

Dedicated to the apple that devoured the serpent.

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The following is nothing more than a nightmare. A collection of thoughts and images conjured up from an empty mind.

To ascribe them to real people or events would be foolish, for in dreams the daily goings become fiction. Any resemblance to reality is little more than coincidence. Any beliefs that these fictional dream creations are real or should become real should be forgone. The events contained within are purely, and should remain, fictional.

What's that coming over the hill?

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A shadow dreams a dream of a blazing sun, rising above a beautiful woodland surrounded by green fields and flowers. The shadow protects and cools those creatures of the underbrush, from the snake to the cougar. No matter shape or form, the shadow provides comfort. But beyond the canopies the shadow sees the fields. Just beyond its reach the light bakes the worms and insects. No matter how hard it tries, the shadow cannot save those perishing under an unfeeling sun. And the shadow awakens in fear as a new day rises unyieldingly over the horizon. Unable to ascertain whether nightmare, or premonition.

a child arrived just the other day

Do you know why you were born? I know why I was. Do you know the actions that led to your birth? Why the decision was made? I do. My mother was a detached junkie and my father was a trailer trash nobody. She was weak, abusable. My father took advantage of her weakness, and my mother could see he didn't care about her. The look in someone's eyes when you exist as nothing more than an object is more often not hidden but ignored. And she ignored it for a very long time. But the slow decay of a relationship is always crushingly obvious. A fact I learned for myself once. Cheating, violence, arguments, and all that pain and suffering. She could feel the end, it wasn't there yet but somewhere in the distance you could hear the encroaching hoofbeats.

So, what was she to do? Lay down and allow herself to be trampled? Be cast aside like trash? No, she had a plan. He didn't love her but should could force him to. Force him to stay with her. Force him to care. All it took was a little unprotected sex and little 'ole me was on his way, a final trump card... But it didn't work, she played her hand and he still walked away. I was born a tool, and even in utero I had failed in my purpose. I was rendered useless and unnecessary, unwanted. Removed as a parasite must be removed to prevent harming the host. Originally a foreigner was going to adopt me, but my grandparents on my mother's side stepped in to save me from such a scandalous fate. And honestly, I'm still not sure if this was from some form of empathy that I grow up with my "real" family or just some form of latent racism.

My mother told her adolescent boy this before he had even finished kindergarten. As soon as she told me my parents weren't my real mom and dad, I was told the man that came by the house sometimes to play with me wasn't just my only friend, but my father. So, she told me to take the phone and call him Daddy. In her mind he would take up the mantle of father figure, they could be together, and I could live in the archetypal nuclear family.

Instead he immediately hung up the phone, his visits stopped, and I was met with the rather depressing idea that he never wanted me at all. Great plan. I don't remember much of her

in my childhood after that, even when she was at the house she was never home. Her tool had failed its purpose and been left to rust.

My grandparents were not much better, the illusion of family had been broken and I began referring to them by grandnames. My grandmother stayed locked up in her room all day playing videogames, and my grandfather was usually gone. Through paper thin walls I learned via arguments that they didn't particularly get along, both accused the other of adultery, and while home my grandfather was nagged to fix our desiccated house by my grandmother. So rather than stay home he chose to stay gone. Doing odd jobs or hanging out with other people and their kids. Once I became too old for him to hold in his hands and show off, I was cast aside for the kids of others that shared his interests.

My early home life was not entirely heinous though, my grandfather knew many people. And one of the men he knew had a litter of puppies, so he brought me home two of them. I named them Milo and Otis after an old movie I had watched, and they were my only real friends in isolation. My memories are muddled or nonexistent, but unfortunately not completely gone. Several people wanted to be my friends, and I often got invited to birthday parties or sleepovers. My grandmother however refused to allow me to go, under the pretense that I might get bullied, raped, or addicted to hardcore street drugs as 5th graders are wont to do at sleepovers.

The same excuse was generally used when people wanted to come to my house. What if they said they were abused while over here? Surely their parents would blame mine, wholeheartedly believing in the lies of their children. And if I had any feeling for my family, I would tell anyone who asked no. Oddly enough appearing to be an antisocial asshole that didn't want anyone to be friends with me led to people disliking me. So instead of hanging out with friends I came home to my puppies. I still remember during winter while laying on my sled they came over and each placed their head on my chest. I like to imagine they were listening to my heartbeat, that they enjoyed knowing I loved them as they loved me. We played fetch, shook hands, all the different manner of dog-human interactions.

The first had his throat ripped open by a large white stray. I was just a child at the time and had prevented my grandfather

from killing the stray, as it was a female. I told myself it would be their mother, play with them and comfort them while I was gone. Within the hour I ran out to it holding Otis on the porch in a death grip, slinging him about as if a chew toy. The blood corroded his brown fur like the tar in my mother's lungs. And it was the fault of an idiotic child not understanding nature.

With him dying already my Grandfather loaded his rifle and put a shot directly between his eyes before throwing the body into the woods. When I had asked him why I wasn't allowed to bury him he told me that he was "...giving him back to nature. Animals will come and eat him, and he'll help them out, it's just nature." So, I guess I was supposed to feel less bad about one of my only friends having his brains plastered on my lawn.

The second was in some ways worse, but still my fault. We had just gotten home from a trip somewhere and in my eagerness to play with him I busted out of the seat too quickly, smashing his head. He started writhing and convulsing and my grandfather made me hold his mouth open to force raw eggs down it since, apparently, he thought that would help. It obviously didn't, and I had to watch once again as something I loved was cast into oblivion. Thrown out to the worms to be forgotten. Animals were my only friends, and almost all of them died horrible deaths. Without them I was almost completely alone, my presumed rejection of my peers led to them rejecting me wholesale. If a new kid showed up, they were told about me and knew to hate me too. People I had never spoken to before, eyes dimming and brows furrowing with looks of anger. Disgust. Teachers separated me from the friends I did have and joined in making fun of me with my peers. I had a sense of longing, but my sadness began to fuel resentment. Rejection unto rejection, hate for hate. The cycle feeds on itself.

live your life some other time

Beyond anything else I want someone to understand me. Just one person for once in my life to understand why I turned out this way. I'm just looking for excuses maybe, but if I die or get caught, I want someone to know me. My parents never hugged me, they barely talked to me. Voiceless and nameless I suffered in silence. I remember the emotions. Throughout my life I was always verging on something. I was never really sure what when I was younger, but as I entered my 20s I began to see it more clearly. At the back of my mind, a sort of monster was overwhelming all my thoughts and actions. A singular infectious thought consuming everything about me. But what was it? I didn't know, never had. But I could feel it. I took to thinking of it as the beast. A generic term, but hey. Who was listening?

It started slowly at first, I spent most of my life playing games or listening to music. They consumed most of my time, as an adult I think it was mostly for the noise. Something that distracted me from how empty I actually was. My Grandmother was a real fire and brimstone person. Overtly paranoid too. I wasn't allowed to date when I was young, I never had those playful "young love moments" like everyone else. I wasn't even allowed to be around girls. I knew I wasn't unique, but during school hours I had to sit in isolation as other kids dated, boys and girls kissed. Heart breaks and loss were rampant. And I hated it.

I wanted to be loved and thrown away. To hold hands with someone. But I wouldn't. I had already learned the hard way that I wasn't going to be able to live like the other kids. When I was in 1st or 2nd grade A girl was flirting with me, not sexual, just that "I like you" style of flirting little kids do. And my teacher saw the girl kiss me on the cheek, I suppose she thought it was cute because she told my grandfather. I wasn't in trouble, she just wanted to tell my parents that I was getting along with my classmates in her eyes.

I didn't even know she'd told them before the car ride home. My grandfather told me that my grandmother knew, and she didn't want me to do anything like that anymore. I told him ok and said I wouldn't. But it wasn't enough, I guess. He had to be sure. There's a little side road by the road to my house that leads

to a graveyard. He pulled into it and stopped the car by a patch of briars. I remember the feeling. That slow realization you're about to be punished. The tension in your chest. The heat and sparks in my body, overtaking me like a seizure. I started crying, begging him not to do whatever it was he was going to do.

My heart started beating faster and my begging turn into indecipherable wails. But truth be told it didn't do anything. He just made fun of me and, if anything, my fear made it more fun for him. He grabbed a few briars and, after bundling them together, laid me over the trunk of the car. My screams were incoherent even before he pulled my pants and underwear down, and when he started bringing his makeshift whip down it had only served to decrease their semblance to human language.

This event in my illustrious life is the only reason I remember salt coming in a packet of two separate tubes, because he thought it necessary to salt the wound. I was trying to prepare myself for his "if you keep crying, I'll do it again, and worse" routine. So, I managed to will myself to hold back the cries of pain. I knew when I got home, I could focus on my videogames, where I could be in control. Somewhere I could matter. Somewhere I wasn't a bad person.

This ideation of my parents that any form of companionship was sinful or would ruin me continued through my teens unto my twenties. Right after my school started introducing sex ed into classes, my parents took me out of school and put me into a Christian homeschool program. The few friends I had slowly lost interest in trying to save me, and I was left alone. I hated it, eventually refusing to complete the books in the hopes I'd be kicked out, but my grandmother started doing them for me. Since neither of my grandparents ever really spoke to me my only form of human contact came from the 2 kids that were over at the homeschool area. Though we never really talked much as I only saw them while my grandfather turned in the completed books. I had felt a sense of isolation during my school days, but now I was well and truly alone. At the point in a child's life where they most seek out human contact my parents had cast me into an abyss of loneliness and despair. With no reason to pay attention to the time, no reason to awake at any certain hour, no reason to do anything at all. Days and nights merged, my sleep cycle became a rotation as I stayed up as late as I could, falling asleep only when impossible to avoid.

I played games and, in the nights, snuck into the living room to watch late night movie channels, softcore porn more specifically. I had no real concept of sex or sexuality, and they fascinated me. I remember at one point having satellite in my room for a few weeks, while my grandmother's TV was busted, they had wired it into my room. I still remember one night while watching Rebecca Love getting fake railed by Voodoo and suddenly jumping up to mute my TV before realizing the sound wasn't coming from my room, it was coming from the living room. I still remember the disgust I felt myself for masturbating to porn with the sound of my grandfather watching the same in the living room. I still remember the disgust I felt at him.

Part of me died when I was taken out of school. 12 years old and suddenly completely locked off from anyone else. All I wanted was to get out, to go to school, even if I got bullied. Even if the only option was 1999 Columbine, I would have taken it. I laid awake in my bed crying myself to sleep nearly every day, praying to God I could just talk to someone. Covering myself in scars as I lost faith in my religion. I stayed alive because the thought of dying without experiencing life hurt. Every time I had a razor on my wrists, my mind reminded me I would die having never really been alive to begin with. It kept me going in a weird way. It was like being trapped within a prison, and I myself was denying my escape. But another part of me died when they saw fit to put me into college. My feelings had been deadening and, without any real direction or drive, I allowed them to put me into nursing school. I wasn't allowed to have a car or phone so every day I had to be escorted by my grandfather to campus, somedays he'd abandon me there for hours to be with his friends. In pouring rain or blistering cold I was an afterthought, like always.

The first few courses I got to hear all about how the childhood development I never had, the sexual and romantic teen years I was denied. And maybe finally learning what sex was ended up being the worst part. I was a virgin, I am a virgin. I couldn't feel attached to anyone, no attraction. I felt worthless, if my own parents didn't want me why would anyone else? It was never about sex, it was the solidification of my abnormality. Everyone else had already fucked 40 people by 17. Experiences I could never have, emotions I could never feel. The few people that recognized me loved to harass me about my crush, Nicole, and her sexual escapades. Seeing her picture, boyfriend in tow.

Hearing stories, true or not, about how many boys had fucked her. Used her.

I heard about how shitty she was, how she cheated on every boy she'd ever been with. How she was a liar, manipulator, that I was lucky I never had her cause she would hurt me.

Apparently, she was still in love with the guy that had taken her virginity, so I wouldn't have a chance anyway. There was a solidarity in some of the things they said about her. She cut herself too, even if everyone else said it was just for attention. Maybe it was true, that she was just a spoiled emo chick that didn't feel anything for anyone.

But she was still beautiful, she's the only girl I've ever loved. She still is. Even after she hurt me. When I was locked up, I could ignore those feelings, but then I got out. I got out and it became painfully obvious that I was never going to amount to anything, ever. And I haven't. Nicole has dozens of friends, I always doubted she'd even give me the time of day. She finished school early and already has her life ahead of her. Ambitionless, I finished college late. Directionless, I've done nothing with my degree, head of nursing and nothing to show for it. I bought a car, own my own house. But they don't make me happy. I buy expensive cigarettes and booze to ease the boredom of nonexistence. But it's never enough. I still want to die. I'm alone and unwanted, and something inside me calls out for me to end my life. It's like a maelstrom of self-hate and fear that's been dragging me down. Circling and circling. I used to cry because I've been afraid someday, I'll give in... And yet, some other void filters through my mind now.

One day, walking through empty streets coursing with people. Scrolling through the hundreds of posts from people living lives I can never have. I realized I'm not the only one. I'm alone in my prescribed style of suffering, but not in my suicidal ideation. There are millions of people that want to die, just like me. Millions of people that go on living fruitless lives, just like me. Days bleed into one another, months and years pass without a second thought. I have nothing to look forward to, and nothing to remember. But I'm no longer aimless. Maybe it's because I didn't grow up with social media, maybe it's because I don't have friends. But all I see is a testament to loneliness and isolation. People like me have access to a constant stream of people prettier than us living happily ever after, not caring if we live or

die. People like me didn't deserve to be born. Knowing that just eats away at you. Dirty looks for being a weirdo, the religious people assuring you their God hates you. No matter what it's always the wrong thing. Always the wrong shoes, wrong music, wrong hair. It never ends.

How many people have a Nicole, like I do? That one person you'd die for that'll never feel the same? She added me on Facebook after I got out of my confinement, and every day I've had to see her face next to a boyfriend. Two smiling monuments to my unhappiness to mock me, posts of their love to help drag me further into the pit. Constant unmoving, fixated reminders of my ultimate failure.

You'll never amount to anything if you aren't charismatic. No one will ever love you if you aren't perfect. No one will ever stay with you if you don't have money. These were the lessons my family taught me. I tried so hard to pretend they weren't true. Unhappy and soulless I was tired of trying, I finally admitted to myself that would never be content in life. I was finally ready to end it all, and somehow, I couldn't. The nagging voice in my mind is a blessing that motivates me to stay alive, and a curse that retches bile upon my existence. I couldn't help myself, fear or otherwise. But I could help others.

never was and never will be

I sometimes wonder why it was I chose her over the others. Maybe it was because she was the first person in years to genuinely try talking to me, but something about her caught me off guard. I could tell from the instant I first laid eyes on her what type of person she was. Long black hair perpetually stuck in a dehumanizing corporate ponytail. A little chubby, but not boisterously overweight. Acne scars and a film of grease covering her face, ruining her eyeliner and powder. Not ugly, but not pretty either. Worthless.

She's the type of person who only exists when you're looking at them. I had completely forgotten about her, even though I used to see her all the time during college. Back then she used to work at a place called the Country Boy Overlook, this restaurant/gas station combo that sits on the only northern road out of town. After days of being mocked by my classmates or professors, it was relaxing to sit in there and look over the cars. Even if someday I'd be filled with a depression seeing ancient lost friends going on adventures in their cars, while I was stuck waiting to be brought back to my prison by my grandfather.

Kind of laughable when you think about it. I lost almost every friend I had in school because the parents thought I was a weirdo. A bad influence. I was a weirdo, but I was an undeniable straight shooter. Perfect grades, perfect attendance, always took the beatings I was given. Though I did occasionally steal library books. I was in trouble constantly, but most of the time it legitimately wasn't my fault. I was a weirdo, so the other kids blamed me for their shit and the teachers just ate it up.

