We gotta get Ed.”  
“Oh no—”  
“So, I’ll be back—” he said, halfway through the exit.  
“NO! This is NOT my problem.”  
“I expect the boy in good health,” the door shut.  
I awoke on a couch, not quite lucid, my belongings beside me. The room was well lit, dazzling in fact. A semi-circular stage nested against the back wall, opposite clusters of tables, all partitioned to one side, with an open area along the other. Sectioned off from the main space was a lengthy countertop; behind it, shelves of spirits, adjacent to a door on the other end. It smelled stained, tinged with sweat, smoke, and liquor, bit like home.

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**HE LED ME THROUGH THE  
DOORWAY, UPSTAIRS AND  
OUTSIDE. IT WAS RADIANT,  
RESTLESS AND IN MOTION,  
SUPPLEMENTED BY  
IMPENETRABLE WAVES OF  
SOUND. ENDLESS NOISE  
SCATTERED ABOUT,  
IMPOSSIBLE TO DISTINGUISH.  
PILLARS OF CONCRETE LOOMED  
ABOVE THE WORLD, ALIVE,  
SHIMMERING LIKE THE STARS  
THEY OBSCURED. VIBRANT  
LIGHTS GLEAMED IN EVERY  
DIRECTION. IT WAS  
MAGNIFICENT; IT WAS  
OVERWHELMING. I RETREATED  
BACK INSIDE.**

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“Hey you’re up.”  
*Fuck!* I startled back.

“Whoa, don’t get jumpy.”  
“Who’re you?”  
“Likewise.”  
“What— Where are we?”  
“Want some grub? You look pretty ghastly.”  
My stomach was going to implode.  
“Who are you!?!?”  
“Still on that?” he jibed, sliding me a plate, “Henry Taylor.”  
*That didn’t tell me nothin’!* His wry smirk suggested I wasn’t getting a straight answer. I ate. He watched. Henry looked worn, older than he should, tired eyes and cracked hands.  
“Back to you; give me a name.”  
“Henry Taylor.”  
“Alright,” he couldn’t help but grin, “wise guy: we’re in the Shaking Pig on State street. A friend of mine found you in Burnham, dropped you here. Your turn.”  
“I—,” *pigs?* “where, are we though?”  
“You’re out of questions kid.”  
*C’mon* “Alright. Thomas Green - a friend of mine moved up north, gave me a ticket to meet him. Missed my train, hitched on another and landed here, passed out in some woods after I think. Where’s here?”  
“Chicago.”  
He led me through the doorway, upstairs and outside. It was radiant, restless and in motion, supplemented by impenetrable waves of sound. Endless noise scattered about, impossible to distinguish. Pillars of concrete loomed above the world, alive, shimmering like the stars they obscured. Vibrant lights gleamed in every direction. It was magnificent; it was overwhelming. I retreated back inside.  
“What’s the deal?”  
“Nothin’ - just a... just a lot, is all.”  
He paused.  
“So, you missed your train?”

#### ONE-WINGED DOVE

We spoke for an hour or so as I detailed my harrowing journey. Afterwards, I nestled back into my sofa as Henry started unstacking chairs. Three men burst through the door.  
“Henry!” exclaimed one.  
“Hey Ed,” the two embraced.  
“The boy’s not dead. You old softy,”

another said, glancing at me.  
"Alright, dry up. He's yours now."  
"Fair enough," he turned to me "What's your name?"  
"Tom."  
"Pleasure, I'm Frank Harris. That's Ed Raslo," gesturing to the towering figure beside Henry. "You met Henry. And that fat bastard is Andy 'Brassman' Probasco." His eyes veered towards the clock, "Oh man, alright boys 9:30, best get hopping," back to me again, "You're welcome to stick around."  
They scrambled about for a few minutes, tuning instruments and shifting chairs. Four more entered and greeted the band, then vanished behind the counter to start mixing drinks. Soon the room flooded with people. The scene lit up!  
Propulsive music echoed about the chamber as bodies began to sway in rhythmic orgy. The vitality was palpable, infectious. I found myself on the verge of jumping from my seat and joining the commotion. Festivities persisted well into the night; I had fallen asleep behind the counter.  
"Damn kid," shocked to discover me comatose again, "C'mon time to go," Henry said, wrestling me awake.  
"Hey get off!"  
"Morning," said Frank, "Sorry to wake you, but we gotta scram. Can't lounge around here all day."  
"Oh, yeah— sure. I'll take off," still dazed.  
"Hey, slow down. Henry told me you rode up on a cargo train. Quite a tale."  
"Yeah," I sighed.  
"Seems like you're in need of employ. Can you play that thing?" pointing at my banjo.  
"Yeah?"  
"Fantastic! Excuse us a minute," as he pulled Henry aside.  
The two withdrew into the stairwell.  
"NO," protested Henry.  
"How's he going to keep up if you don't show him the ropes?"  
"I am *not* your fuckin' lapdog Frank, teach him yourself."  
"You know I don't have the time. It's asking a lot, I'm aware. But he said he can play, just give him a feel for it. Get

him thinking on his feet a little."  
"Why are you doing this Frank? You don't owe this kid anything."  
"The world owes him a hell of a lot more than he's going to get. How much skin off your back is he taking?"  
The two returned.  
"Alright Thomas, you're strings. I need to leave; the fellas are waiting in the car. You can stay here; just don't let anyone in. Henry's going to stick around and show you some tricks. You know jazz?"  
"Uhh— sure?"  
"Great this will be easy," he handed me a key and smiled to Henry, "Good luck."  
We sat facing the stage.  
"Jazz is passion kid. Just keep that in mind and you're set."  
"Uh-huh." *Is he fucking with me?*  
"Alright, let's jam."  
"Wait! What the fuck does that mean?"  
"Watch the lip. It means play what you feel."  
"This ain't coming across."  
"I'm talking about heart. There's a little bird in you and he's singing. When he's soaring, you can hear it. That wild mercury, the way it shines, bright gold."  
"You gotta be more plain."  
"You play that banjo, don't you?"  
"Yeah, how's it a bird?"  
"It's not—"  
"Then what are you sayin'? Just tell me what I'm doin' here specifically."  
"No! You need to find it for yourself, I can't hand it to you. But once you see it, the way that bird flies, nothing compares." *This is horse shit.* "Can ya give me a response that ain't so damn vague?"  
"Have you ever been excited?"  
*Guess not.* "What?"  
"Nervous? Frustrated? Confused?" he said, punctuating his statement with a laugh. *How the hell does this—* "Yes."  
"Okay. Then you know how to feel. Now transfer that to the music. You heard us performing last night, right?"  
I nodded.  
"That's feeling! The crowd felt it! C'mon," he climbed onto the stage and unlocked his clarinet, "let's jam."