Throughout my days at the work I see the same things. People with terminal illnesses suffering in their last days. Parents losing their children to cancer, and vice versa. I see men and women overjoyed at their new baby. I see mothers crying as they learn their child has to undergo surgery. Mundane actions like throat swabs lead to chest x-rays. Sometimes I get to see their eyes light up with glistening tears when they learn the x-rays are clean, and other times you can see their light leaving. The day I ran into Lily again I had spent all day helping out at a nursing home. I walked through room after room of old men and women,

unable to move or eat by themselves, crying out in agony. The overworked employees are only paid slightly above minimum wage, and they seem unenthused in their efforts. There are people laying in dirty diapers, covered in bedsores. As I'm taking an old man to his shower I see one of the aides steal an old ladies banana. The same creeping sensation that I felt the first time I stepped into one of these places, fills me again. I always complained to my Grandmother that by the time I was allowed out it'd be too late for me to do anything. "You're young," she'd say "you can do that when you're older"

Even when I was a child, I knew she was wrong. I couldn't sneak out of my house to go party with friends when I was an adult. I'd never be chastised for giving into bad influences and smoking. I never got to hang out in my friend's new car or show off my own. I used to tell myself that maybe when I got out Nicole would still be here. She was always some far off drive to keep me going. That maybe someday, if nothing else. We could end up as friends. Deep down I knew I'd never be happy though, deep down you always know. And then, early 20s, I'd found myself face to face with the truth. I had already lost so much of my life, and now what?

Cleaning the crusted piss off of an old man's dick. Hands full of shit. One day I'd end up in one of these places, unwanted and unloved I would die alone and in pain. I still will. Every day in clinicals I thought that. And every day that thing inside me that wants me to die just kept growing. I'd stopped cutting my arms when I was put into college and started on my legs instead, easier to hide. My family always told me I only did it for attention, but I used to wear long sleeve shirts and sweaters in 90-degree weather to hide the marks. I genuinely hate the sensation, but it's like when I hurt myself it feels more like I'm hurting something else. Like I'm not real anymore.

Whenever I start feeling that way in the day, the voice in my head reminds me that when I get home, I can make it better. But the day I met Lily wasn't the same. In a small room with two beds I sat behind a dingy blue curtain. Staring out through the molded window I watched the spring rain beating down on the pavement. The wretched old woman at my side could no longer move. She could no longer speak. Fatuous conversation spilled from my lips towards her frosted, dull eyes. I fed her mush, and instinctively she consumed. Her plants were kept up by her

family in the windowsill, but from her position all she could see was the lines of plastic holding up the ceiling.

Sitting on the sink lay a gift from her son, years she must have dedicated to him and he paid her back with a cheap bouquet with her name on it. Something has been tearing the sheets in my mind these past few weeks. A crippling realization of free will discretely, forlornly, begging me to dive off the cliff. I could kill her, not only that, I should kill her. The thought came into my mind, and it didn't leave. Room after room I saw pain, I saw my future. Loved ones came and went, but they remained.

Wrapped up in blankets of blood and feces. I wanted to cry, and for one of the first times since I was a child, I felt like I could, without shame. But I didn't. I kept up a façade of happiness and joviality, for their sake. A lifetime of suffering just to end up in a place like that. I couldn't stop thinking about it on my way out. I couldn't stop thinking about it on my way into the restaurant. Sleeper blasted out my car's 700\$ stereo, leather squeaking as I shifted around in my seat.

And I was thinking about it at the grimy brown table I sat at when Lily brought out my black caffeine in a paper cup and asked if I was alone. Over the course of her lunch break we talked about her life, seems I was the first person that didn't just shun her the instant she opened her mouth. Working a dead-end job, shitty worn out sneakers that were out of style before they left the factory running along these cracked tiles day after day. Every step picks up more grime and filth as she drags out heart attacks in paper bags to completely indifferent masses of fat and narcissism. And none of them care about the little individual, turning her away so they may more thoroughly engorge themselves on the American staples without pangs of guilt.

She was in her late twenties now, under the film of grease, sweat, and makeup something called out to me. Not just a feeling, something real. Desperation. A desperation I had known all too well when I was younger. That unyielding desire for someone to love you, care for you, want to ensure your continued survival. My soul died ever so more. Even after Nicole had hurt me, I'd tried to find someone you know. Brittany led me on for weeks until eventually telling me she'd been talking to someone at the insurance office and was going out with him. Susie and I texted back and forth flirting for a month before she told me she had just been using me for someone to talk to, that the boy she liked had

cheated on her and she needed a friend. They got back together afterward. I went on a date with a girl and the entire time she was texting a boy from her job. I can't blame them though.

I'm hideous, my voice is annoying. My nose is too big, and I don't have any real relationship experience either. When Lily started talking to me every time I went into the store I didn't mind, I've always enjoyed talking to other people. Being mute for a decade will make you wish you could talk to anyone but the voice in your head. Her coworkers ignored her, aside from occasionally making fun of us for being disgusting. Lily was flirting with me, she loved to talk about how she had dreams about me. Enjoyed my presence. And I almost believed it.

She called me a spring bird, just like my grandmother did. A small wave of depression consummated the thought. The first person in years to tell me happy birthday in person and it was her. Every year on the first day of spring I wake up to notifications of people telling me it on Facebook, but they're fake. Real people being used in an automated system, it's done completely without feeling. A press of a button. And now this random cashier remembered to tell me, a happy birthday spent drinking cheap coffee in a fast food restaurant. It almost made me happy.

But there was something behind her smile, teeth stained yellow like the piss on the floor of the men's bathroom by cigarettes. She didn't want me. Her life consisted of nothing but coming to work and going home, food was eaten purely from survival instinct, videogames, movies, anything. They didn't make her happy, merely a method to pass time until she was forced to work. *Empty*. She wanted a void fill. It was the only thing she wanted me for. It's disgusting. Bile started filling my mind every time she looked at me. I never had the same conditioning other boys had.

The other men around me act as though sex is the only thing of value in their life. Cowardly and without reason they attempt to hoist themselves above others with their wives, chosen out of lust. And wives most often choose out of wealth. How much money does he make? Where does he live? How big is his truck? It's like the men here follow blindly, allowing themselves to be used for money as they use for sex. It's not love, it's evolution. Attraction is made up of a desire for security, for the betterment of their future kids. And what of those that can't find this so-called love? Maybe they're born in the wrong neighborhood. Born with

genetics they have no control over. Maybe they're too short or too tall. Maybe their upbringing made them shy or overtly talkative. Hell, maybe they just can't grow a beard.

Those people? They'll never find it. They'll spend their whole life suffering and trying, but they won't. Just like she wouldn't. No boy ever stayed with her, once she got out of high school and no one would use her to lose their virginity she was ignored. She wanted so bad to have kids, but she's almost 30 and no one would even look at her. Her archetypal nuclear family had long since passed its half-life and she knew it. Lily's life was nothing but loneliness and pain, and she was coming up to a point where it would be too late to change it. The truth stays in her eyes as she stares at the 70 year old in a "Tecosar" T-Shirt washing the glass doors.

This is the life of far too many people, unwanted and unloved they die having led completely useless lives of nothing but suffering. No one wanted to even acknowledge her existence, let alone help her. She would float around her whole life, burning up like a piece of ash being torn up in the breeze. I knew I could help her. I could help her, and no one would care. Would you? If some mediocre cashier died would you really notice their passing? How many homeless have you passed on the street only to look the other way, forgotten as soon as you turn the corner? How many weirdos do you and your friends make fun of solely for the crime of being different? People like her?

I am not a monster. I told myself that over and over. The people that rejected her are what would allow her to die. Abuse isn't always physical. Sideways glances, mocking comments from her coworkers. And that was if she wasn't being outright ignored like the roaches that infest the kitchen. I was the only one willing to see her as a person, as someone worthy of saving. While everyone else saw her as little more than vermin I extended a hand. The entire time I focused on myself, I was always afraid to die even though I hated being alive. I knew she was the same, given time and the chance to think about it. She would agree with me, welcoming death as if an old friend.

seems as if it's always been this way

I daydreamed of Lily while I was at work. Lydia, one of the nurses, is smoking in the parking garage. “You know these things will kill you” I said, tossing my own to the floor. “That’s the plan” Lydia mutters. There’s an irony that two medical professionals are smoking even though they know firsthand the consequences. I can understand it though, with the manner of work we reside in. Lines and lines of paperwork, a floor of people dying. The EMTs bring a man into the emergency room, he passed out earlier and his chest hurts. He’s not mine, one of the emergency room physicians will take care of him. A girl with freshly asphalted hair and a septum piercing kindly reminds me Nicole exists. She asks for directions to the cafeteria, she’s been here all day with her dad and hasn’t eaten. She’s been crying, the veneer from her eyes bleeds down to her chin. Similar scenes go by every day, the questions reassemble. Were the tears from her dad being put in here? Did he just recover and now, through tears of joy, she can eat?

The same thoughts repeat themselves. I’m alone, any family that had even pretended to care for me is dead. The rest pretend I don’t exist. I have no friends, no lovers, no anything. I’m a ghost, a shade. No one notices me when I maneuver through these dry halls, reminiscing corridors burn with the sound of generations of loss. These patients are too focused on their own pain to care, we get so many that the employees forget their faces as new ones filter in.

We have to, day by day seeing so much pain. So much unabashed, unrepentant, meaningless pain. It eats away at you, if you try to care it’ll destroy you. Every child that comes in to be kept at arm’s length, with a dance of friendliness provoked towards them. Every step echoes silently, every thought focuses and magnifies. When I end up in one of these beds I’ll be just like the old lady. No, I’ll be less than that. No one will come to visit me except the nurses being paid for their charade. It hurts. Maybe someone will come to my funeral to show off, but what’s the point of that when I’m already dead? Lily’s the same way, no friends or family. Ignored.

People like Danielle are the only ones this world is made

for. She was one of the pretty girls when I was actually in school, an abusive self-centered narcissist. They move up in life, the move up in jobs. Businessmen, managers, politicians, any position of power they can find. It manifests when you're young. Are you the jock that bullies the nerds and wins the affection of the prom queen? Or the nerd that stands there and takes it. I was like that, the latter. My parents always told me to take it, not to fight back. Turn the other cheek, be nice. Know where that gets you? Ignored. If someone makes fun of you and you stand there, you let them, then they know they can. And they will, because it's such an ego boost. Tear someone else down to make yourself feel better, to show off in front of your friends. Your mates. It's evolution. Humans have been walking the Earth for over 300,000 years and we're still little more than tribal animals, chained to the Us vs Them mentality our cells have designed us with.

Almost every day I walked that factory of taxes and menticide I got the shit beat out of me. It started when I kept telling kids I couldn't come over, I wasn't with them. I was against them. It got worse as I got older, I was turning into a weirdo. I remember one time getting slammed into the polyurethane floor by a boy accusing me of homosexuality, of being different. His friends joined in and I was beset by their superiority, plumage lights on their shoes flashing with every kick. Fists and rings took the breath from my lungs, my body tells me I'm dying, and despite every effort I cannot retain oxygen. I can't breathe, I'm weak and I cry as a boy beats me with the watch his parents bought for him. Other kids look on and laugh and it hurts. Our 5th grade gym teacher smiles behind his folded arms and laughs, telling them to tear me apart. I roll over into a pool of my worthless bodily fluids and see Nicole staring at me. I feel worthless. But something about her flips the same primal urge they're feeling.

I have to show off to her, prove I'm worthy of her affection. They're still beating me as I slip on snot and tears, a Krakatoa of cacophonous laughter erupts. But I still stand and through vision blurred by embarrassment and pain I managed to throw a single punch at Alex. Suddenly the gym teacher cares, "break it up" he says. The thing in my mind tells me I was chosen to be a failure. Selected the instance I stepped into school. There needs to be one, right? A punching bag for everyone else to get their rocks off to. It's a most holy form of brainwashing for these people, to

talk so much about acceptance only to try and kill anything they don't like. And they do want to kill me, I'm not like them so I'm a threat. In our civilized society we can only subject these people to a social death, isolate them, pretend they don't exist. Cause as much pain to them as possible until they go away.

And what do these abusers receive in return? Love. A boy broke my arm when I was in school and he faced no consequences. More than that the entire school adored him, walking around class to class. Showing up late, eating fast food instead of doing work. As the principle's son he was predestined to happiness, to friends. And if you were his friend you could go with him to the teacher's lounge, away from the lesser people. The rich barricading away from the poor, the poor pretending to be rich, the diseased refusing their infection to others. I can barely remember any of it, barely remember anything.

But I'd give anything to have stayed, anything to be out of that room my parents put me in for 10 years. The beatings, the constant cries of the facility and my peers that I was unwanted. I'd sell my soul to have been allowed to stay. Because I could feel something. In that room I wasn't even a ghost, trapped in my own mind telling myself about the lives others were surely living. Lives I never could, even if I was out. But at least I could have tried, at least I could hear more than my parents belaying my dreams with the reminder that I was useless. Have I thought this before? My thoughts feel so disjointed, like a caustic storm has come in and blown everything around. Shifting memories, reshaping time. What's wrong with me?

A call light comes on from a man wheeled in earlier. The clatter of my non-slip shoes breaks the silent moans of the damned that rest in these halls. The judging eyes of patients and staff watch me calmly sprint down the hall, annoyed by the attention given to the suffering of others. Withdrawn in their own little world, spotlighting themselves on the stage in this empty theatre. Leo, the new nurse, is performing chest compressions. "26, 27, 28, 29, 30"

Breaths.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5"

His eyes are frantic, brows twisted downward. How many days ago did he start? Has it even been a week? Renee, another nurse, follows me through the door. "Leo, Next breath I'll start compressions you continue breaths, Renee go get the code team"

It's sterile. Emotionless. There's no room to feel here, no time to rest. Leo's eyes are watering. Rhythmic beating against the time. Either Renee is slow, or the team is. Arms hurt, clock ticks. Leo and I switch again. The man is unresponsive. Leo tells himself that he'll be okay, "the team will be here any moment we'll get you fixed up" he says, his eyes focused. Focused on some place far away, remembering his courses. Remembering his training. Hundreds of hours spent working towards this, and on the first few weeks of the job a man's life is in his hands.

The first time I did CPR on a patient I was alone. Young, panicky. I walked into a room with an old lady collapsed on the floor. "Ma'am are you alright," says the training, "help will be here soon."

Her son is standing asking if everyone is okay, he's sent to get help. Do you have any idea what it's like? Tears built up in my eyes but I forced them back, her grandkids run into the room crying and I try to blot out the sounds. But you can't. Training dummies are nothing. With a bunch of other students under ideal conditions, it seems fine. Like a magic fix all. But I remember that day. I remember her bones cracking under the chest compressions, just like they said could happen. And you don't stop. You keep giving them, you keep giving breaths. The weight of the universe collapses inward all on you, every eye focuses on you, every ear listens to the sound of your heart beating, every bacterium on earth heaves itself into you. Surrounded on all sides by the living and dead, completely alone.

It was the first time one of my patients died. I tried so hard, I did everything perfectly. I did exactly what I was trained to do, and she didn't make it. I had nightmares about her for weeks, saw her figure in people walking by in the streets. The physician told me I did the best I could do, things happen. Lydia said it happens to everyone, you get used to it. But I haven't. I still think back to that day wondering what I did wrong, how I could have done this, or that. Just one miniscule little spec of a thing I failed to do that would have saved her life. "So fucking worthless" says the voice in my head. He's right.

I make better money than almost anyone around. Once my grandparents died, I bought their house from the bank and had it fixed up. I drive an expensive car. I keep telling myself I should be happy. That I have what a lot of people around here would dream of. But it won't go away. I can see Leo out on top of the

parking garage smoking. Just staring, thinking. Maybe I should talk to him, lie to him. I was standing there too once, asking myself what I did wrong. What's the point? To any of this? It doesn't matter how hard you try. It doesn't matter if you're good or evil. Rich or poor. No matter how much suffering you go through the answer remains the same.

Death.

It's been in my head since I was a kid, why do I have to stay alive? Why is it so frowned upon that people like me want to die? Why do we have to keep going? When you're so down, so broken, just so lost that there's no way out. It's like I'm falling down a pit, some unbelievable long dark hole. There's nothing at the bottom, nothing around me to grab onto, no light to lead the way. I keep falling and falling and it just keeps going, never getting lighter, never changing. No matter what I do it just keeps getting darker. It's not emptiness, it's something far colder. Something so indescribably sinister, so seductive. Like thousands of loving hands trying to embrace me. For so long I kept telling myself I'd hit the bottom someday, just come to something blacker than the topos I reside in. The absolute encompassing truth that would just end it, the worst of the worst. But you don't. The pit is boundless, and one day you realize there is no bottom. There's no way out. You just keep falling deeper and deeper, forever. But something keeps singing to me, telling me I can be free of it. They say it's selfish, to think of how you'll hurt other people. Hypocrites.

They don't care about the suffering of others, it's just that they don't want that nagging feeling to bother them. Their conscience. If you kill yourself suddenly everyone loved you, everyone wanted the best for you. You were a good person, had a hard life. They wish they had talked to you. They lie. They never cared about the dead, just themselves. Suicides interrupt their perfectly constructed vision of themselves. Forces them to realize that deep down, they weren't these perfect God loving individuals that spread the word. They never loved their neighbor, never offered a helping hand. They're every much as responsible for the death as the deceased.

So they start desperately reinforcing themselves. They blame others, talk about how they cared, reassure friends it wasn't their fault. They move on, forget it. And you can't talk to anyone about it, because no one wants to feel bad. The only thing

I've ever been able to talk to has been the noises in my head.

It's the voice that won't go away, the question that bellows in my mind. A vicious whore infecting me, a decrepit house falling into the sinkhole of the soul. Erasing everything I am, and ever will be. I need to die, it's the only way it'll ever go away. It has to be the same for Lily. It scrapes across the chalkboard of mangled insults long forgotten. It beckons the carcinogens from my passenger seat as I drive home. My one solitary companion, a gaseous sage exploring my body and tainting every pore. I hate it. I hate myself. I despise the very existence of the answer, the delayed response of a broken phone. It drags me down through muck and mud of tears and lies, and as the abyss closes its embrace around me, I call out to myself. Lily needs me. The collection of tissue I wear begins breathing softer, steadier. My heart readjusts. The whiskey taunts me with a reflection of my failures. Tingling sensations of reality fade through the body, and I repeat. I repeat as I have done for years. The boxcutter resting on my vein stops its plunge towards oblivion.

What about Lily, and all these things I think to myself. Why? She suffers. She has and will. If I die now she'll continue, stuck in this cyclic danse macabre until one day she finally puffs out and croaks. Until that day she'll continue, continue the loneliness. Continue the pain. Wasting money and time until eventually the alpha wolves abandon her corpse. As with many things she emanates for me a feeling of sadness, but it feels different to usual. I don't entirely understand it but it feels more like her sadness inside me instead of my own. I have to do this, for Lily.

doesn't look a thing like jesus

Her family was either gone or didn't want anything to do with her. Paperwork for a missing person maybe, but I doubted she'd even be brought up again when she was gone. I needed to isolate her though, somewhere I could kill her without anyone noticing. And I couldn't just invite her out somewhere. No, she'd certainly tell someone in her elation of being asked out on a date for once. The primal desire to raise yourself above others wouldn't let someone like her keep it secret. I had to prepare. I started looking at her posts on social media. You could see her attempts to be like the other girls. The pretty girls. Almost every hour of everyday, posting photos of herself in desperate attempts for social media masturbation, for any form of validation. The other girls take pictures of themselves and post them to Facebook, so why couldn't she?

A girl posts a picture of herself in a bikini captioned something vague and meaningless, so horny guys and her friends will like them. An excellent ego boost, fueling the conceited creatures society wants them to be. Terrible if you want any form of privacy. And unfortunately for her she wasn't like the other girls, she was lucky to even get more than two likes on any posts. She was too plain for the nice guys of the world to pick up on. Not enough make up, cheekbones a little off. Little things the brain picks up on. Why would anyone notice her, when just a few clicks away they have access to a hot blonde in a bikini on a "fishing trip" with two guys and a key?

But I noticed. Every picture or video she took, I noticed. I couldn't push the thought from my mind about how useless she was, the thought that the only reason she showed interest in me to begin with was because she herself had failed. Maybe it was growing up without parental figures, or the abuse. But I have stereotypically feminine traits. I get told that all the time, the way I stand, the way I eat, the way I speak. I'm weak, a pushover. I had known since I was young that even if or when I escaped the holistic cage I had been locked in it was too late for me to date, I always knew I'd just end up used by some desperate girl that didn't really care about me. But still, I poured over her posts. Every single photo was a cry for attention, a lot of them she was

half naked covered in make up, just her in underwear backed by a messy room and flaking wallpaper of a two-bit apartment. She wasn't happy, the game society wants us to follow had fucked her over. And then among her sea of loneliness I found it.

One night behind an indeterminate glass of bourbon, stroking a cat well beyond its years I noticed a pattern. She wasn't overweight, but I think she'd convinced herself she was. All those unnaturally skinny girls were fucking the pretty guys, her chubby figure must have been the reason no one loved her. People talk all the time about fat acceptance, but it's just a big scam, isn't it? Danielle constantly makes posts of herself with various homeless people, or charities... Anything that makes her seem like a good person, really. It's just a form of self-flattery to elevate herself to ever increasing heights, using the backs of the less fortunate for steps.

Back when I still worked at my first job, right before I showed up to one of the life erasing shifts I worked, she had posted a link to some fat chick being called beautiful by a kid. Her meaningful contribution being "Be the good !!!" and a selfie of herself one could assume took at least 3 years to get right. I disliked the masturbatory nature of her posts to begin with and already had reservations about her, but then her and her 20 pounds of expensive dust walked through my store and lounged the aisles of decadence.

It was the first time I'd seen her in person since my parents had locked me up in homeschool, though for around a decade to have passed she hadn't changed much. I still remember the amount of malice I felt for her. Some generic pop tune about how fun it is to commit adultery and drink played over the speakers as I drove a mobility scooter through stacks of soon to be thrown away food. I was replacing the now dead scooter of an old obese woman, and once I made it to her you could see the difficulty she had switching seats. I always hated seeing people like them, I could never understand how someone like that meagered the will to go on living, but I was glad to be able to help them. So many people just sit and stare or laugh at them. It made me feel better to provide some form of comfort, if temporary.

And then Danielle saw her, separated by pickles and expired cans of tuna I heard her and her friend ridiculing her, why? What gives you the right to ridicule make someone feel like

shit that for all extents and purposes could very well be out of their control. Don't you think it hurts them, or do you just assume they can't hear your snarls five feet away? Everything in my mind wanted to go to the next aisle and beat the shit out of them, but it was almost impressive. The amount of double think to act like a caring person for attention, then try so hard to bully someone that hasn't even done anything to you. She did the same to Lily, though far more sinisterly. Lily made posts constantly about her attempts to lose weight. And Danielle was on almost every single one, providing "support" to her.

Lily made a post about how she had lost 4 pounds, and Danielle was there to comment about how she didn't look different and needed to try harder. That she believed in her. To make matters worse Danielle's replies usually got more likes than Lily's, how the fuck was that right? Even in her attempts to better herself she was being put down, Danielle was just using her to further her own caveman like yearning for validation. And worst of all no one else seemed to care, was it because Danielle was attractive? Maybe it's just because Lily was weird and society programs us to be okay with bullying weirdos. Whatever it was I couldn't take it. Whatever ideation had been in my mind was solidified into action. I read every post, scoured every picture.

Part of her weight loss involved her hiking places, she posted workout pictures all the time, trying *so hard* to be like the pretty girls. It gave me such a strange sensation to see her like that, some sort of pit in my stomach forming at the knowledge of how much suffering she was going through. The same path every single time, maybe it was an easy hike or maybe it was because no one else ever showed up on the trail. But she favored one trail out of the hundreds she could have chosen. And each picture her fading blank smile, it's perplexing to see how much sadness can be projected from a joyful expression.

I ran the situation through my addled mind over and over. It'd be so easy, all I had to would be to sneak up behind her on the trail and stab her. All the time I spent in medical classes let me know exactly which arteries to puncture, and that's all I had to do to destroy a lifetime of suffering. A few stabs to save her from this boisterously hateful world. I could do it, I knew I could. I knew I could I knew I could I knew I could. It's funny that I used tell myself that on so many things, sometimes I was telling myself that every day. I knew I could, so I didn't have to. That's what it

was, I had to realize that. So many people say they could do things, they have this idea that they can, and they don't. "I could write a movie if I wanted, I could learn this skill, I could fuck this girl" But they don't. They tell themselves they can, so they feel better about not doing it. I realized that for weeks I had been telling myself I could kill her but had taken not a single action towards it. And it finally forced me to start making preparations.

First came my weapon, my idea was to stab her jugular. It wouldn't be a pleasant death, but it would kill her quick and I wouldn't have to be around a gun. I knew no one cared about her, so my hope was that by the time someone found her body it'd seem like an animal attack. I picked up a knife sharpener and just sharpened one of my kitchen knives as sharp as possible, there was a certain beauty to it. Once I finished sharpening it the first time, an unduly process that reduced its width, I ran my fingers over the sides of the blade.

There was something mesmerizing about the razor edge sliding just below the fingers, the way the silver glistened with dust in the evening sun. I sat in my room holding the blade and fantasied about finding her on the trail and cutting her neck, I saw her smiling in death as she was freed from earthly pain. A sort of warmth overtook me when I thought about it. Next came finding the trail, using her selfies I eventually spotted enough landmarks to point me to it, simple enough with as much time on your hands as I had. So, then what?

I stored the knife in my pocket when I went out, and walked the trail hoping to run into her. It was nostalgic in some ways, my Grandfather's brother used to take me and his son out exploring woods, trails, and parks when I was younger. I felt a longing for those days, back when I had someone I could talk to. Back before I became a complete outcast. I started walking that trail each day I was free, more so I could remember those feelings than for Lily, and then one day she was walking up ahead of me. It genuinely caught me off guard. For all my preparing I don't know if I had actually intended to find her.

It was that same problem, where you start to do something because you assume you won't have to complete the task. But I had found her, and I was determined to go through with it. I'd been weak for years and it had hurt me, I couldn't be weak anymore. For her sake. Dead set on doing just one meaningful thing in my life, I had to move in. I still remember it, I walked

behind her in the woods for an eternity trying to work up the nerve. She walked in silence through the insects and humidity, only stopping to take a drink of water twice. The hike trailed on and her breath became labored, I was waiting for it. I wanted to try and make sure she was tired, in case I had failed, and she tried to run.

It's hard to explain it, but there was something beautiful about her in the moment. Sweat dripped down her face and had soaked her clothes, marching on in the face of adversity to try and better herself. I couldn't stop watching her, not content to just laze around and let life pass her by she was doing what I never could. Trying. The world was against her, she stood in currents as the fountains dared try and rip her apart, and she refused to give an inch of ground. Then she noticed me. My body suddenly caught fire, I never intended for her to know I was there.

I wanted to sneak up behind and kill her quickly before she had time to react. But now she'd noticed me, and I had to go through with it. She was still desperate, and she didn't seem to consider the oddity of the boy she only saw when he was ordering black coffee and hash browns appearing at a trail with her randomly. It was kind of comforting in a way, to talk to her again. Without judging eyes or ears on us she was more open than before. I listened, I tried to understand. But my replies were hollow. Maybe it was my lack of any real social interaction, but every word spilling out from my mouth seems as though tainted. Awkward. And it was worsened by my thoughts being consumed by murder. But her need for someone in her life must have allowed her to ignore it. Try to ignore the signs the person you're talking to just isn't as into the conversation as you.

I've been in that position so many times I can feel it myself. I felt so bad for her, she was trying so hard to be somebody. And in all her attempts to get some positive attention, she was met with malice or ignorance. I had known that all my life, the desire to just have someone to talk to and being pushed away at every turn. So, I talked to her. I could sense she had the same problem I had, wanting to talk so badly and being unable think of anything meaningful to say. It must have been the first time anyone had ever taken the time to really try to understand her, cause once she finally started, she spoke for a few hours. Amid an ocean of trees, we perched on top of a cliff as she talked about high school, since I hadn't been allowed to go.

She had lost her virginity in school, but the guy had left her after someone had accused her of cheating on him. She swore to me she didn't and that it was just people being a dick to her for being different. Besides she says, after he fucked her, he seemed to have lost interest anyway. She talked of sneaking out and screwing around with her friends. Some recess of my mind began to fill with hate, hearing all about the life I never got to experience. Locked away in my room, being forced to wither away. Maybe hate directed at my parents, or me.

A part of me began to hate Lily, taking her experiences for granted. Even though I understand, I would have sold my soul to be able to experience some of the happiness she felt. I didn't have much time to dwell on it however. See, during one particular topic where she was talking about trying weed for the first time, she made the movement that ended her life. The air smelled of menthol and, under the lukewarm shade of a tree, I saw her reaching into her pocket for her lighter. It must have reminded her she had a phone because she switched from lighting her cigarette to pulling it out, my heart stopped. I asked what she was up to in a faked joking voice, a distraction. And it was exactly what I was afraid of, she wanted to post about running into me.

Suddenly I had to enforce my demeanor, I knew I was about to run out of time, she wanted to use me as her validator. Bring me up as a friend to prove she wasn't some useless little girl no one liked. To make herself feel better, some sort of shield against the void. But it would mean associating myself with her, and if by some miracle the police cared enough to investigate her death. I would be a suspect. In a haze of smoke and pollen I moved from the rock I was resting on towards her leaning on the tree, "Wanna take a selfie" came the disingenuous words from my mouth, it caught her off guard and her smile widened so much bigger than I had ever given. That twinkle in her eyes further motivated me. She didn't deserve to suffer. And this charade had given me enough to get in close to her with the knife. She stopped smiling.

It wasn't anything like I had imagined. I could see her reflection in the phone as I came up behind her, she noticed the knife and screamed "oh god don't" before dropping her phone on the ground. Blood from her hands fell onto my own as she tried to block it. Her screaming made me want to puke. All alone

in the woods with no one to help her, and no one to care. She continued screaming when she fell to the ground, and I jumped on top of her. I was afraid, I thought she was going to escape, maybe accidentally send a picture of me on her phone during the scuffle. I didn't want her to suffer and now she was screaming her head off, begging me to stop. I didn't want to listen. The knot in my throat kept getting bigger as I tried to ignore her. I focused on my hand as I stabbed the knife into her over and over. The stomach was first in my panic, I moved up to her chest and neck, but she was still breathing. Whimpering. I kept stabbing her. Until the wound turned to mush. I focused on all my movements, I sat on her in tears counting out every single wound I inflicted on her. Over and over, long after she stopped moving. Until I finally stood up and fell back onto the tree.

The bark tore into me and, once I slumped down in the dust storm, I stared at her body. It was twitching faintly on the area just moments ago we had been talking about her. Blood was everywhere, on her, on me, the ground, trees. And more was spilling out. She had been a person just seconds ago. And now where once stood a breathing, feeling girl with hopes and dreams lay only corroding electrical signals. Wherein my fantasies there had been a smile I saw tears and pain. I had to get home. I pulled her body over to woods, deep into the woods. By the time anyone noticed her I just had to pray they'd chalk it up to animals. My car released itself to me, and the socially acceptable suicide went between my lips, melting away above a cheap lighter. Draining into my lungs.