## BELLS OF THE CROWN

Despite the mumbo jumbo, I managed to find my footing in playing with Henry. We practiced a few more times, before I had built up the confidence to join the rest of the band. Their music was intricate, fast-paced, and inventive. It reminded me of the songs they played back home, almost entirely improvisational, teeming with energy. Performances were every other night, broken up by days of rest. As soon as I got comfortable, weeks channeled into a predictable flow.

On a more memorable evening, a pale man floated into the club. He sat apart from the other patrons, a well-dress zebra amongst the lions. His eyes meandered about the room, as if perplexed by the fray that surrounded him. He bid his time, patiently nursing his drink, while the night grew old. Once most everyone had cleared out, we stepped off stage. Noticing his opening, the man approached Frank, chatting briefly before making his leave. Shortly after, Henry did the same. "Who was that?"

"Joe Glaser, owns the Sunset Café in Bronzeville. He liked us, wanted to sign a few gigs."

"What did you tell him?"

"Said I would consult the band. What do you think?"

"Seems like a good deal."

"Yea, I'll check with the boys."

Frank had arranged for us to meet Joe the next morning, we left before sunrise. The Sunset Café was reminiscent of the Shaking Pig—same basic layout, but larger, more illustrious.

"Frank, I'm glad you called."

"Hi, this is the band: Andy, Henry, Ed, and Tom."

"It's a pleasure," shaking each of our hands, "So, have you considered my proposal?"

"Yes, it seems very agreeable."

"Excellent! We'll have you do a few shows over the coming days, you know, to get a sense of it, see if you blend well," he spoke quickly, with a devilish charm, "You may need to spruce up your sound a bit to fit in. I can get you three slots, they

pay—"

"Hold on," interjected Andy, "What do you mean 'spruce up'?"

"Well, you know, make it a bit less 'hot'—that doesn't sell. Less improv and more rhythm, people need to move to it. Learn some fashionable songs, you know the Charleston? Maybe we could throw in a singer—"

"People can dance plenty to our music!" protested Ed, "Who are you to come in and tell us how to run our show?"

"I'm the man giving you the job. Look it's nothing personal, you boys are good. Don't go squandering that in the name of your pride."

"What's a man like you know about pride?" snarled Andy.

"That it's not worth a dime. I'm offering you a hell of a lot more than that, which can't be said of most places, as I'm sure you know."

"No, we've got plenty thank y—"

"Whoa, slow down," Frank interrupted,

"Sorry. Give us a minute."

"Take your time."

We gathered around an open table, while Joe waited at the door.

"Are we really doing this Frank?" grilled Andy.

"What's your objection to it?"

"You heard him! 'Doesn't sell.' Where's he getting off like that?"

"Well, if it doesn't— then maybe we should listen to him."

"Are you hearing yourself? What about the music? Henry? Ed?"

"If it doesn't sell..." Henry sighed.

"I mean, I can see his point," said Ed.

"Unbelievable! What about you kid?"

I stared back vacantly, unsure of what to say.

"It's guys like him that abolish the sanctity of music! They go around sticking their paws in every which nook and cranny, searching for some weary eyes to sap dry, trying to make a quick buck. 'Not worth a dime.' Hell it's not! Pride is worth everything! How can I look myself in the mirror knowing I sold my soul for a few dollars?"

"C'mon Andy, it's just a gig, not sacri-  
lege," consoled Frank.

"How long before it's more than a gig? We could be in this thing for the long haul. What is it then?"

"And what a shame that would be! Imagine the horror: a decent living! This will be good for us. We can keep playing our stuff, maybe it'll just have to be on our own time."

Reconvening with Joe, we accepted his proposition. "I'm glad you boys wised up."

### BENEATH THE DIAMOND SKY

After those preliminary shows, we settled into Sunset fairly smoothly, playing on weeknights, with weekends dedicated to time at the Shaking Pig. The pace of the club was much sharper than our own. The ground would quake as partygoers sprung about; their cacophony of movement regularly drowned out the music. Such fervor was alien to me.

"Why do they dance so much? All these folk comin' in every night, what's the point?" I asked Henry, lying on the stage after a particularly chaotic evening.

"You ought to know; it's a young man's sport."

"Seems like they're just getting plastered."

"Ha! Maybe. But that's their way of breathing, even if it's a little brash. You got to feel alive, whatever that takes."

"What's it take?"

"Up to you, always is. But might do you well to avoid getting too mixed up in this if you can help it. Some roads only go one way— you know."

"Guess so... that why you play songs? Feel alive?"

"Ha, lots of reasons to play songs kid. Remember how worked up Brassman got signing this deal?"

"Yeah?"

"To him, music's gotta be pure. You don't do it for the money, the adulation, the ego. You do it for its own sake, like you owe it to the craft to make something worth hearing. The second you write it down, try to sell it, becomes trash, another piece of merchandise."

"Seems a bit grand, don't it?"

"Hahaha hell yes it is! That's why he's the best musician I know, because he's a bull-headed piece-of-shit who thinks crazed notions of purity are worth more than a paycheck."

"Well why ain't they? Whatever it takes, right?"

"It's not always about feeling alive kid, sometimes just living," he sighed, "I'll kill myself playing the Charleston my whole life if I have to, getting by. But at least people are listening. It makes them happy; they can dance around and feel it for me until I get my chance."

"When's that?"

He paused. "You see the type of folks that come in here?"

"What do ya mean?" I responded, a bit thrown.

"All sorts, men, women, black, white. They don't seem to notice one another— maybe they just don't care, at least for a moment."

"Where are you goin' with this?"

"These are different times; big things are coming. When they get here, maybe then kid. In the meantime, I can wait."

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# PALE FOR THE MOON'S LOVE

Sabrina Arif

How shall I describe the flower, *Nymphaea nouchali*? Twelve maidens in gold saris circle together and rise, outstretching their arms to Heaven. They call their praises in a great valley, encircled by mountains blanketed in fresh, powdered snow. The mountains are not rounded, such as the species' Western counterparts *Victoria* or *Eurayle*, which more so resemble a gathering of white-hooded nuns mashing a tub of blackberries with their bare feet. No- these petals point outward, inviting a higher power towards their epicenter, radiating sunlight from each maiden's palms.

Just like a drowsy infant, *Nymphaea nouchali* awakens with a new day and retires to sleep at night. But unlike the infant, this flower is born nonviviparously, germinating separate of either of its creators. Some leaves remain submerged. Others that kiss the water's surface bend in gentle curves to match the water's motion. Their edges form crenelated gaps, imitating the low walls of a castle.

To Bengalis, *Nymphaea nouchali* is *shapla*. The *shapla* can bloom in *lal* (pink) or *nila* (blue), but namely *sādā* (white). My tongue has always struggled to wrap around the long a's and short i's, but I always give an honest effort. To me, it is the white water lily.

My father would find them behind his grandparents' house, standing peacefully in large ponds of non-moving water. My Auntie would see them sprout from clear water, providing a seat for little frogs on the floating leaves, or even a hiding place for small fish below. I have only ever seen the lily through the stories of others.

*An Excerpt from Lover's Gift and Crossing (a translation), by Rabindranath Tagore*

*Her neighbors call her dark in the village-but she is a lily to my heart, yes, a lily though not fair. Light came muffled with clouds, when*

*first I saw her in the field; her head was bare, her veil was off, her braided hair hanging loose on her neck. She may be dark as they say in the village, but I have seen her black eyes and am glad.*

When I was a younger, I looked for the lily everywhere. I found it late in the evening, as a little crouching tiger at the foot of the stairs, listening to my father's side of a conversation with relatives oceans away. The long-lost Bengali flowed from his mouth like warm honey into a tin pot, only to be disrupted with English that betrayed the beauty in the mysterious words. His voice ran like a wild rabbit, down into valleys and back up into the sunlight, moving at the quickest pace and produced from a smile. Nearly every other sentence was cut short with "Thik ache! Thik ache!"—a single word that latched on to my memories. *Thik ache, thick ache*. I imagined it to be a rising morning sun, or the swaying grasses of a rice paddy, or even the clinking of anklets against bare feet.

Admittedly, I had let my imagination get carried away. As a curious teenager, Google revealed to me that *thik ache* actually means "Okay."

I found the lily in Rochester, Michigan, hiding in sheepskin rugs and unused hookahs, but mostly in the cooking of my Dhela Auntie. Her *saag paneer*, a fragrant concoction of spinach and her entire spice drawer, was painfully delicious. I, who normally detested hard boiled eggs, gladly scarfed down her egg curry, paired with fluffy, buttery *naan* and a freeze thawed *samosa*. Even her morning toast had a special touch that transported me halfway across the world. Back at home, the closest remnant of Bangladesh in my dad's rare instance of cooking was his unsalted, unspiced, un-anythinged *dal* lentils, served upon a heap of white rice. Although I always tried my best to enjoy it, my Auntie later demonstrated that *dal* is most delicious when allowed to simmer

with ginger, turmeric, onion, cumin, red pepper, garlic, and salt of course.

My first family party was a circus of colorful *saris*, clanking bangles adorned on each wrist, aromas of curries, spices and sweets, soft carpet below naked feet, and a quiet shyness that kept my own flower wrapped up. The other attendees bloomed brightly, crowding in their pool of still water, their roots submerged deeply into the soil. The cousins introduced me to a family friend, Adil, whom they said would make for a good companion, as we were both “hybrids” with an American parent. He exchanged knowing smiles with the family, then turned to me to say hello. I struggled to pronounce his name correctly. He pronounced my name better than I could myself.

The room grew tangled with the broad leaves of cousins, second cousins, and something-or-other family and friends. I took it upon myself to explore the house without the eager introductions of my family. A step into the kitchen was immediately rewarded with a dozen Aunties offering every type of sweet imaginable. I happily obliged, breaking the language barrier with a small smile and a handful of *rosogullas* to go. Cousin Romana called me over, and I spent some time bouncing her six-month-old daughter, Lila, a “hybrid” herself, on my knee. Aunties and Uncles had been ogling her all night, waiting for their opportunity to pinch her soft cheeks or kiss her rosy ankles. She was no less part of the family than any other attendee. Even me.

The fragrance of *sada shapla* has never graced my own nose, but like the flower itself, it dies off after only a few days of life. The living are pollinated by buzzing bees or curious beetles, and next curl up and descend below the water’s surface, where they pass into the next life peacefully. Thousands of little seeds release into the clear water, whose air pockets allow the newborn *dingis* to travel a gentle current. The wanderers risk being whisked up by a hungry bundle of feathers, or washed up on a shallow bank. If the stars are in their favor, the seeds will bury deep into the muddy earth beneath

the water’s surface, hoping to emerge in the same fashion that their ancestors had passed.

*Another excerpt from Lover’s Gift and Crossing*

*One April evening, when the moon rose up like a bubble from the depth of the sunset; and one maiden was busy watering the plants; and one feeding her doe, and one making her peacock dance, the poet broke out singing “Oh listen to the secrets of the world. I know that the lily is pale for the moon’s love. The lotus draws her veil aside before the morning sun, and the reason is simple if you think. The meaning of the bee’s hum in the ear of the early jasmine has escaped the learned, but the poet knows.*

What does *Nymphaea nouchali* mean to a Bengali? Innocence and purity, my father says. It is not a difficult guess to make. Every maiden in a traditional poem is a lotus: she smells of jasmine; she bathes in a lake of white lilies. Her conscious is as clean as the white petals, and her passion burns brightly like the gold filaments within. She is an academic, a connoisseur of the arts, motherly, gentle, and above all else, very beautiful. She is the same in nearly every story. She is Bangladesh itself.