I didn't think to put on any music during my drive home.

Cursed is the ground for your sake. In sorrow shall you eat of it all the days
of your life.

Genesis

i wanted to believe someone

To say I lacked self esteem as a child would be an understatement, but my confinement in homeschool had worsened it. My parents and family were the only people I spoke to, and for all those years my grandmother repeated the same thing to me. “You’re going to be a nobody all your life, no girl will ever love you. If you don’t go to school and get a good job no one will ever go out with a useless ditch digger like you, you’re not handsome. And you’re not a girl that could get a guy to go out with her anyway, the only way you’ll get anyone is if you go to school and become a nurse making good money.”

I heard sentiments like that from her every now and then when I was in school, but in homeschool it became so much worse. I used to cry, and then she’d get my aunt on speaker phone to further nail in the point that I was useless. Whenever I brought up being put back in school, I was shot down. They said no one wanted me, that I’d be bullied. Or that I just wanted back in so I could get some useless whore pregnant. Maybe it was my near nonexistent knowledge of what sex really was, outside of barely audible softcore porn, but I didn’t care. None of the girls I went to school with were worth anything at all, barring Nicole. She was the only girl I ever liked, she still is. I wanted to ask her out when I was still in school, but the day I finally got up the nerve my best friend had asked her out instead.

That puke adorned cafeteria may as well have been a morgue. What type of world is it where you must congratulate your best friend on kissing the girl you love, to open the cardboard milk and pretend the powered strawberry tastes fouler than the wind that now follows you around? I lost Nicole, but before the end of the year I’d lose Michael too.

We were drifting away once he started dating Nicole, I still enjoyed my time with him, but the ticking clock was sending out chimes of a sinister nature. I would have still been his friend, even with as much as it hurt me, because he was the only kid that hadn’t grown up with me. When he moved to our school, he didn’t know to avoid me from peer pressure, but unfortunately his mother became a teacher in our grade. She learned how other kids talked about me, all the lies and false attributions, and she

didn't want him around me. They had begrudgingly allowed him to be friends with me for a long time, but so-called evidence kept mounting.

I went to my one and only sleep over at his house, it was fun, in the youthful wanderings of his backyard his dad found a little brown turtle. While he had it sitting in the garage Michael's brother spit on it, and his dad instantly blamed me. It didn't matter that I tried to explain it was the 5-year-old, the same consuming realization I felt before I felt again. I was guilty before words first came from my mouth, before he called me to the garage. "Why would Kevin spit on a turtle?" he said, angry I would place blame on an innocent kid.

He kept asking and asking, but they weren't questions. Statements disguised as requests for information, my grandmother was right. But it hurt more to know Michael believed his dad, or at least didn't try to defend me. He stood there the entire time, not bothering once to explain me and him were down at the creek building a damn from rocks and trying to catch the shimmering minnows. I can understand though, parents can't be reasoned with anyway.

And then Michaels mom found out who my mother was. She used to live around here, and when they were in school my mother had a reputation as a whore and junkie. But that's not what Michaels mom cared about. See, way back then, my mother was sleeping with Michael's dad. She completely forbade Michael from talking to me, and the only interaction we had from that point was in school. I didn't understand that at the time though, just assumed he'd finally decided I wasn't really worth his time and started ignoring my calls. I thought I had done something wrong. But after all that wondering and not knowing, it was just pettiness. My weirdness was just an excuse to hurt the blood of someone she didn't like.

I didn't want to be lonely, so I still tried to be friends with him during school hours. But behind every baseball game, every recess, every class. Something followed me throughout those chambers of youthful memories. A burning pain of loss for something I never had. For around 8 months I had to sit and watch them make out, hear tales about how they were going to get married, have kids, all that fun stuff. I hated it, and it made me hate him.

We were only 12 of course, so it shouldn't be surprising to

learn they broke up within a year. She was single, and I had a chance on asking her out again. Silencing my death warrant, my parents took me out of school before I could. Imagine how it felt to hear my grandmother say that no girl would ever love me for all those years I spent thinking about Nicole, fixated on the thought that maybe she of all people could be the exception. It was like someone stringing barbed wire through every pore of my body and pouring salt into my cranial nerves. And this was all compounded onto my belief that God genuinely hated me and wanted me to go to hell.

Growing up, up to at least the age of 6 I had been molested repeatedly. I still remember it, in a playhouse during the summer a group of older kids had taken me and made me pull my dick out so they could play with me, they frenched me, and of course they fucked me. I finally confessed to my parents when I was around 10 and you know what they cared about? The only thing that bothered them was whether it would turn me gay or not, told me to tell them if I was afraid it would. That they'd kick me out on the street, that no faggot was gonna live under their roof, that I was going to hell for it. My grandfather had already made me worried about it, but that was the final straw. It confirmed it.

If you asked anyone that knew me which event stood out the most from my time when I was still in school, it'd probably be the tornado drill. I was terrified of storms as a child, and once in school I had made such a ruckus screaming and crying that my grandfather had to bring me home. See, one fine sunny Sunday I had been reading my bible like a good child, and I went to ask my grandfather something that bugged me about the 10 commandments. Don't lie? Sure, I understood that. Don't steal? Of course not. But what was adultery, what was this grave sin, and how could I avoid it if I didn't know? So little 6-year-old me strolled up to my grandfather as he was walking down my great grandmother's driveway and asked him, "what's adultery"

I still remember the annihilation I felt when he said, "It's what you and Heather do in that playhouse." The old fart must have seen her riding me at some point, because he knew about it. Knew about her and her friends fucking around with me. And he just let it happen. I know why. If I ever mention it to anyone, even when I mentioned it to the psychs I went to, you know how the conversation goes? I tell them I was molested, and their

impressions get pale, suddenly I'm offered their deepest sympathy. Then I say it. I say "she" and watch their facial muscles ease back into their resting positions, and a relieved "oh" leaves their mouth. Spurred on by the polluted air infesting their lungs travelling through vocal cords that took millennia of evolution both biologically and culturally, they say "oh".

Of course, the same day he tells me this I have to go with him to my great grandfather's house so he can mow his lawn, and the entire car ride over I was filled with dread. My grandmother's dad was neighbors with my molester. Every time my visited him, it happened. She used to tell me that if I told anyone she'd use her magic to kill me and send me to hell, so I let it happen. I let her French me, let her stick her finger up my ass, let her twist my dick with a plastic wrench. Whatever she wanted, because I was afraid. I thought if I just let it happen it'd be okay, but now what? Had God let me off the hook because I didn't know it was a sin? My Grandmother used to say kids couldn't be held accountable for sins because they didn't know better, but now I did. Now I did and in the middle of a sweltering summer day I was being forced back. I could see that fucking playhouse as we pulled into his driveway, every nerve, every muscle fiber tensed.

Then the storm came. My grandmother had always told me God controls everything, he controls the wind, the sun, even the bugs. And now that I knew I was sinning against him, the most violent storm I had ever seen came. I was walking with Heather to that damned pillory of wasps and moldy carpet when out of nowhere hail started pouring down, my grandfather called me back into the house to sit with them. Tornado watch he said, I didn't need to be outside. Wind was picking up, and I started screaming to leave.

My grandmother protested about leaving her dad, but I was embarrassing her with my cries, and she relented to leaving. That walk of shame to my grandfather's car was vastly overshadowed by the mixture of fear and relief I was escaping Heather. On the ride home my body began tingling and shivering as if I'd just jumped into the arctic as hail slammed into his car. No one had to say anything, I knew it was God. He'd sent a tornado to punish me for my sins, and from the car to my house I cried, so afraid my life was about to end, and I'd be dropped into the pits of hell. I held my hands against my ears so tightly they hurt so I wouldn't have to hear the wind and thunder. I prayed so hard for

it to stop, but it didn't seem God was listening anymore.

During 2nd grade my parents had put me into a private Christian school briefly after I got mono. They couldn't afford to keep me in there more than a year and during that short stay I only learned one lesson of importance, one worthy of remembrance. One day on the ride to school I saw the tendrils of a cold front encroaching the landscape, my breathing was quickening but I was telling myself it might not end up raining. Then, during the service the school had in the mornings, the first echoes of thunder began. The preacher must have loved trying to console people, because he jumped at the opportunity. And in the midst of our respective babbling he tried to explain that God loved me, that God would never hurt me. When I explained I was scared of tornados he spat forth the words that sealed my damnation. "God only sends tornadoes to kill bad people"

I was bad people.

I have always been a bad person. It's why my parents had to punish me.

It's why God needed to punish me.

My grandmother was quick to remind me that any girl that seemed interested in me was a whore that just wanted to get pregnant, and I knew that God didn't want me to have friends or date. I took her advice in trying to stay with God. I used to read one of my mom's books about how all these symbols, games, and songs were the devil trying to drag kids to hell. And it, along with a book by some guy saying he was in hell for a few minutes, helped me realize something. God punishes those he doesn't like, and his punishments were brutal enough that I would do anything to avoid them.

If a girl looked at me and I thought she thought I was hot, if a girl gave me her number. If we were eating and my grandfather pointed out a belter waitress looking at me, I had a ritual. It continued up to my later teens, and one memory comes to mind. We were coming home from visiting my aunt, eating at a Denny's. I was 17 at the time and the waitress was trying to flirt with me only to be scared off when she said she was 26 and my grandmother smugly mentioned I was 17. For the rest of that meal she never came back to our table, and I got to hear my grandmother lecture about how she was useless. About how people like her go to hell, about how I needed to finish school so I'd have enough money to get a decent woman.

When we finally got home, I did the same routine I always did, I closed the door of my room and shuffled a playlist of songs my mother used to like that she'd passed on to me. Then I pulled off my shirt and threw it onto the broken-down mattress my grandmother had seen fit to hand down to me. Followed by slowly pulling my belt through the loops of oversized pants. For nearly 4 songs I beat myself with it, over and over. But like always it wasn't enough and, back burning up as badly as the hell I was trying to avoid, I unplugged my laptop and went into the bathroom. I snuck into my grandmother's room after I set the laptop up on the sink, quietly and slowly so she wouldn't notice me over the images on the TV. She had a baggie full of disposable razors, and I pulled out a purple one. Pop icons eyed me stealing my favorite colored instrument of self-harm, but they didn't tell anyone.

Over the course of a few minutes I sat alone in the bathroom prying out the razor, tearing through skin on my fingertips, until I finally succeeded. Most of the time there I didn't shake or flinch anymore, like when I had first started so long ago. But I was shaking as I pulled the mirror down to look at myself, stripped down to the skin, guiding a razor through the epidermis on my arm as rock music played in the background. Focusing intermittently on the black mold growing on the frosted windows, and my own reflection.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

The same thought played on loop, opened up in the filth of decades of unwashed toothpaste splash back staring at me from the surface of my oval reflector. But I wasn't, not really. How could I feel remorse for something I didn't understand? I was just

afraid. No one even remembered I existed or cared, and I was afraid. I was afraid of being alone, but afraid other people might hurt me. That God didn't want me to speak to them, and I had even turned on myself. That night I cut myself deeper than I ever had before, and even when I came to my senses and closed the wounds myself with gauze and duct tape they were bleeding through, I went and cried under my bed that I was sorry. I didn't feel like I deserved the bed, so I slept there. With the spiders and ants. For the next few days I felt weak, like the strings in my body could barely survive the puppeteer controlling them.

My family were the only people I could talk to, and all of them wanted me to be a nurse. So, I did. Suffering through college, I finally got my degree. And yes, I had the money to buy a fancy house, fancy car. I could buy all the albums and games, and anything I wanted. And now I was wandering back in from killing a girl, back into my fancy house in my fancy clothes after getting blood all over my fancy car. I stripped down and tried to make my way to the shower to clean off the blood when I saw it. Me. In the same scene I seen so many times in my life, naked, blood tainting my arms. I could trace the old lines up and down my forearms, but this blood wasn't mine. Before the scene was one of hate, a vile boy being punished for his own existence. And now it evoked something else.

I could see my chest rising with every breath, and behind my eyes, it was a stranger. I used to sit and stare at myself for hours, noting every mistake God had made in me. My nose was too big, my teeth weren't the right color, my hair didn't part as well as I liked. God had created me as a monster. I could see it in the eyes of people when they spoke to me in public, disgusted by me, obviously thinking of how hideous I was, down to my blood. But what was my body? A mass of flesh piloted by sentient tissues, a hive mind pulsing with electricity. I notice the same flaws I always have, but this time I stared into my eyes. They felt so disconnected from everything else. Like they belonged to a different person. I had to run my hand along my face to make sure I was even looking at me. The body in the mirror does the same. I couldn't believe it. I killed someone, almost on a whim.

No one had stopped me. I trace the old lines with my fingers, every moment I spent suffering in front of a mirror reflected back through my own skin. I nearly drowned once in a pool when I was young, if I had died then I wouldn't have gone

through the years of fear during the slightest storm, I wouldn't have learned adultery was a sin. The beast writhes forth from my consciousness the vague memory I have of that day. I'm floating midway between surface and bottom with a scuba mask on, after walking too far underwater and slipping over the incline into the deep end. I'm not afraid in the water, warmed and brightened under the refracting summer sun, I'm at peace. But then I hear a noise, and my grandfather drags me up from the land of chlorine and piss. And suddenly I'm afraid, coughing, crying... But under the water everything was calm. Under the water I felt something I had never felt again, until today. Today was the first time I've felt that feeling again.

Is it peace? I trace the old lines with my fingers, each one an instance where I could have died. Every instance proof that I had continued the charade of life another day. No one had stopped me. I trace the old lines. This isn't my blood. In the span of a few minutes I ended all her future suffering and took away her past. My faith in God eroded long ago, but part of me wants her to be in a place of warmth and comfort. I trace the old lines. If there's nothing after death then I did her a favor, a lifetime of suffering would be rendered useless by an eternal oblivion. I trace the old lines. If she's in an afterlife, then I've saved her from a lifetime of suffering to send her to her predestined path. I trace the old lines.

I was weak. Each and every one of these magdarama marks on my body was a cry for release. I didn't want to be alive, but I was terrified of dying. Just like Lily, there's no way she was happy. There's no way she ever would be, she'd live a life of suffering and then die. Like I was going to. Was, not anymore. I saved her, if I don't get caught, I can do the same for others. For the first time in my life I have a purpose.

not one of them involving you

It's sad that I was right. I don't like that I was right. I should be in jail. Investigated. Someone, somewhere, should have put the pieces together. Collected samples from my body, noted inconsistencies.

But no one noticed she was gone except her boss, and the only thing he did was hire someone to take her place 4 days after she disappeared. Life has gone on and she rots away. Just like I do. I saw Nicole in the restaurant Lily worked at when I went to see if anyone was talking about the dead girl, and she still provokes the same feelings she always did. Everything about her is perfect, her skin, her voice, her hair, her eyes, everything. She didn't talk to me though, I wonder if she even recognized me? I used to fantasize about her back when I was locked up in my house. I finally learned more about sex during one my college courses at 17 and it made disgusted with myself that I thought of her that way.

But I couldn't help myself, late at night I used to jerk off in the living room and I used to imagine that some day she'd be with me, silhouetted by moonlight on top of me. She'd look in my eyes and make some vocalization of affection before kissing me. It disgusted me, and I made cuts to myself with a pocketknife every time I came. It was different to me, to imagine it with a "real" person instead of pornstars. But it didn't help that most of the channels I watched porn on seemed to be phasing it out.

I never knew why I couldn't separate the idea of her from the idea of me fucking her, looking back I wasn't any different from the people I hate. Evolution has predestined our society to view sex as the most important thing in human existence, people die for it. People kill for it. Every single thing humans do harkens back to it. It caused Lily so much pain, like it used to me. Like it still does to me. I still want to fuck Nicole, I keep telling myself that if my parents had let me go to school I probably could have. Fantastical dreams of not being a worthless piece of shit. But it's useless to think about now, she's been with Jake for 4 years, I guess they're staying together.