Bangladesh’s civil war made it difficult for my father to tell me stories of home. His eager assimilation into American life made that obvious. He had the scars of grazed bullets down his arms and a strong distaste for firearms. The only pearls of information he relayed me were almost accidental. The family escaped to Dhaka, the capital city, in a small boat, where they had to duck whizzing bullets from across the river. He and his brothers had to carry their mother many miles while escaping; her feet bled so badly, yet she stubbornly protested to walk the entire journey. Anarchy erupted in every corner of the city. My dad opted to spend nearly all his time tucked away inside, studying by candlelight, as electricity was a fleeting luxury.

He chose to bottle up, to pretend we lived the American dream. His only remnants from home were perhaps Madhubala’s *Chalte Chalte* on repeat and an

occasional game of cricket streamed late at night. We did not reach out to other Bengali families, nor did we partake in Eid, nor exchange that honey-tin Bengali I had pined for. I resolved to hole up in my bedroom, a plastic container of *rosogullas* in hand and a Hindi movie on my laptop.

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**IT IS POSSIBLE TO FEEL  
HOMESICK FOR A PLACE YOU  
HAVE NEVER TRULY KNOWN.**

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It was all I could do to satisfy the cravings. Even today I'll curl up in bed and stream *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* when I feel alone.

It is possible to feel homesick for a place you have never truly known.

How does one transform into a lily? I've laced up my dress, whiter than a full moon in an empty sky, and fuller than a pot of rice overflowing at the lid. I lie in the still water, my threads floating gently and my arms outstretched to the afternoon sun. I feel the thick air press against my skin, which shines a dark tan against the dress, but is quite fair against the wet mud. I reach higher and higher, feeling the sun crawl down every fingernail. A small smile escapes my lips. My hips are motionless in the clear water, while my toes sink deeper into the cool mud. In this moment, I'm beginning to bloom.

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# WALLET

Luke Lemons

I developed a feverish mentality of wanderlust at 18 years old once I realized I was an *adult*. I had read *Catcher and the Rye* and graduated to hate Holden Caulfield rather than relate to him, a process that took about a year. However, with this graduation I fell into another literary pitfall.

"This is some Gary Snyder shit," Nick said putting his Leica up to his eye.

"What?" I replied. We had just hiked up a small hogsback outside of our neighborhood.

"Hopping rock-to-rock to the summit. Very Zen." He had only read a small excerpt from *Dharma Bums*, but his comment caused a kinetic burst that sent me into Transcendentalism and Beatnik writing.

Here and there, a young adult will pick up Kerouac and read *On the Road* and think to themselves, "I want to do *this*...I want to get in the car and just go." Looking back, I realize how developing this idea is almost a rite of passage into adulthood or maybe a coping mechanism used to blind us from encroaching 401ks. Paired with Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, I felt a rush of inspiration. I knew nothing more than suburban streets on the foothills of the Rockies. The occasional death of an elderly neighbor or a cat getting mauled by a coyote was the only contact I had with death or hardship. I selfishly wanted more than to watch new cardboard neighborhoods getting propped up. I wanted excitement. I wanted truth, not the sickening bright green grass speckled with vibrant purple and pink flowers—which were minute compared to the black steel lamp posts that towered over the freshly white concrete sidewalks that had yet to turn a depressing grey from years of traffic, and still they managed to reflect some feeling of degradation when stained by the light post's deep yellow and orange aura when night fell. Everything was too bright

and felt plastic. I felt that my world should have more natural tones of a pine tree rather than the fluorescence of an Easter basket. Perhaps that's why Pat and I became such good friends. In the transcendental literature I was exploring, there was a rejection of this type of America and falsity. Kerouac and Thoreau were proof to me that the world isn't like suburbia. I didn't have to fall into adult life and into a four-bedroom house 30 minutes outside of the city.

All this shattered as I marveled upon the towering inferno of a bonfire deep in the Montana mountains. I was holding a social security card and part of a ripped birth certificate that wasn't mine. This is what I had wanted a week ago: to destroy an identity in order to be without borders, without physicality, without myself. Only in the void of nature, desolate in sentience and concrete, could I see what America was. I wanted to see past the politics, past the races, past the ideas, past the religions, past the sexes, past the comradeship and friendship. I wanted the essence of this country (and perhaps myself). I wanted something for the time that I was about to punch into my card.

Yet, this meed never came:

At the time, I had three nuclear friends: Nick, Pat, and Leo. Generic names, but ungeneric people. We didn't know who we were, but we had some inclination that we were close to some sort of identity epiphany. We could look at one another and say, "Pat? Oh, he's a punk," or "That's Nick's camera. He's the photographer." But we were unable to look at ourselves and place an identity. This is why we wanted to travel into the American woods: to find ourselves and what the purpose of all our lives was in this country. We all loved America despite times in which it was brutal, unfair, or unjust. It was a fraternal and maternal

love together. We wanted to know what this nation's essence was deep down, so we figured we should embark into it.

We passed literature around to one another and a free flowing naturalism started to develop amongst us, perpetuated by texts like *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Dharma Bums*, and *Leaves of Grass*. We had to go. It had to be spontaneous. There couldn't be an out. We wanted our trip into America to have a high level of entropy because we thought that the most memorable moments were to be found in the chaos of a situation.

It was decided we would drive to Montana and stay in national forests and parks along the way. Being that Leo had some level of survival training and understood how to perform basic back-country camping tactics, he ensured us that we would be fine camping in the woods rather than the surveyed and concrete "campgrounds" that we actively wanted to avoid. The only plans we had were related to what day we wanted to be *where*; besides that, we were keeping true to chaos and planning nothing. It was to be our last chance to set things straight before most of us headed to college the following fall.

"I don't know, man. Sometimes it's all too much," Pat uttered.

Leo stood up out of the water and sat on the side of the hot tub.

Nick, Leo, Pat, and I had a tradition of going to Leo's house on the weekend and playing video games, hiking, driving to rumored haunted houses and bridges in the woods, but ultimately retiring to his hot tub around 11 am. We would talk about girls, jobs, aspirations, theories on life, theories on death, and whatever else was bothering us.

Pat was leaning over the edge of the tub with his stomach to the jets. His mohawk, when wet, looked like a limp dorsal fin on a whale. He was looking out into the grass, "It's like an abyss we are about to jump off...hoping we land in water..."

"Or in a way where we aren't completely crippled by the fall," Nick added. He swung his leg over the side of the hot tub, spilling at least a gallon of water onto the cold concrete of Leo's patio.

I was fully submerged with only my head bobbing above the water. Leo, from the side of the tub, turned to Nick, "I don't know, I see it more as a time for change than an opportunity to fail. Think back to when we entered high school, we all thought it was going to be the end of the world, yet here we are: fully transformed."

"HA!" Nick opened the sliding glass door to Leo's living room, "You can't honestly compare who we are and where we are going to us entering *high school*. The game's changed. This isn't just four more years of prep. This is life." He disappeared into the house.

"He's got a point." I ascended out of the water and joined Leo on the opposite edge of the hot tub. "Our whole life we are forced to look at 'grown-ups' and see them as their *roles*: Ms. Johnson the teacher, Karri the mom, Tony the dad. But as we're getting closer to getting our own roles, certified by degrees, I can't help but look at my mom and try to figure out who she was before she was a mom, or a wife, or a social worker. What's behind the job title, you know? We are about to start a path into becoming *something*, but I don't even know what I am. Freaks me out, I don't want to be whatever I choose my degree to be."

Pat turned around, "That's why we're doing this whole trip. Let's just get out there and clear our palate before starting a new chapter."

Nick swung back out the door with a bottle of Kentucky Deluxe and a blunt. "Pat! Do that thing. Guess the time, I just checked."

Pat looked up to the stars. "About two o'clock."

"Damn! 1:42. I'll count it though." Nick passed the bottle to Leo. "Leo, does it piss you off that all those pre-ROTC army survival classes don't have shit on Pat?"

"Oh, fuck off," Leo replied after taking a pull. His face shriveled from the straight whiskey. "Pat may have learned how to tell 'star-time' while he was out with the forest rangers, but I learned how to build forts and booby-traps."

"I hope you did," Nick said behind

the smoke of his blunt. "Because when I go AWOL and start picking you all off one-by-one in Montana, you're going to need everything you got."

At that point I put myself back in the water. The air was cool. I turned to Pat, "How do you do that anyway?"

"I just look at the stars when we get in the tub and see how far they moved. It's really an approximation. I can't tell the exact time. Especially if I don't have a reference point.

"Oh."

Nick and I went into the trip with rose tinted shades, thinking we were going to discover some underlying truth about ourselves and America. We wanted to be Kerouac and Ginsberg, or McCandless and Whitman. We were two young kids who were mystified by the idea of not being a part of anything except the books we read. In a way, this trip was to test if we were able to escape Moloch.

Nick wanted to only bring a sack of rice for food in order to mirror *Into the Wild*; however, we agreed bags of trail mix would be more nutritious. Nonetheless, Nick still brought the sack of rice. This was the beginning of a series of idealistic problems involving the authenticity of our trip.

We were in Glacier National Park in Montana, and about five days into our trip, when I started to undergo a paradigm shift in thought. We had spent many days on the road and hiking through forests, and during these vast spans of time that forced reflection I came to realize that what we were doing was nothing close to what Kerouac and Thoreau experienced. We still had money to buy our entry into the parks, we were in a car that was registered with The State of Colorado, we had REI camping sets, we went to gas stations, we drove on paved roads and over civil engineered bridges. I later learned that Kerouac and the narrator in his books are two separate people. He never embarked on half the things his main characters did. The general audience's misunderstanding of this led Kerouac to be expected to live a

life that was not his own. He was forced to become a character he created who was extroverted and constantly moving, yet at his true core Kerouac was an introverted alcoholic who lived with his mother. The same split in character and self is seen in Thoreau who built his famous cabin on his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson's, property and enjoyed going into town to buy pies. Hell, even Chris McCandless who declared himself Alexander Supertramp during his American quest signed his last note, in which he knew he was dying, "Chris McCandless."

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**THERE WAS A UNIVERSAL SEPARATION BETWEEN IDEAS AND REALITY, BUT WE WERE TOO YOUNG TO HAVE KNOWN THIS. WE TOOK EACH FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE AS TRUTH AND EVIDENCE OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF EXPLORATION.**

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There was a universal separation between ideas and reality, but we were too young to have known this. We took each first-person narrative as truth and evidence of the possibilities of exploration.

Nick noticed as well that we were infringing on the barrier between ideals and reality, but refused to accept that they were separate. He wanted to push deeper and closer to the "authentic way" of experiencing America. It was around this time that I first noticed my outlook on this country and the youthful vigor I had for empirical meaning was tainted. Nick started taking every action we performed as some chapter in an unwritten book about the way of American life. Pat and Leo were indifferent to this unspoken debate on the authentic America and self, but I found that they each aligned with either Nick or my idea of exploration in relation to certain events. Leo sided with Nick that we needed to push deeper into the woods and try to hike through

the border of Canada along with embarking on an off-route three-day hike into the Waterton Lakes National Park. Pat and I agreed that a hike and border crossing like that was a pointless risk and that, like an asymptote, you could never reach the authentic way of experiencing America that Thoreau and McCandless attempted.

"Well then what's the point?" Nick would say when such discourses arose (often during the long car rides). "What's stopping me from pulling into an off-highway motel right now?"

"Nothing's stopping you, but don't think that a motel and a reserved backpacking campsite are the same thing," I'd reply.

"Don't tell me what to think."

"I wasn't."

"Both of you shut the fuck up." Leo would interrupt. "It's my turn to play music and I don't want you guys arguing over my songs."

"Get a better taste in music then," Pat would peek over his Nintendo DS.

"Fuck you too, Pat."