The thought of sex still disgusts me too, I almost want to hurt myself again when I get home. But I don't. I don't because I

know that I don't care anymore, not really. At least not in the manner to try and take action about it. I sit down at my desk and look after my feed, girls are posting pictures of themselves to get attention, guys are posting pictures of their trucks to try and get a girl's attention. It's all one big show, the primal instinct to be better than everyone else is thrust into the spotlight and magnified. I laugh at the stupidity of it all when a notification comes through over the album I have playing.

Nicole has sent you a friend request.

My heart skips a beat before realizing the stupidity of my actions, I accepted it under the assumption it was just to add the size of the number she has by her name. Friends 940 up to 941. I can see her posts now though; the day I saw her she was going to a party in the woods. Without me. I see her drinking and having fun with her friends. With Jake. I force myself to look through my feed instead of focusing on the monument of my ultimate failures. Danielle posts link to a news article about a company adopting a pro LGTB stance. The caption is "be the good" with fruitless comments of acceptance, and I see a name of someone I haven't seen for a long time. Michael, we used to talk about the girls we thought were cute, about what we thought sex was, and here he was praising the company for standing up to gay rights. His rights.

His posts are pictures of his house, his cars, his face. The peacock feathers of the new age. I think back to Nicole, I imagine Jake taking her to bed and fucking her in the ass as she moans in pleasure. Him, not me. Why do I care so much? If I wanted to fuck someone I could, now that I have money and a house it wouldn't be hard. It's because she's not like the other girls I tell myself. But if that's true why do I fixate on sex with her? Why should that matter. My mind wanders as I stare through the pictures Michael's using to try and attract a mate. Maybe it was my tenure in homeschool, but time seems unreal to me. Days pass as hours and hours as days. Months, weeks, days. All of them merge together. It's unreal to me that Michael has changed so much, and I wasn't there for any of it.

Nicole pulls down Jake's pants and wraps her lips around him. I hate it and I hate him. I hate myself for thinking about it. Why am I no better than the rest? It's just the primal urge for reproduction, and it won't leave my fucking head. I hate the fact that I saw her. I hate that fact that I couldn't grow up with her,

even if we were just friends. Alex is flirting with Danielle in the comments for all to see, his relationship status is married. No one seems to see or care about that, his wife even liked his dumb jokes to Danielle.

Michael works as a mechanic, it's a convenient way for me to meet him again. Under the pretense of an oil change I go to the shop he works at and, wouldn't you know it, he recognizes me. It's a slow day so we're afforded the time to talk, I don't even have to bring her up. He tells me he remembers me talking about her all the time and being burned when my friend was the one that got to kiss her at recess instead. Dripping in oil and grease an old friend tells me that my crush was a whore during high school. He tells me about this one time she cheated on her boyfriend and he made her hump a pillow in a video call to get back together. "Apparently the dude dumped after a week anyway, lot of good that did her" he laughs.

Surprisingly the weirdest thing I learn from him is that our old friend Ryan became Shelby after school. He thinks Ryan only did it because girls wouldn't sleep with him, and he goes into a monologue about how much he wishes he was attracted to girls. He's lost a lot of business ever since he came out, and now he's considering moving to the city. Get away from all the rednecks, or at least get away from a small town where bigotry can be practiced so openly. I know where he's coming from, almost all the people around us go to church on Sunday so they feel morally required to beat down anyone that's different. Michael thinks it's worse on Ryan since there aren't that many trans people in the area.

In some ways Michael still seems like the same person I knew as a child, if a little more distant thanks to time. I never had internet at my house until I was around 16, so I had to take my laptop to my aunt's to play games online, where me and Michael used to play Minecraft sometimes. I remember those days too, as obsessed as my family was with me not getting laid, they didn't like my acne. And the only way for me to get my aunt to let me use her internet was for me to let her pop my pimples. She'd lay me across her lap and pop the pimples on my face and back for hours at a time, holding me down when the pain of her fingernails became too much. And eventually, me and Michael could play together. He was one of my few friends and, even though we never hung out in person, I appreciated him. If I could go back in

time I'd still choose to suffer if it meant gaming and talking with him. Even if I had to feel the hurt from him growing distant from me again.

It's amazing how many people that never talked to me for years suddenly messaged me after they realized I'd went to his garage.

"Don't you know what he is?"

"I can't believe let him work on your car."

"I don't have a problem with it but I don't think it's right"

"The bible is very clear on homosexuality"

"Oh dude I'd have been afraid he'd hit on me or something."

So many people that go to church and talk about love and acceptance just blissfully degrading people, based on sexual preference. Even as they themselves cheat, beat their wives, and commit sodomy. Hate fills my mind at their hypocrisy, and I remember Nicole. She's friends with Shelby still. And I use Shelby as an excuse to talk to her. We talked about Shelby before turning to other subjects, and our conversation went on for hours. Like it always did. There's a tinge of sadness parading in the corners of my mind as I realize again, that she'd never be mine. I think that maybe I'm hurting myself by talking to her, but I want to. It's fun, even if we were perpetually just friends, she's the only person I've spoken to in years that I can be myself around. The only person in my life that gives me some semblance of happiness, plus it opened the door for me to add Shelby. He must not have recognized me though, just another way for his number of friends to inflate, considering he never messaged me. Maybe he just didn't feel like talking

But his page told a story. All his pictures were using filters, all his posts were trying so hard. So many of his pictures were people calling him ugly, people saying he looked like a guy in drag, people calling him queer. Michael might be disliked, but it wasn't as open and in his face. Once I knew it was him, I remembered people talking about him in college. But why do they care? If someone has a genuine mental disorder, why do they feel such a need to hurt them with it? Ryan doesn't deserve any of the bullshit they're throwing at him.

There's a stigma with that term though isn't there? Disorder. There's a stigma with anything different, it's why you change retarded to intellectually disabled. Why you change disorder into condition. But it doesn't get at the root cause, it

doesn't dig into the cultural biases that have stood for eons. No matter what you call it, he is different. Shelby wasn't comfortable being a boy, so he rejected the gender God forced on him. And the reward for refusing to live a lie, the grand medal he receives, is spite. It's anger.

People around here don't want to understand him, they don't want to accept him. They want to hate him. He goes against their religion, and they can hate him instead of themselves. Dedicate the wrath of the heavens onto the animal that isn't like the pack, rather than acknowledge their own sins.

normality is not a word i understand

When I was a kid I remember having a cat give birth to kittens inside our barn turned garage once. Despite him telling me I should give them away I convinced my grandfather to let me start feeding the mother, and once again my loneliness was taken away by animals. Not humans. Most of them were grey or brown but there was a little Calico kitten I called Dante. For a week, every day once I got out of school, I went and sat in the garage with them, watching them. Then, one day my grandfather yells at me to come into the living room. Dragging me up the hill to the driveway by the hair of my head, and I see all of my kittens dead, ripped apart. "See what happened, are you proud of yourself, huh huh? Cocksucker" he yells running back inside the house. The mother cat is crying in the gravels near the kids when I notice my Grandfather back outside with his shotgun. I barely have time to start begging him not to shoot before the mother dies too. Head blown off by a pointblank blast.

He told me there was a tomcat at my great grandmother's house that had killed the kittens so he could have sex with the mom again. I didn't know what sex was, but I knew I hated the tom. My grandfather said he had killed the mom to stop her from getting pregnant again, and I told him I wanted him to kill the tom too. I told him I wanted it to suffer, it stole my new friends and it needed to pay. He said he would and made me follow him up to the side of the house then, as the tom started to run, he put buckshot directly in its stomach.

He made me watch the tom convulsing and choking on its blood in a puddle of piss and shit for an eternity before putting another shot into its brain. "It's just an animal, that's what they do." he said, "they don't know right and wrong it just wanted to mate." He must have noticed some regretful lines on my face cause he asked me, "Do you feel better now that I killed the damned thing?" I don't remember my answer, if I gave one.

There was no reason for him to shoot the tom's stomach, I wanted him to make it suffer and he did. But there wasn't any reason for it. I've been thinking about that because of Lily. She suffered before she died. If I killed someone else, I needed to make sure I knew what I was doing, that they wouldn't have to

suffer. Nicole makes me reminisce of back when I was just finishing up college. We had been talking back then too, she was dating Marty back then. For a few months she'd been calling me whenever she got drunk and texting me about her life. We got along well, and she used to tell me about how she did like me. She told me if it wasn't for Marty having cancer, she would break up with him for me. I clung to that, it was this hope that someone ended up caring for me after all those years. Then one day she gets more distant. She stopped texting as much and ignored me when I asked why. Cut to a month later and she's dumped Marty for Jake.

I hated Jake like I hated Marty. I hated myself, the day I found out she'd been lying to me and didn't even have to decency to even tell me I cut myself. It was one of the days when I was afraid of it. It was all I could think about at work. And the entire time I was telling myself "I don't want to do this" over and over. On the ride home. When I got in my house. Tears were streaming down my face as I went about putting up my stuff. I took off my clothes and put them in the hamper set out towels. "I don't want to do this, please, I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this." I begged myself. I tried to fight it even as I pulled out my razor and got into the shower, staring at my bare flesh. My tears were flowing as much as the shower head, and eventually "I'll feel better if I do" came out of my mouth. Like every other time I tried to fight it. The mantra repeated itself as I tore apart my body and took part in my bloodletting. I cried tears of blood thinking about how she'd been lying to me all that time. The only person I'd ever put my trust in just used it to lie to me, hurt me.

I cried because I knew I deserved it. I was weak, what good could I have been other than complementing her? She was only talking to me for emotional validation while she waited for some dude she would actually want to fuck to show up. Someone she could actually love. I deserved it because I'm a bad person. I had to feel the sting I wanted Marty to feel. A stronger man would have blocked her, but the only I could do was delete her. Nothing more than dipping a toe, too afraid to completely kill my chances. And now it almost feels like she's coming back, every positive emotion I felt from her overtaken by memories of the bad. And I still forgive her.

I tried telling myself I was wrong back then, that maybe the man she was feeding fish with was just a friend. Useless lies to

try and avoid the truth. I knew it was coming, I knew she'd get with someone else. But I lied to myself, can you blame me? A lifetime spent waiting for her, motivated solely by the dream she might want me, and when it finally seemed like I had a chance I was about to be cast aside like a used condom in the woods.

That was days right before my first vacation and she had absolutely ruined it. Tainted it. I was weak. In a way I still am, because I'm talking to her again. She hurt me more than anyone ever has in my entire life and I still love her. I still want to be with her. At least this time my pain can serve a purpose. Nicole tells me about Shelby. I know Shelby has to be next, as soon as I learned who he was, but I need to talk to him first. His page is basically the same as everyone else. Most of his posts were just at work selfies or links to random articles. But everyday when he got out of work, he ate at the sub place near him. Like clockwork, and everyday he posted a selfie with some variation of "eat healthy" or "finally off work" on it.

That's where I could run into him. The very first day I tried, I ran into him. And, even if it took a little reminding, he remembered me. The tone setter for his life was the cashier telling him to "Have a good day, sir." When we spoke, I learned it wasn't exactly an uncommon occurrence, he'd been eating out here to try and stay slim, to keep a more feminine figure. And he gets looks all the time, even his boss had refused to call him by female pronouns before he'd threatened to call HR. I told him I was starting to try and eat healthy myself, and we might see each other around more. I saw the couple in the table across from us snicker at him as he was leaving.

I wouldn't even know he was trans had I not known him as Ryan, yet whenever I look all I can see is the boy swinging at recess. All I can focus on is the boy he used to be, that distant memory of another lost soul in school. We aren't that dissimilar I suppose. He'd gotten into trouble before at work because most of the male employees thought he was flirting with them, it was weird to hear that from him. Back in college every girl in every class assumed I was flirting with them, even though I mostly just wanted someone to talk to.

I can't exactly blame them though, our culture raises girls to be weak, our religions try to enforce girl's places as sex objects, mothers, complacent. Combine this with a bunch of horny rednecks that bend over backwards trying to get laid and

you get a bunch of egotistical girls that think any male attention is to get into their pants. But it's like they're taught their only worth is sex too, like the only value they have in life is as a man's toy. They buy expensive make up and follow demeaning diets trying to live up to unreasonably high expectations of beauty. It's a shame.

While Nicole was still with Marty she called me and the first words out of her mouth on our first phone call was to ask why I was a virgin. The only girl I genuinely like calls me out of the blue and asks me why I haven't got laid. Followed by her asking why I want to fuck her, why I like her. I was a virgin because I was locked up in my house until I was 21. I'm still a virgin because it's too late to care now. If you don't lose it while you're young, you never will. It's not my choice, it never was. But when I lay awake in my expensive bed crying into a 50\$ pillow case it's strange. I want to know what sex feels like, of course I do. Like some vain hope it might make me happy.

But that's not why I hate being a virgin. It's because it pours the concrete into the foundation monumenting that I am not normal. That I never will be. Everyone else already lost theirs, they have multiple partners throughout their life and they're normal. Even if Nicole's flirtatious nature isn't just my own wishful thinking and she goes out with me, she'll be my first. What if she's my only? How would it be fair that she's supposedly been with 9 guys by 26 and I've never been with anyone? I don't care because I'm insecure, I care because I want to feel normal, and I can't. Just like Shelby.

Shelby has to brace himself for mockery and pain every day, after being brave enough to choose to live the life he feels is right for him he has to deal with some girl that just spent 2 hours putting on her face coming over and telling him he's the pretender. Or some 16-year-old in a pick up his dad bought him comes in with his arm around two girls that look like they stepped in from clown school and tells him he's going to hell. Every time some useless little girl had accused me of flirting with her, it made me sick. Some of those girls have tried flirting with me now that I have money, a house. But I'm still the same me. It's disgusting.

Shelby told me Nicole used to fuck a guy with a 10 inch dick and that the guy used to brag about her riding on him with it all the way in her ass, and he didn't give a shit about her. About

how she just goes for assholes that don't care about her. He tells me the things I've always heard. She's a manipulator, a liar, someone that only cares about herself. A nymphomaniac that wouldn't have feelings for Jesus Christ. He told me I didn't miss out on much with her, and it's funny because even though I some part of believes him I still want her.

Nicole is a bad person, but she knows she's a bad person. She's told me before about how toxic she is, about how she ruins everything. And I want to be with her, still want to give her a chance. Nicole as a person is just so different to everyone else, I just want to be around her. Spend time just hanging out or playing games, watching TV. Just to exist in her presence. The girl that was once homecoming queen tried to fuck me in college, and I turned her down because I didn't care about someone like her. The boys and girls of the good Christian community still occasionally make fun of me for that.

It's not about sin, it's just about being better than someone else. These people point their fingers at Shelby so they can ignore their own faults. They talk about love, but their version of love is just fucking someone until you get bored. Shelby talks about love as if he wants to find his soulmate. He talks about it as if it's work, but it's just evolution. Shelby doesn't understand why people hate him. He doesn't understand the evolutionary bias the worms have towards anything differing from the norm. And now these hypocrites make Shelby scared to leave his house because he's afraid they'll hurt him.

The mind wanders. I remember my grandfather packing me up to go to Florida because he told me the government was going to cause a train derailment. I remember my grandfather convincing me the world was going to end in 2012. He told me the black lines in the road were explosives the government was going to destroy the roads with us in our car on it. He told me the government was putting brain eating amoebas into the water to kill the poor. And for some reason the last one affected me the most, *Naegleria Fowleri*.

It's an amoeba that lives in freshwater and, in rare cases, can end up infecting your brain if water gets your nose. Almost certainly killing you. For most of my teenage years I was beyond convinced I was going to die from it. Despite being one of the rarest things in the world I, in particular, was fucked. For a while I still drunk water but every time I thought even a drop went up my

nose I started hyperventilating and praying to God that I didn't want to die. It got so bad I had to see a therapist about it. And her first idea to help me was to tell me to leave it in God's hands, presumably not knowing that's what I was afraid of.

And then I turned 20. I had been in a mostly online college program since I was 17, and now I was getting ready to transfer from the community college I was in to what my parents called a "real" college. My grades allowed me in without any trouble, and I was already getting ready to move into the dorms. I think that's what changed me, at least one of the things that did. The realization crept over me during the admissions process that I wasn't doing it of my own free will, I was just following orders. Like an ant or a bee. It was the same college my aunt had went to when she was becoming a nurse, and all throughout my college years from the community college up to this point my family told me how proud they were I was becoming a nurse. Why? It was never my choice, they told me to, so I did. I took the classes they told me to, signed the forms they told me to. I was only ever doing what I was told. They weren't proud of me, they were proud of themselves. And, as I was coming to this conclusion, they made the final action that sealed my fate, the action that began the destruction of the old me. Condoms.

I made it into the dorms and had all my stuff set up for the most part and, as I started unpacking, I noticed a pack of trojans wrapped up in my clothes. For years they'd made me suffer in silence, disgusted by own body, by supposed natural impulses. And now they'd decided it was okay for me to have it. Something broke inside me, I came to the complete realization that I had spent my entire life forced into a void of near nonexistence, where my only purpose was to follow orders and live a life planned out by my parents. I had been completely stripped of free will and now it's as if they understood that I was going to be away from them and could get laid without them knowing. They had to send condoms, they had to send a note saying I could use them. It had to be them, not me that made the choice. And in a single moment, frozen in time, I made the first choice I made for years. I left.

After we got home, they made me get a car and a job, despite my pleas for years that they let me get one they acted like I never wanted one to begin with. I was forced to go to work, I didn't even get to pick the store I worked at. *Weakness*. After a

few weeks in a job I didn't choose, I realized something. It hurt me every time I saw couples walk by. It hurt me every time I saw teens walk by. What was caging me? I was 21, did my parents still hold control on me? I lived a life dedicated to fear and hate and I still allowed myself to be constrained to it. My blind therapist was nice, she couldn't see my deformity, so I didn't have to feel so self-conscious around her. But she couldn't help me. I told her I was fine and quit. I told her I was over my fear. I lied.

I spent the next few weeks afraid and working. Until finally I came home and turned on the shower. As dumb as it was, I stood in there with an electric razor and shaved my shoulder length hair off. Then I stood under the flow and finished the rest of it with a disposable. I stood under that water until it ran cold, and then some. Everyone made fun of me for shaving the weeks after, but I was happy with myself for a time. A single action like that freed me from my fears, I stopped being afraid of storms. I stopped having a panic attack from water. It was the first step to becoming my own person. To being free, or whatever this is.

Shelby reminds me of that in his own way. Faced with years trapped in a body he didn't want, he made the choice to change. While I used a knife to enforce my containment, he used his to break free. And in doing so we both learned the same lesson. During our years as little more than lambs we had people who loved us or would at least say they loved us. When I left the preppy private college to finish my schooling in community college, I shattered the chains my parents had bound to me.

Suddenly I was no longer the obedient servant, no longer the puerile chattel they'd created to further their own ego. That's all it was in the end, all those people they proudly displayed me to, boasting of my academic success. It meant nothing to me, but the primal desire to be above someone else fueled their self-worth. And they sacrificed me to fan their flames. Yet, once free I did not arise as a phoenix, but as an ember. Floating through life I had lost my purpose, and merely awaited oblivion. And in crawling forth from the bottomless pit, I learned that my time had passed. In an instant my childhood had been ripped from my grasp, and I had no way to steal it back.

I could never be normal, my childhood through my teens was spent isolated. As a child I never understood the dislike other children had for me. But it's clearer now, it's evolution. All of it. I was different, I was always different. Even before my birth I was

damned, and in life had almost willingly assumed the role of the outcast. It's the only thing that seems to make humans happy, inflicting pain on others. Make yourself feel bigger by trying to make everyone else small. Get your friends together, go make fun of a fat girl eating ice cream. She's not hurting you, but it's all you can do to hold back laughter as she enjoys one of the only pleasures she has in life. And she doesn't fight back, she's been conditioned to accept it. Lay down and take the beating. And your little gang of scoundrels can lap up her despair until you burst like a tick overstaying it's welcome on a doe. It promotes unity, the idea of "us" vs "them" logic.

We were born in this country.

They want to come to our country.

By creating such black and white scenarios in our heads we can safely hurt other people without remorse. Religious people don't need to feel remorse on anyone not in their congregation if they're going to hell anyway. Anyone that disagrees with a protester is a brainwashed sheep getting in the way of freedom. Anyone that doesn't agree with your political views is on the wrong side of history. And this vicious machine of hatred is given energy by itself, it's so long rooted itself into our culture that no one notices as the tendrils bake their way into our nervous systems. A man's father teaches him to be a democrat, and he teaches his sons, and they teach theirs. It never ends, trapped under the weight of our own mortality we try so hard to achieve some form of meaning that we arrest ourselves in an unending masquerade of non-meaning.

And what if you don't conform? What if you can't don the same masks as everyone else? We tell ourselves we live in a civilized world, we convince ourselves of the masquerade and so we follow the idea that we can't just kill the things we dislike. But what we've done now is so much worse. I experienced it growing up, Shelby experiences it now. We can't kill the things we hate, so we must instead enforce them to do so themselves. I escaped my own destruction, but Shelby inches closer every day, and now we've given ourselves to tools to use his death as a masturbatory aid. They just recently found Lily's body, and like some twisted play the newspaper unfolded before as I had written them. No investigation, no fanfare. Just a small obituary, dedicated to a girl that was mauled by animals while hiking. No teary posts on social media, no candlelit vigils. She was worthless and, when

discarded, easily forgotten. The only mention of her was Danielle making a solitary post about it with a black and white selfie, somberly looking into the distance. “It’s sad how easy life can end, we were friends in school” a bunch of likes and hearts. A thousand comments saying “Sad” or complimenting Danielle’s hair.

I can’t let it happen to Shelby, he smokes constantly, drinks heavily. I can feel in his voice that he doesn’t want to be alive. Everyday he’s forced continue with the knowledge that this isn’t the life he wants to live. That he’ll never have the life he wanted, it’s too late. It was always too late, since before the first atoms configured themselves to the sperm cell that became a girl born as a boy he was fucked. The thought fills me with pure unfiltered hatred, such disgust. He didn’t have the life experiences other girls had, and now he never will. He’ll never fit in, never truly be a girl. Society won’t let him, for all its talk of acceptance, the stigma will follow him wherever he goes. “He’s different” says the tribal brain, “get him away from us.” The only person that ever supported her was his mom, and now she’s probably dead and buried.

All of it’s just to force him to kill himself, like a pack of wolves forcing the sick one into the fields to die. And even if he doesn’t, what then? A lifetime of being degraded and made to feel less than human because he wasn’t born like everyone else? Just to be thrown in some home to waste away? They make him resent his family too, just like me. It’s the same as everyone else, we blame our faults on others. I wasn’t different. In my days before I was taken out of public school there was a girl that had a crush on me, but everyone else liked to make fun of her for being a weirdo into manga. I liked her in some way, but I wouldn’t go out with her. No, I was too good for that. For once in my life I got to look down on someone. And look down I did, every opportunity I got I used to make fun of her, to feel the crowd cheering me on instead of beating me down. I still think about her, still wonder how she ended up. She didn’t deserve any of that. To be some punching bag for a weirdo trying to play it cool. Maybe after Shelby I could kill her too someday, make up for the things I said to her as a kid. But now I have to try and focus. I have to help Shelby.

My cat purrs next to me as I cover up in an expensive bed, alone in my thoughts.

night terrors

I've not spoken about my dreams yet, have I? Maybe it was the image of Lily festering in decay that sparked them to once again start expropriating my mind, but I feel the need to explain them regardless. Over the course of my life, as long as I can remember I've had two recurring nightmares. The first is the easier to explain, so let's start with it.

The home I spent most of my life in sat directly down from the, now burned down, home of my great grandmother. In my dream I'm walking down the hill from her house and turn to the field beside our house, and from it the horizon. A massive gas giant looms over the trees, glowing orange and dimming the land in its shadow. For some reason this doesn't frighten me, I get the feeling it could crash into Earth, but that it won't. The grass is still, the wind is calm, and I feel at peace examining its features. For untold hours in my dreams I would rest myself under its gaze, at least until I made it to my porch where I would inevitably wake up.

The night I killed Lily the emotional stress must have affected me, for the first time the dream was different. Instead of the dream ending with me walking to my door, I began to tear up. The planet was going to crash into us, and I was crying. Not wailing, but tears were streaming down my cheeks. Amidst the fear I walked into my house and laid on the couch, closing my eyes. My idea was that if I was asleep when it hit, I wouldn't be afraid, I'd just be dead. I was terrified, but the thought itself was calming. I'd fall asleep and suddenly it wouldn't be a problem anymore, not really.

When I woke up, I checked all my social media for signs they'd found Lily, I was worried that in my haste I'd given myself away. In my essentially unprepared cavort of blood I'd left too many traces, far too many. And even though she ended up rotting down there for weeks, they still should have found something. Maybe the dream was some weird abstraction of that, concocted by my mind to torment me. Or maybe it's just the meaningless reactions of chemicals within the confines of my skull forming useless images and sounds. I'm not sure which would be worse.

The second I had again recently. It's one of the worst

feelings I've ever experienced in my entire existence. And to make things just that more unpleasant, I've never really known how to describe it to people. It's such a simple scenario. In the back of my great grandmother's house there's a rectangular patch of ground where she kept her garden, and from that garden you can see the entirety of the field. I'm standing at the edge of the garden, and my eyes fix themselves to one corner of the field. To the tree line.

Even just thinking this, just the notion of my dreamworld's features, the bare minimum effort required from my synapses to bring the memories to the forefront, the smallest notion sends a chill down my spine as if I've fallen into the arctic. I feel like I need to describe it. I don't want to, but I need to. And yet I still cannot fathom how. In the dream I stare down from the edge of the garden, to the right-hand side of the field. Into the trees. And somewhere within the bush, in the brown mess of bark and dead leaves there is a man. I've never seen him, but I know he's there. I can feel him standing there, just beyond where the grass merges into the forest. And he stares at me as I stare towards him, as the atoms composing my body burn. It feels like he wants me to come down there with him, but I'm afraid. I stare down there at that little corner for what feels like hours in paralysis. The urge feels overcoming and I cannot look away, whenever I try to turn, I can feel hundreds of indescribable voices screaming at me not to turn away. They have no voice, and there is no sound. Just the essence of a scream, multiplying and overlapping in my head.

My cells ignite.

And whenever it becomes too much, I try to close my eyes, like I used to during storms. To shut my senses off and try to escape it. And then I feel myself down there, right in front of him. I close my eyes and I am right there, inches away from whatever it is. Does it have a form? I just feel a presence. Overwhelming me, every single molecule that makes up my being. Every impulse that works to continue my biological functions screams at me. My body freezes over, and my eyes begin to force themselves open. Is it betrayal, or does my nervous system save me? I don't know, I don't understand, and eventually I wake up. Vague memories of the thing that feel like a man rush through my mind as my heart races. Sweat covers me and my bedcovers, tears stream down my face. And my chest slowly releases its grip.

It feels like I've died, as though I've been brought back

from the void. It feels wrong. But there's nothing else I can say about it. I don't really think my dreams mean anything, it's just fun to talk about them. I never spoke for most my life because I had no one to listen to it, and now that I finally do, I speak into a wall. I type the pages of my confessions onto a meaningless white background. Unresponsive to my statements, you merely take in my sentences without being able respond. Even so, I find enjoyment in it. I became a shade when my parents locked me in my room, and even now as I solidify my freedom. No longer voiceless, I remain nameless. I want someone to understand me, maybe see where I'm coming from. I can't say with certainty I'll kill Shelby. I can't say I won't end up caught before I accomplish anything. And when I am what then? Will they execute me?

I'm not sure I'm afraid of dying anymore, my family and peers spent much of my life convincing me that I'd be going to hell. God's ultimate punishment for mankind, fire and brimstone. Forever. Maybe that's why most of my childhood dreams revolved around my demise. Getting chased through a maze of cardboard by a monster made of fur and eyes, eaten by spiders. One dream saw me offer more cherry soda to a man only for him to explain that it was, in fact, blood and pounce on me. Most of my childhood was fear. My grandfather was a conspiracy theorist and the rest of my family were end times Christians, I always knew the end was just around the corner.

My grandmother had me convinced magic and premonitions were real. That the Anti-Christ was going to kill all of us at any time. And my grandfather that the government was corrupt and killing off the poor. Poisoning the water, the sky. He moved me to Florida once, convinced they were going to derail a train. Any car rides were filled with nervousness because I was told the black lines on the road were explosives. I walked around my house some mornings convinced everyone had been raptured and I'd been left alone, calming down only once I called one of them. My grandparents' beliefs coalesced in me, and I had nightmares about them too. I dreamed of bombs going off in the sky, tornados and fires consuming me. I dreamed of begging Jesus to help me as he threw me into the pit.

I caused a scene once at the Country Boy Overlook when my grandfather took me there, bad enough he took me home and spanked me. The night before I had a dream that a plane had dropped a bomb on us, and in the sky, I saw a plane just like my

dream. I started hyperventilating at first, but as the plane got closer to where it was in the dream, I started screaming about how it was going to drop a bomb, about how we were going to die. I think I even asked God to forgive me for my sins at one point, and it made my grandfather madder than a spider watching its web get blown away in a thunderstorm. But that was my life I suppose. Two people telling me everything was out to get me and warning me death and hell was around every corner. I could find some escape from it in school, but once they took me out and locked me up in homeschool that was it. The only person I had to talk to for 10 years was myself, and I don't think he liked me very much.

Even my dreams of Nicole were often sad. I had a dream we were about to kiss and a man with a gun showed up to shoot us. Before she got with Jake I had a dream she was fucking him and laughing at me, maybe it was a warning. I still wonder if the dreams she said she had of me were real. That we were having sex in the middle of a dorm with her friends watching us. That we were making out in the middle of a rock concert. Was any of that ever real, or was she just playing with me? I don't know if I really want to know the answer.

warped mind

I can't help but wonder to myself if Shelby grew up feeling the same way I did. He grew up in a single parent household without a father figure. He's spoken to me about his mother a few times and, while she seems nicer than my maternal figure was, she may have been what damned him too. Made him weak. See, she used to tell him about how he'd find love someday, how you have to be nice to people, and never to resort to violence. She made him complacent. Society, our culture, has no place for weak men. Except maybe doormats. It's evolutionary, ingratiated into our religions, media, hell even our clothes. The male deity saving his flock of sheep. The big macho man action hero saving the damsel in distress, a girl that exists only as eye candy in skimpy clothes. But Shelby was never macho, and now he's dressing the same way as a damsel.

My Grandmother made me weak, trained me to be a dog. Follow orders without question. It allowed people to walk their shit stained shoes all over me. But what is Shelby then? His mom wanted a boy, and he became a girl. Even though his Mom supported him, she didn't want him to go through with it. Does that make him strong? He's so unhappy but still pushing forward because it's what he wants. Doesn't that make him worthy of being considered a girl? Where biology and God failed, he's taken power into his own hands. I still remember the boy I used to talk to at recess.