For three days we became divided on issues and plans, so much so that we would take different trails to the same locations during our hikes. Having heated arguments with friends is a terrible thing because you can say anything to a friend honestly, despite how malicious it is.

The climax of our disagreements happened on a beach of a mountain lake. The lake was about 15 minutes from our back-country campsite and, like diplomats, we decided that we wanted to watch the sun set on the water together. We did not talk on the beach but instead poked and prodded at the surrounding wildlife. Leo was skipping stones, I was looking for walking sticks, and Pat was drawing in the sand. The sun was just touching the top of the mountains across from the lake and the water was calm except for the occasional ripple and splash from Leo's stones which, like hockey pucks, sailed across the surface until falling into a kinetic, sun-filled technicolor wave. Nick would often get introspective at times, so it was no surprise that he was staring off into the water, fixed on nothing. Nick would over think things and end up trapping himself

in some idea that, though illogical, would symbolically carry weight, like martyrdom. We had bickered back and forth about this idealism for the past few days whenever he would suggest to "do what Kerouac would have done."

I had found a walking stick and used my knife to sharpen it to a point. The sun was now behind the mountains, but the sky was still luminous with orange clouds that acted as lanterns hanging above us. I begin walking the beach and poking at the ground to pass time. The shore was not made of fine sand, but pebbles and rocks. There was no constant tide to beat the rocks down into particles, but the high elevation winds were able to push the water into polishing the stones. Yet, when I pushed my stick deeper through the layers of smooth rocks I would break some type of membrane into the thin sand that one would expect on a beach.

I passed Nick occasionally during my pacing. He was now picking up a few stones and tossing them far into the water. Leo had retired from skipping stones and Nick had taken over the position of disturbing the surface of the lake. However, while Leo's skipping stones had glided across the face of the lake, causing crinkles in the water like velvet, Nick's rock throwing shattered the glass surface exploding it with flashes of orange and red; reflecting the sun's descent.

"I lost some of the money." Nick kept staring at the lake as I passed with my now dull poking spear.

Nick and I had already been at each other's throats and he knew what this comment would entail.

"What?" I replied. "What do you mean? How much? How?" My tone was already revved up.

"On the fucking hike this morning! Okay?" He exploded knowing that this conversation was already going to turn into an argument and he might as well get a head start.

"It was only 50 bucks...I realized I had the money in my pocket when we started the hike and I was going to put it back later, but I had it loose in my pocket and some must have fallen out when I took out my

phone."

"Are you fucking serious, Nick?"

Our diplomacy fizzled away. Earlier that day we were going through our supplies and counting our money. We had about \$300 left. Nick explained that when we were putting our supplies back, he just pocketed the money and forgot to put it back in the satchel that we were as a bank that we stored in the car. We had budgeted so thrifty that a \$50 loss for us meant the we might have to forgo a day of travel in order to have enough gas to just get home.

"Relax, man. It's no big deal. Get over it." He was still staring at the lake and throwing rocks, but now as an outlet for his rage. He was picking up bigger and bigger rocks and throwing them harder. The sunset was now turning dark and only fading hues of red remained in the sky. Each explosion from the rocks he threw seemed like bullets hitting a person, with splashes of red violently shooting up.

"That's our money. We all chipped in and you can't think to put it in your wallet, let alone the car? Are you fucking serious?"

"It'll make our trip more authentic." I remember him saying that word: authentic. As if it meant that everything was fine, that this world didn't run on money, that we were all just little Thoreaus or Kerouacs wobbling through America in the back woods like toddlers screaming about "society" and how capitalism is futile.

Pat and Leo, noticing that the tension was expanding and that soon either a supernova or implosion was about to happen, took off on a walk down the shoreline to let Nick and I fight.

"Those are just ideas, Nick. They don't mean shit. They're just for the sake of entertainment or some selfish narcissism."

Nick turned his gaze from the lake to me.

"Luke, this is why you're going to get trapped, get left behind, and work a shitty desk job that you get with a shitty degree. You don't get it, and I'm sorry for that."

I felt a deep, hot coal in my stomach. I couldn't even think straight. I walked

right up to him and threw my spear in the lake, "You just can't cope with the fact that you're not going to college so you're looking for any excuse to defame it or belittle the world built around it."

There was no supernova or interplanetary implosion; it was heat death.

Nick threw a punch that landed on my jaw. I tackled him to the ground. The smooth rocks pushed bluntly into the cartilage between my ribs and spine as Nick and I rolled among one other, landing every other hit. Here we were, two 18-year-old suburban kids, fighting on the cold beach of a Montana mountain lake, miles away from home, bleeding. Looking back, it was the most ridiculous fight I have ever gotten in.

Pat and Leo heard the commotion and ran back from their walk to break up our fight. We had rolled into the sandy bushes away from the water when Pat pulled Nick up and Leo dragged me away. Each took the other to cool down.

"Jesus dude, what did you guys say?" Leo was leading me towards some boulders we could sit on.

"I told him he couldn't deal with not going to college."

"Damn, Luke. That's fucked."

"I know, but he was pushing me just as hard. And he lost some of the money, Leo!"

"What? Shit that means...uh, well..." He resolved his thought, "Luke, money really doesn't matter right now. How's your eye?"

"Feels fine." I sat down on one of the boulders.

"Good because, if anything, it's an improvement."

"Haha, fuck off Leo." He gave me a hug.

When I finally settled down I was cold from the water and sand, but my face and torso were still hot from the fight. Leo and I got up from the boulders and walked together for about 15 minutes talking about how we still had the bag of rice if we really needed food, and that we could still prolong the trip as long as we drove to one or two more spots with a good radius of places to hike.

When we returned, Pat and Nick were sitting on the sand looking out on the now black water. Nick and I, now cool

and composed, apologized to one another. Because we had planned nothing and let the trip roll stochastically, there had been tension for days as we declined one another's suggestions on what to do next. We both recognized this frustration and agreed that the fight needed to happen to release pressure.

"You got me good in the lip," Nick said.

"I don't even remember." I sat down on the rocky shore next to him.

As Nick and I relaxed and bonded over our fury for one another, Pat put on his head lamp and went walking down the beach to look for stones or wildlife of some sort (the whole trip he took pleasure in the ecosystems we imposed on). Often, he would come back with a frog or maybe a plant that he learned about in his forestry class.