I still remember playing tag with Ryan and now Shelby talks about how much thinking about his old self hurts, like it was never real. Like he was trapped. Now that I've killed Lily, I think I understand. The old me was a slave trapped in his own mind, and even now it's like he's clinging onto me. He doesn't want me to kill Shelby. He wants friends, love, life. He doesn't understand that's over. He doesn't understand it's useless. Just like Shelby. I'll never be able to have a life, never find love. I'll never be anybody, much less the person I want to be. And now Shelby is starting to understand that. Danielle posts trans acceptance pictures all the time, but when Shelby tried to take her up on an offer to talk about it, he was ghosted.

He... But Shelby isn't a he anymore, is she? Ryan's long

gone. Like everyone else he moved on in my decade of nonexistence. Danielle hurt her feelings, the last bastion of hope she had just ended up bringing her down. I can't let her keep living like this. A lifetime of suffering and alienation, for what? There's no light at the end of the tunnel. When Shelby dies is anyone even going to remember to show up to her funeral? I bought a knife for Shelby. I've sharpened it so much that it's lost most of its original size. Lily suffered, Shelby will be quick. I'm prepared this time. Her posts filter through the lives of other people, taunting us both. Nicole and Jake pose for birthday pictures, Danielle has a gallery of bikini photos from a boating trip. The lives we'll never have. My gut tells me Shelby is going to try and kill herself someday. She's proven her bravery once, I can't let her do it again. Not like that.

I've been there, when I was younger. All my self-worth as a child was based on my grandmother, I wasn't allowed to have real friends and the rest of my family ignored me. I was a weirdo, all my life growing up I knew that. I hated that. Michael was really good friends Nicole when we were 11, I hated that. I hated it and told myself there was nothing I could do about it. No one wanted me, no one needed me. I was worthless. The only joy I felt came from my grandmother's faux congratulations on my perfect report cards. But I don't know if I ever really thought about it, and it just sit there. Lurking in the back of my mind waiting for the right spark to drag it out of its cage of glia and neurons into the forefront. And it found it. Maybe it's because I never got attention at home, or maybe I was just genetically damned from the start. But I was an attention seeker at school. Whenever I finished my schoolwork early, I started goofing off to ease the boredom.

And that attention seeking eventually prompted the school board to put me in an alternative class, though class might be too flattering a word to use. It was just the school's trash can. When society doesn't want something, they shun them. And we were the misfits. Aside from our allowed outings to other classes we sat in that class playing games on the computer, and once I got into college and realized what sex was, I figured out the boy with black hair was particularly fond of porn games in hindsight. It was such a mundane classroom, a grey table without anywhere to throw your shit. Dim yellow lights flickering overhead, humming desktops filled with unused programs of education and testing. Overseen by a fat grouchy old woman with dyed blonde hair.

Living a life of luxury off the back of her husband and explaining to us how we needed to step up.

She broke the cage. One day she sat me down in class alone and sent the rest to recess and their evening classes before telling me in no uncertain terms that no one liked me. Not a single teacher or student enjoyed my presence, she'd sent a poll around the school and not a single student had said they wanted to be my friend. I was a menace, and it was getting to be too much. They were going to send me to juvie, my parents to jail, and I'd never see anyone again. She was so proud of herself as my eyes gave way to rivers of tears dampening the shirt my grandmother had picked out that day. I blubbered retorts at her, and she shot back. Each word dug me deeper into the hole prepared for me. I missed recess and half an hour of my math class before she was satisfied. Proudly marching me into class like a trophy, I saw every single one of them and knew she was right. Looks of disgust and contempt at the 11-year-old barely able to see or stand being taken to his chair by the teacher everyone said was over the retards. I must have disgusted the teacher too, cause she sent me to the bathroom to get me out of the class.

The smell of cleaner mixed with the scent of shit, piss, and cigarettes. A broken stall with the word faggot carved into it stares at me through the mirror. In that instance every flaw was staring out at me, lit under the flickering spotlight my tears dried up. The beast wrenched free from its prison and whispered into my ears the things I'd tried to hide. My breathing slowed, and paper towels dried my face. Even though I'd calmed down I stared into my face. My eyes. I didn't want to go back to the classroom. Go back to my nonlife of ridicule and hate. Of loneliness and isolation. But I did. The math teacher commented that I looked like I was feeling better, and maybe I did. On the bus ride home Kevin tried to give me a piece of gum to make me feel better but I turned him down, told him I was fine.

But I wasn't. I was going to kill myself. When I got home, I took the sparekeys to one of my grandfather's cars and took the box cutter he had in it. Brand new, extra sharp. I took it with me out to the field and sat on top of the hill overlooking the pond. I couldn't do it. I wanted to believe that it'd get better someday, that I'd escape the pit I was falling into. So, I just made cuts, little wounds to play with the idea. But it never left. The thing just festered inside me. Every time I hurt myself, every word that got

said to me, every happy couple, every normal human. It fed on it, like distorted songs to ivy. It waited for years. Until one day I finally got desperate enough to give in to it.

19 years old and still a virgin. The thought was killing me. It felt like if I could reach out and fuck someone, anyone, I'd feel better. Like all these negative feelings would go away if I could stick my dick in a girl. But no girl would have me, would they? Who would want to fuck a disgusting socially inept virgin that still lived with his parents? Heather might. The girl that raped me when I was a child might. I wanted to feel something so badly, I wanted to be happy. I didn't have a car but I could walk, and I knew where she lived. All over town she had a reputation as a disease-ridden whore. And I was willing to get one if it meant not feeling so worthless. So, I walked all the way to her house, the entire time trying to run thoughts through my mind like maybe I wouldn't catch something. Maybe I could use a condom and be fine afterward. But I hated Heather, so many acts of self-harm directed from thoughts of her. So many times, her face in that musty playhouse played to the sounds of a razorblade clicking open. I still remember the way that place smelled.

And once I finally walked up to her door, I couldn't go through with it. Like the realization of what I was about to do just flooded my body. I glanced over the decorations that formed a walkway and didn't even muster up a knock on her door. I walked home alone, in silence. Cars passed by and a cool breeze flew through the trees. I was sad, but not in a crying way. Content, I was sad, of course I was, but I knew why. I could feel reason behind it. I thought about Nicole, about how if I'd gone through with it how we could never be together. I knew that she was out there somewhere fucking someone, being with him. Close to him. Happy. The thought ran through my mind as I came back up to the road home, wondering if my parents would be back yet. If they'd noticed my departure.

I made the trek down my road listening to birds singing and frogs croaking. It was a beautiful day outside, and the sun beating down on my face felt like heaven. One of those days where it's just cool enough for the sun not to burn you up. Where it just seems like everything is in sync. Dogs ran through the junk cars lining the cracked potholed lane, shirtless men with sunburns store apart wire and rubber. The rotten floorboards of my porch creaked as I opened the screen door to unlock the front

with a seductive clicking of pins in the tumbler. I was home alone, and I made sure to lock both locks like Grandmother always warned me about. It was serene in some ways as I put a water bottle on the desk and opened my Grandfather's room. An oddly nostalgic smell of sweat came from the sleeping bag he used, silhouetted from light filing in through dusty broken blinds. A reminder of the days I was too scared to sleep on my own and had to stay in his room. My hand slid under the mattress until my fingers ran over the cold metal of my great grandfather's revolver. I don't remember thinking anything as I pulled out the gun and put it to my head. My Grandfather used to mention his friend that tried to shoot himself and ended up blowing his jaw off instead, I wasn't going to end up like that. No, I put it to the side of my head and began to pull the trigger.

But I was weak, and one finger alone couldn't pull it. Tears started streaming from my eyes at the realization I couldn't even kill myself correctly. I had to shift the gun to my forehead and use both hands to fire it. Then the lever slammed down onto nothing, sending a jolt of electricity through me. I fell to the floor like someone had knocked the wind out of me, and through wails and cries puked out my courage. My entire body shook while I tried to clean up a mess of RC and cereal, sliding the gun back into its resting place and leaving as though I was never there. I climbed onto the top bunk of my useless bunk bed and drowned in the ocean I was creating until I fell asleep.

I own that gun now, one of the few things my parents willed me after their deaths. It's been hidden away since it first arrived. It... frightens me, in a way. The cage was destroyed, and the beast has been left to wander my mind, and it calls to me. Every day it tells me to pull out a syringe full of medicine and inject myself instead of the patient. It tells me to jump headfirst from the top floor of the hospital. It tells me to make my cuts vertical along my veins. To down a bottle of pills. It wants me to swerve into semis and off cliffs. But most of all it wants the gun. "No pain" it says. Even though the chamber was empty, that split second of what I was doing was an eternity of pain and defeatism manifested through flesh. I can't let Shelby suffer through life, but I can't let her kill herself. I'm the one that has to do it, fill her last moments with fear instead of self-hatred. And then what? Does Shelby get sent to hell or heaven? Cease to exist? Whatever it is surely it's better to just get on with it?

Under a Blue Moon

Sometimes I need to remind myself that no, the universe doesn't just universally hate me. That despite the seemingly endless ways it finds to torment me, it's just coincidence. Way back when I still used to straighten my hair every day and my cousin was riding me out at 13 to lose my virginity to a 19-year-old I remember thinking about him. This weird brown hair boy that I'd been to school with since we were still in that asbestos covered preschool. You know he just straight up vanished one day? Like one day he just stopped showing up to class, teachers, kids, even the principle didn't know where he went. Once he left it got really boring in those clownless classes, like one of our friends had just ceased to exist. I used to really like him, he was always a little off, but he was nice to me. I remember forgetting about him too, mostly. Doing all that hoodrat shit with Malissa helped, but it's weird. I thought he died.

And then, fresh out of college, he came back into my life. Something about him was different though, back when we were kids he was always so upbeat, so cheerful. The entire school knew him as a class clown, you know? We talked for like two years straight about each other's lives, events, goings on. Apparently, his parents were religious zealots that locked him up for like a decade, and he'd only just then been getting out. It's selfish in a way that the worst thing he told me was that he liked me. Me, of all people. I guess it's just because he didn't know anything about me, the type of person I really was, but he was head over heels for me. Honestly, I liked him too, I still do. Back when we were still in school together, I started dating one of his friends just to get him to notice me, and he didn't. I looked for him on MySpace, Facebook, Instagram. Everywhere I could think of, and I just couldn't find him after he pulled his Houdini trick.

So why, I ask you does this boy-turned-man always come into my life when I have a boyfriend? I'd been with Marty for like a year by the time I ran into him again, and eventually I get to find out this boy I'd been obsessed with in school likes me too. And then the entire weight of the world bears on my shoulder. I messaged him at work, at home, called him when I went drinking with my friends. Like Marty had never meant anything to me. Every tap on my phone's screen sent words into my mind. "You've just been lying to me this entire fucking time"
"Always were a little whore, weren't you"
"You said you loved me what happened to that"
"You lying cheating bitch, you've been leading me on this whole goddamned time and you've been fucking someone else behind my back"
"Oh boo hoo are you gonna cry? Fine you know what, go ahead. Kill

yourself. I tried so fucking hard to believe in you and now you're just dropping me for Marty. How long have you even known him?"

"Look please, don't leave me. Just talk to me please.

"Oh come on you don't love him, do you?"

"Whatever made you think I cared about you? You were just easy Nicky, but this has to stop. I'm going to be a dad."

"I love you Nicole"

"I love you Nicole"

"I love you Nicole"

"I love you Nicole"

"I love you Nicole"

"I love you Nicole"

"Whore"

"Whore"

"Whore"

"Whore"

"Whore"

"Whore"

"Whore"

How many times had someone told me they liked me before just fucking off? Derrick ditched me after I turned 14. I cheated on Aaron with Jacob and both left me. Neither of them ever cared, Aaron used me to lose his virginity and Jacob was abusive. He used to yell at me, punch holes in the wall. Tear my hair out and beat me. How many times have I cried alone in the shower with a razor blade, hurting myself? How many more times will it happen again? Lines of scars form ladders on my wrists, aging along with me as I grow older. I'm a bad person. I'm such a terrible person. And then this boy comes out like a vampire awakening from his slumber to seduce me. Entrap me. I was done with Marty, and it was like I was suffocating. Living a lie every time we talked, every time Marty fucked me. And suddenly a vampire rose up from the dirt and extended it's hand, whispering sweet nothings to me. Calling me to his arms.

His arms are stained like mine, like he suffered. Whenever we talked, I learned more about him, about his life. But it's strange, he spoke as if he had never had friends, lovers. He seemed so down all the time and I couldn't understand why. A handsome brown-haired boy like him shouldn't be a virgin, maybe he was lying to me. Like the others. Like I was lying to him, lying to him for months. I'm a whore, everyone knows that. It's all anyone cares about, anyone except him. For the two years me and the little vampire talked I was talking to Jake. Marty meant nothing to me, not anymore. A manchild that would never do anything of value in his life. I was tired of it. But I did love Marty for a time, like I loved the others. I try so hard to feel something, anything, for anyone. And I can't.

Love fades. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast. But it always fades. Marty had cancer, and I used that as the excuse as to why I couldn't accept

the vampire's kiss. But it was a lie. The entire time I spoke to the undead, I was fucking Jake. When he found out he acted like I was the bad guy, tried to make me feel like shit. Guys always think it's okay for girls to cheat on their boyfriends, but only if it's with them. I mean, what was I supposed to do? I tried not to tell him because I didn't ever think I was going to leave Marty, but maybe that was dumb.

I was at the boy's house one day with him sitting on his bed. And I got right up there with him, inches away from him. I could have kissed him, could have reached out and given myself to him. But I didn't, I panicked. I was a whore. I am a whore, how could I hurt him? How could I let someone like me be his first? Even if I had, I would have left him for Jake, doesn't he know that? The only reason I was talking to him in the first place was because I thought Jake would never really go for me. I never expected Jake to even like me. When I found out what was I supposed to do? Pretend I liked the boy still stuck in college over the guy with a house I'd been interested in for a long time?

I tried distancing myself from him, tried to make it easier on him when I got with Jake. Easier on myself, I didn't want to tell him. What's wrong with me, what's wrong with him? Why does he like me? After everything I told him he knows what time of person I am. I kept distancing myself from him, and I left Marty for Jake. I had to. I didn't want to hurt him, and that's all that would have happened. God, I wish I wasn't like this. I cut my thighs to try and take some of that away. Like a forced reminder etched into my skin that I couldn't let myself go out with him.

And now he's back. We've been talking again for a few months, but last night I saw him alone, in a graveyard. Maybe he really is a vampire, he was really fixated on a grave of someone that was dead back when we were still in kindergarten. Does the universe hate me? The one summer night I decide to go visit my Dad's grave and he's there. I thought about talking to him, saying literally anything. But I didn't. I couldn't. I don't think he saw me, and I took the opportunity to run away. Just like last time. I just fucking wish I could touch him, silhouetted out there in the moonlight he looked like a God. If I could just give him a chance maybe I wouldn't have to feel like this, like maybe if he'd been with me way back when instead of Derrick, I wouldn't have ended up like this.

Maybe I could, maybe after I hurt him so bad with Jake he'd still give me a chance. But I'm not worth it. I told him was toxic, I warned him. I'm just a whore. It hurts to know that. It hurts to look at him. Maybe I ran into him at the graveyard so we could be alone, and I fucked up my chance. But after everything he said he went through he deserves better. Even if I want him, even if I tell myself I won't be hurt again. One day the love is going to go away. Replaced with hate. Then he'll call me a whore too.

all kinds of twisted thoughts

Talking to Shelby reminds me of when I was young, before I got taken out of school. There used to be a girl that lived out in the junkyard that consumed the forest around my house. Her dad was out there all the time, and eventually she started hanging out with me. It was fun, but it kind of sucked. As much as it seemed like she liked hanging out with me, I wasn't allowed to tell anyone because I was a weirdo. She didn't want her friends to know, cause then she'd be weird too. Sitting in my room with her, playing rhythm games with her, was fun, I heard a lot of the bands I grew to like first on there. Back then my grandmother didn't like it, but I wasn't yet rendered filthy by puberty and she was allowed to come over.