As Nick and I both discussed, more civilly our individual thoughts towards going into the wild and how he believed that only in an absence of everything could we truly understand America, and how I believed that it was impossible, and that we should still push the asymptote as close as we can to idealism without being completely reckless, Pat came running back with something in his hand. Something he had found on the shore.

It was a black, thick Velcro wallet, about 6 inches by 6 inches. Inside was a woman's Massachusetts driver's license, social security card, folded birth certificate, credit cards, and receipts. The wallet was waterlogged and some of the paperwork inside was ruined beyond legibility. We dissected the wallet and found that she had an entry ticket to the park that was about two years old.

Her whole life was in this 6 by 6-inch square. As we poked through the pockets of the wallet we came across folded bills. Pulling them out, we counted it to \$350, enough money for us to get back home and spend a few more days on our trip. With the sudden shift in mood and the ominous finding of this wallet, we decided to leave the beach.

We returned to our campsite and started a fire. The fire was the biggest one we made during the whole trip. Before going to the

beach earlier in the day, Pat and Leo went searching for dry wood, and luckily found two dead trees, while Nick and I dug a hole for the pit. It was an elliptical pit that was about five feet wide by four feet across. We had about a pound of Old Man's Beard lichen from one of other campgrounds (which was thick with the stuff), and we used it as tinder because of how well it caught. Before heading out to the beach we had set up the dead parts of the tree into a cone structure. Now lit and at its paramount, the fire shot feet above us and lit the area with a ten foot radius of light.

We passed around the contents of the wallet. I felt intrusive, but I was curious. I've forgotten the woman's name to which the wallet belonged, but I remember she was about 45 and had long black hair. She looked like an elementary school teacher. She had about six credit cards that each expired after the next as if she was living credit to credit.

Across from the fire Leo looked up from coals: "If I had lost information this important I would hope someone would destroy it." The comment hung in the air.

"Do you think she's still out there?" Pat replied, coming out of the penumbra from a piss.

Leo turned, "If she is, she's probably gotten a new social and birth certificate. The park ticket was from years ago."

"What about the money?" I instantly felt guilty after saying it, turning towards Nick.

"Payment." Nick replied, "It can be payment for the destruction of her documents. Besides, to her, if she's out there, this money is already gone."

"I guess that's true." Pat looked down to the hot coals.

We cut the credit cards and threw them into the fire along with her ID. I had the pleasure of burning her social security card. It was strange to hold some else's burning number. It wasn't my identity I was annihilating, but I was close enough to the fire to feel like it was. Pat ripped the birth certificate and we each had a piece to throw into the pyramid of fire. The paper, due to how wet it was, didn't burn instantly, but smoked until it turned

into embers and got launched into the sky.

As the ember rose, I couldn't help but speculate who this woman was. If she was alive, she was still herself; perhaps changed due to time and experiences, but *she* was still out there. Only her documents were sacrificial. Maybe that's all Chris McCandless and Kerouac's characters were: damp social security cards and birth certificates for others to burn.

After we ran out of documents to incinerate we all sat down in our respective fold-out chairs and grabbed a beer. Nick opened a small Advil bottle and pulled out an edible we had stored.

"Well, I can't help but to feel like a killer." Leo put his beer between his legs.

"Get used to it, Mr. Army-man," Pat replied. Leo smiled and took another sip. "Besides, she's not dead, as far as we know, just her government issued IDs are deceased."

I let out a sigh and looked at my watch. "Pat, what time do the stars say? How long did we burn her stuff?"

Pat looked up to the clear black sky. It was full of more stars than I had ever seen. If the night sky was a clock, this one was atomic.

"I don't know." Pat looked disappointed, "I didn't see where they were to begin with. I can't approximate where they are now."

None of us could.

# SUMMER JOURNAL ENTRY 9:

Tyler Fair

I have a love-hate relationship with my handwriting. It is undeniably beautiful—a product of my very intentional decision in 5th grade to restrain my hand from what I saw as my once ugly scrawl. The result of a year of conscious practice: a wonderful, loopy, “girly” penmanship.

Like many things that society—namely, my middle-school bullies—deemed feminine, my writing was, in private, a source of pride and accomplishment. This love, however, was by no means a constant. On more than one occasion a teacher would announce, “I have a paper with no name...it looks like a girl’s.” Eventually when the anonymous namelesspaperer would be discovered to be me, predictable giggles and a pit of shame in my stomach would result.

Especially in spaces that were particularly “masculine” I would dread situations that forced me to handwrite something. You see, rather coincidentally and unrelated to my world-class handwriting, I’m also (mostly) homosexual. Writing emergency contact information at the first basketball practice each season (yes, reader, many gay men do sports ball things too) felt like a remarkably painful (and stupid) way to ‘out’ myself. The only thing possibly worse than being confused for being a girl was being a fag. Surely, these words would tell them my big gay secret. I would, quite purposefully, make my print seem worse—writing faster, or squashing letters together. Self-protection: right out of the closeted gay play-book (look, reader, a sports metaphor).

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Once when a friend told me he opted for notes on his laptop rather than using a paper journal, I was struck by how lonely this seemed to me. I get a rush of joy every time I look back in my journal and am met, like an old friend who has been through it all with me, my familiar and

welcoming words. I am a quote collector. I often find myself gathering the words of another, writing them, molding them, embodying them into the pages of my moleskin. As I press them into my personal journal, this commonplace book, the act of writing these borrowed words makes them part of my story too.

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**OTHERS’ TRUTHS GUIDE  
DISCOVERIES OF MY OWN SOUL,  
OTHERS’ PHRASES PLACE MY  
PAIN BETTER THAN MY WORDS  
COULD.**

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Others’ truths guide discoveries of my own soul, others’ phrases place my pain better than my words could. For now. My personal relationship with these quotes, with these lessons, would have never been possible if I’d simply highlighted a book or typed out an electronic note.

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I recently heard an NPR story (classic gay liberal trope) about three Denver students who won national awards for the essays they wrote about—and I assume in-cursive. When asked why using cursive was important, one student seemed a bit stumped at first. “Well, I can’t describe it exactly.” Eventually, she found her words, sharing that it’s like being able to speak another language. Just like it wouldn’t seem ridiculous for a person to want to speak Spanish even though English works for them, cursive shouldn’t be considered redundant or archaic. Like Spanish, this little girl reasoned, cursive allows you to experience a different world: your grandmother’s box of letters or even the U.S. Constitution in its original form.

As well reasoned as her subsequent

response was, I find myself more deeply connected to her original answer; her inability to give a response is what resonates with me more. "Well, I can't describe it exactly." Uncertainty and wonder strikes me as infinitely more appealing these days. Cursive is beautiful and that I like how it makes me feel should have been (and is) a perfectly acceptable answer. As usual, however, society, NPR, and middle-school bullies expect more.

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When I was working in the palliative care clinic, an interesting and entirely inspiring patient came in. This woman was one of those no-nonsense kinds of lady (*slay queen!*). She was not going to be bullied into any conversation—even if it, like this case with advanced directives, was necessary and even helpful. This patient had a piercing gaze that made me fully aware that she saw me deeply. Her eyes that stared sharply past my manufactured facades and into my soul. When she addressed me directly, I felt an uncomfortable vulnerability. At one point during the appointment, when the palliative care team was trying to get her to discuss her own death, she rejected their scripted agenda and inserted her own. She looked at me and stated, "You've lost someone." Then in a way that told me she had already seen the answer, she asked, "and how did that feel?"

Throughout the appointment I was struck by how much she reminded me of my grandmother. Perhaps this was because while sharing parts of her life story, the patient had mentioned that she was once a handwriting analyst-like Grandma. This tidbit was not given much attention until after the appointment had ended and most of the team had left the room.

With only the nurse left to take some end-of-appointment measurements, the patient turned and demanded the nurse write two sentences on a piece of paper. The patient went on to share—to the dismay of the unsuspecting provider—everything the nurse's handwriting revealed. When

my team member told this story to all of the team, she was only willing to tell us one thing the patient's analysis had "shown." The rest of the information was too personal, but the nurse assured us, in her Irish accent, "it was spooky spot-on." The one she was comfortable sharing: the patient could tell that the nurse was going on a trip to Iceland (which the patient correctly guessed) and that the nurse's over-planning was negatively impacting her relationships. This was all (*obviously*) true.

Another reason this woman reminded me of my grandma was she, like my grandma, showed some significant signs of dementia. Once when I was in sixth grade, my grandmother-before her memory issues had gotten too bad—spent a whole night teaching me some of what she knew about handwriting analysis. Towards the end of her short lesson, she told me about a time that she had analyzed the handwriting of a woman "that [she] didn't like too much." From this woman's writing my grandma correctly saw that the woman was a (*\*leans in for a whisper\**) lesbian. Curious, but also increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation getting too close to my own recently discovered sexual secret, I asked Grandma how she knew this. She showed me a few ways to spot "the gays." Feigning boredom to escape the lesson, I rather frantically ran upstairs. Quickly, I wrote and re-wrote names of guys I had crushes on at the time. I did so in cursive because Grandma told me this was the form of writing that revealed the most about a person. Amongst the loops and lines that formed these names, I looked—with untrained eyes—for the "gay" clues my grandma had taught me. Suddenly, I had a thought: Why else did grandma randomly bring up this topic? She must have seen something in my writing. She must know! (*nervous vomit ensues*)

The analytical side of me came to believe that this was pure paranoia. Another part of me thought this was just Grandma's way of telling me she didn't approve of the "feminine" she'd seen me display that evening. Nevertheless, for years after that night—well after both the

content and the occurrence of that lesson were wiped from Grandma's memory—I would see the "gay clue" in my handwriting and actively try and avoid doing it. Maybe if I stopped having "gay" handwriting, I would stop being gay myself.

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Scientific types often reject handwriting analysis—reserving it to the book stacks amongst pseudo-science, horoscopes, palm reading and crystal balls. Its value is only redeemed during specific court cases during which the increasingly endangered counterfeit check is discovered. Nut jobs are the only ones to stretch this analysis to guessing personality traits or future events. Science says.

Personally, mystic that I am, I think this practice gets labeled "inaccurate" or "voodoo" because it makes us feel vulnerable. It makes us feel exposed. "Outed," in a way. Rather than expose ourselves to the chance that just maybe someone might see past the ego we've built up to "protect ourselves," we reason that it must be bullshit, illogical, illegitimate. It's a deep-set fear of not only that which we don't want others to know about ourselves but—scarier yet—also that which we may not even know about ourselves (*where you at Freud?*). It's a shame that should it be seen, would render us unworthy of love. We would be too unbearably ugly. What would happen if our intentions were laid out, seen without our permission or consent? What if, for once in our life, we were known? A subconscious honesty. An id.

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After reading a personal statement draft for my medical school application, a writing teacher told me, "this is the statement of a social worker, not a pre-med. Where's the science?" I heard the same thing I hear when someone says "doctors have bad handwriting": Clearly, I am not right for medicine.

But perhaps being a good doctor has less to do with someone's penmanship. Instead,

being a good health care provider has everything to do with being a competent scientist—which, to me, means embracing mystery and wonder rather than certainty. Being a good physician has everything to do with being a good listener—to handing the mic off to those whose story has yet to be heard, to learning how to see someone deeply. Being a doctor has everything to do with being an educator—educate from the Latin "educare" meaning mold and "educere" meaning to lead out, a visceral process of liberation. It has everything to do with being vulnerable and authentic and honest—looking deeply and humbly into the darkest parts of oneself and finding there, waiting all along, one's greatest source of strength.

I've realized my beautiful handwriting is a resistance of sorts. I'm growing to love who I am, who I'm becoming. I continue to attempt to embrace parts of me that I once spent nights crying for God to change. These letters I form are symbols of a process which, undoubtedly, is making me into a better provider—a more whole-hearted human.

I have a love-hate relationship with my handwriting. But at some point the only thing I can say about it is "well, I can't describe it exactly."