Once she turned 16, she didn't need me anymore, she got a car and left. Only a year or so after I got taken out of school and she went and left me alone. I used to hate her for that. Talking to Shelby isn't unlike the Junkyard Dog, I still remember her body language. Her smile, her voice. Smells. Nostalgic feelings of ambrosia locked behind my mental coils. Why now is it I can remember those? Why do they distract me from Shelby, distancing the meters in front of us in a betwixtionary dance of isolation? I feel so alone, we make jokes and Shelby's hand touches mine in a high five. And I feel so far away, like some vacant observer from behind the skin I wear.

When Shelby was making her transition the only person that really supported her was her mother. A town full of people preaching acceptance and love, and only her mother was willing to play nice. If I could I would jump over the table and choke her to death right now. I'd kill the cashier smirking at us from behind the counter. I'd drown them all under the same unfeeling tomentum they bind Shelby and me to. But I can't. Months have passed since I killed Lily, and what do I have to show for it? Shelby waxes on about how scared she was going into the operating room, and in the distance blurry faces fire spite onto her.

They're disgusting, all of them. I need some way to kill multiple people at once, the thought of a shooting crosses my mind. How many people suffer during a shooting though? These

longing demons of bigotry are still people, and even if I somehow managed to walk into a building and kill everyone there, I couldn't stop the fear they'd feel beforehand. I am not a terrorist.

I know how to make triggered explosives thanks to my Grandfather's ideas we'd be fighting off the army someday, but where could I use them? It needs to be somewhere it'll make a difference even if I get caught. Whatever it is, I need to turn my attention to Shelby. She talks about how inescapable this town feels. I understand, once I finally managed to escape my parents' house. Once I finally got a good job, good money. When I could finally go anywhere, I felt lost. Like I'd been stuck here so long I missed the comfort in it. Maybe that's why Shelby stays here, she dodges the question when I ask. In the same vein one would run from a forest fire. As if the words themselves would hurt her. The same feelings I felt when my parents died. After I bought my old house, stepping back onto the shaded porch was... encompassing. No one ever leaves here, not really. I drive an hour to the city up north because I work at the hospital there, and every day I drive back. When I first moved back, I bought the land around me once the junkyard owner died so I could be rid of the junk cars. It didn't make me happy. It was all superficial, just something I could do to distract myself.

Shelby feels the same, I tell her I understand. And deep down I do. I tell her it's going to be okay, I lie. I lie to her and hold her hand when she cries. I offer her the things that no one offered me, and I feel strange. Other people look on her in the restaurant with disgust, they look down on me for talking to her. She tells me she'll be here tomorrow, and I tell her I'll see her there. I drive home alone, after spending my days putting up facades, I traverse the beautiful countryside to my house. And past those trees and flowers sits the old prison, restored, repainted. And it's still rotten on the inside. Grass has grown over what was once dirt and rust. But my mind remembers them, I remember the tears and pain I felt. Being driven home in heartbreak after finding out about Nicole at college, staring at cars sold off for drugs and thinking about how much I wanted to die. How much I wanted to be anybody else but me, the worthless weirdo locked behind a castle of decay.

Shelby can never escape those memories of Ryan, they linger. They will always linger. When I'm home I put on music, I sit alone in my room listening to Tribe. I comment to myself that a

band as good as them should have gone places. I own both of their CDs, though I could never find *Here at the Home*. I play *Sleeper* while cooking a steak, and in my mind form compilations of albums I consider perfect. Music has always been an escape, and I memorize the words and beats of songs. It asphyxiates the repetitions in my head. The same words play over and over, day by day. But I can lose myself in music, an entire day wasted with sounds rolling through my cochlea and forcing out the things inside me. But it's just a distraction. I think the same things every day, and every day the same music plays.

At least now I have something to do, some way to help people. I can't understand them, a lifetime raised by media instead of people didn't help with that, but I can help them. In my dreams I again find myself staring down at someone in the woods. I keep telling myself I need to walk down there and see what the fuck is even down there, but I can't. I'm afraid, down to the core, of even so much as looking towards the place. I feel so alone, so trapped. Weak. The thing in my mind tells me to take the gun. It won't leave me, it scares me. I smoke a cigarette to appease it, and it mocks me. Suicide is slow with them, painful. Between fingers a trigger of paper and leaves replaces metal. Inhalations give me momentary respite. I smoke 2 more on the drive to the hospital, and one on my way in. Lydia makes a joke that someone that works in the medical profession like me should know better. I repeat the joke back as I flick the filter into the wind.

On a break Nicole messages, mundane talk between her and I distract from the walking dead that roam my halls. It makes me uncomfortable talking to her, something about the sensations are unnatural. She's a wiccan now, she says. She doesn't believe in God so one wonders what she means by that, maybe some form of rebellion against her parents' pseudo-Christianity? From a third-floor window I see a sight I've seen thousands of times. A red-faced father carrying his son's body into the emergency room.

The speed he used careening into the parking lot begets the anger from the ambulance in his way. The son's screaming immediately fills the cold halls, and my time comes again. Seconds pass as years. And somehow the comedy of the situation fails to amuse me. He tells his son he's going to be okay, that we're going to help him. The boy cries and I tell him that it's

going to be okay. His mother prays to God, and soon the family comes in. They talk of how God is working on the boy, how he's calmer than before. I agree. I lie.

He's not getting better, he's getting worse. A macabre cocktail of drugs injected into him is just corrupting his senses. The father knows. His father knows and yet he continues to encourage him, tells him he'll be okay. It's my job to lie. I fill up the greenbacked piñata with painkillers, antibiotics, anything we can to keep him alive. But he's fucked, we're trying to bail water out of the Titanic. Trying to push him just that little bit more so we can squeeze more money out of his family.

I wish I could overdose him on morphine. His family would fight me, yell, call me a monster. But they sit here watching him suffer, for their own weakness their loved one has to continue a life of pain. He tells his dad he's scared, that he doesn't want to die. An IV drips down functioning placebos through a rubber tube into veins filled with poison. A heart monitor sings a despondent song, the sun goes down and streetlights illuminate the windowsill. A father sits alone in the cafeteria and cries, far away from his family. Beyond their judging eyes. He's man, and the burden of strength has been placed on him. He accepts the coffee, and further damns himself.

"Is my boy gonna be okay?"

I tell him the same thing I've told so many others. We'll do what we can. We've had people with worse. Lies. And he knows. Earlier we started the kid on the last resort. I took upon myself the guise of Satan and offered to his family a choice. Either let the boy die or let me give him a drug that could make things so much worse. Or not work at all. We've given it to patients before, and sometimes it'll work. But even when it does, sometimes they come back. Sometimes after all that euphoria from being alive, they'll find their cure damned them. They sing praises to God, swear they'll change whatever sins they've committed. They lie.

Then when they come back with their own body fighting against them, they get scared. They want us to fix them again. I tell them the same thing I tell all my patients. Lies. The father knows... He looked his son in the eyes and told him that he was going to make it. That they were going to get pizza and milkshakes when they got out. He fought back tears to make his only child's final moments one of optimism, of hope. He took the fear on himself, engaged himself on the pain. And his reward is

sitting alone in a mollycoddled lunchroom, forced to think about a child being cut open in the next floor.

Sleeping beauty doesn't wake up from the dream. Repetitive thoughts and recursive images fill my occipital lobe. Daddy is no longer crying; his son is gone. My lies do nothing to ease his pain, and the family speak amongst themselves. They tell each other that their son is healed, that he's with God now. At peace. Why then did they insist on making him suffer? What drives us to keep going in the face of finality, to fight against nature? All their smiles vomiting up lies and self-pity. All their pats and rubs, their "I understand" and "he's in a better place" repeated over and over.

It's fucking disgusting, a wretched show of disease flowing through these halls. Their child suffered because they were weak, their child suffered because I'm shackled to a world of decay that desperately seeks to bathe itself in flourishing evanescent half-truths. I wish I could have killed him, if I could have just acted when he first came in here, I could have saved him. If he had never been born... The pain of death is loss, for others. The deceased is gone, the boy no longer feels anything. But those around him are forever tainted by this little room, cursed by memories of the lamb sacrificed on an alabaster slab.

in your room

Shelby has been following the same routine every day. She gets up, smokes a cigarette, and takes a shower. She posts the same variations of pictures every day. I know how to get inside now, every day she smokes a cigarette with her window open. And from her live videos it looks like she tends to leave it open while she showers, forgetful like she used to be. Like the her I used to know. I'm ready this time, my knife is with me and I've planned it out. She won't have to suffer for my mistakes like Lily, she won't even know I'm there until it's too late. But I can't park my car close to her, so I park it at the abandoned laundromat and get ready for the walk. My biological mother's musical taste emanates a somber synth song through my speakers, and through the fractured windows of a once thriving business I see gutted machines defenselessly cowering behind an aged no trespassing sign. The dust floats in a haze, illuminated from artificiality through the streetlight hanging overhead.

My car shuts off, and suddenly silences begins to deafen my ears. The cool night air is shrouded in fog as my shoes hit pavement. There's a strange beauty to the night, when I was a child I used to be terrified of the dark. Housing demons and monsters, I would be dead without a light to protect me. But it's more peaceful now. I don't have to see the happy people enjoying the lives I can't have, and the couples hide their love in their homes. The roads are specked by teens, cops, and drunks. I light a cigarette to take my mind off things, and a spider begins spinning its web in the broken windows ahead of my car.

My walk to Shelby's house is marred by thoughts of Nicole, like some sort of plague that's infected me I can't get her out of my head. Even in captivity my mind used to drift to her, like some goal I could work to. Something to keep me going. I was an idiot for thinking I'd just wake up one morning and be able to be her friend again, when we talked recently, she seems like she's interested in me again. Like last time. Humming to myself to try and push her away I come to the graveyard, marking my halfway point.

I know this graveyard. I left early enough to have time to stop here. To say hello to someone I barely knew, and I call

myself an idiot for doing it. Buried here in a sea of other long since forgotten souls is the only adult that ever genuinely tried to help me as a child. The numbers on the tombstone tell me I was six when she died, maybe that's why I only have one memory of her. The 20 year old next door bears herself onto me, uncomfortable and implacable in my position waiting for it to be over. But Sophie stops her. Hidden from view Sophie noticed my absence and saved me, berating my molester. She tells me it's okay, I'm not in trouble. A cloud of tobacco hangs in front her grimacing face, and she gives me back to my Grandfather, even though he doesn't seem to care about what she has to say.

She died later in the year, accidentally overdosing on painkillers and cocaine. Her family mocked her relentlessly at the funeral, now that I'm older I know she'd cheated on her boyfriend for drugs and ended up dying from them. Karma they said. But was it karma that led to her kid walking in on her? If God was punishing her why did Eric have to be the one to find her corpse? He's told me about how that felt before. The way he tried to get her to wake up and started crying when she wouldn't move. He suffered from her sins, and now her family and friends say she's burning in hell. But she was nice to me. Icey wind blows through my hair as the words come out of my mouth. A soft pseudo-prayer that she's in a better place, a mention that Eric was prom king last year. I joked that ever since I was put in homeschool I didn't really understand time anymore, but I remembered that for her.

I chastise myself for my own stupidity again before I continue. No one ever answered my prayers and no ghosts ever moved my furniture. My mind tells me she's gone, whatever she was isn't real anymore. Withered away in rotten wood under 6 feet of dirt. I spent the rest of the trip wondering what would happen to Shelby. If there's an afterlife would she be mad at me? Would she be waiting there to tell me I was wrong when I died, would she tell me I was right? Maybe there's nothing after death. No reward or punishment, just gone. The thought causes a knot in my throat as the beast tries to sink in again. All of those things I never was, things I was never allowed to do. All the nights I spent hurting myself while others were living their lives. It tells me to plunge my knife into my throat. To rip out my jugular and end it, my life is already gone. As pavement turns to gravel, I stare at the moonlit blade.

My fingers run across its smooth surface, and scrape against the edge. But it's not the same feeling I used to have. This isn't my knife. If I die no one is going to help Shelby. I'm the only willing to help any of these people. I know that I'm going to die someday, that someday all of this will be gone. It's a melancholic way to put it, but I've never been alive to begin with. I've got nothing to lose, and there's nothing I could gain. No friends, lovers, family. It was all stripped away. Shelby has things to care about, if I'm right and she kills herself. She'll have that moment of self-hate, right before the end. Somedays may be better than others, Shelby will meet an old friend and have a great time talking to them. Maybe she'll eat an orgasmic salad or watch a well-made movie. But that can only distract from it. Life is nothing but work and suffering. And it's so short, I spent a third of my lifespan locked away. Shelby spent a third of her lifespan in a body she didn't want. And even if we live past our 70s, our minds are decaying well before then. In the face of an eternity of non-existence what do our lives even matter?

It starts to seem more real as I get older. Nonexistence. It's insulting, the thought itself is absolutely destructive. It's completely liberating. I'll never be able to kiss Nicole in the sun like I always dreamed of. I'll never be able to go to someone's birthday party. I'll never have friends over for mine. And someday I'll die. Once I'm dead I won't be real anymore. The electricity masquerading as me will blink out. I won't think anymore, I won't feel. I won't be. All my hopes, all my dreams. Everything I ever wanted and could never be, just gone. Forever. I've cried alone to that thought before, all those experiences I lost can never be claimed. It doesn't matter in the end. One chance at life, and it was destroyed. Maybe it'll be lung cancer, everyone in this hell hole of a town smokes anyway. Something so obviously self-destructive and people just go for it. Like me.

Movement in the house tells me Shelby is awake. The same thoughts continue to run through my head. As she opens the window for her ritualistic bed head selfies smoke billows out. She'll end up with lung cancer too at this rate, the thing that brings her peace serving to cause further suffering. And I can take it all away. Music erupts from her house as she syncs her computer to her speaker system and starts blasting goth hits from the 80s. I can save her. I have to stay alive so I can save her.

Water begins hitting fiberglass, and I lift myself through

the window. An odd sense of pensiveness fills me as I consider that my first visit to someone's house in over 10 years is to kill them. The open window led into her cramped bedroom. Her house is cold, the summer day hasn't yet risen over the horizon, so the window begets the night air. Her room is mostly barren, a TV, a computer on a desk with a rolling chair. Her tenebrous blue carpet is stained and worn down.

A single picture sits in an angelic frame on the TV stand, one of Shelby when she was Ryan. With her mother. I never noticed before, but her mom is one of the patients at the nursing home. Maybe that's why Shelby's stayed here so long, surrounded by misery and people that despise her. Anna has late stage Alzheimer's, I've heard the aide's talk about her kid before and just never put two and two together. Whenever Shelby showed up Anna used to call her Ryan. Now she doesn't recognize her. She doesn't recognize anyone. The last time I was down there she couldn't even speak anymore, just lay there. Maybe it's a good thing I was distant from my parents, I never had to go through that with them.

Never had to watch as one of the lights in my life slowly winked out, whistling away like a bonfire in rain. Anna is barely more than a body now; the mind is gone. The person is gone. The flesh serves no purpose other than to continue the functions of declining vital organs.

If there's a soul, what happens to it when someone ends up like that?

cuts you up

Her house is so mundane. It's kind of messy though, crumpled food wrappers and paper stuffed into the garbage cans overflowing like bank accounts of a superfluous metaphor. It looks like she spends most of her time sitting at her computer. Facebook is opened in one tab, messenger in the other. She tries to talk to Danielle, and she is ignored, names I don't recognize call her a faggot. Names of the churchgoers that parade around the children's ward tell her she'll be burning in hell. She stalks a boy with a goatee, infatuated maybe. Nicole tells her that she shouldn't let other people get to her. Further back the pattern repeats. For dozens that provide strife, one provides comfort. An odd sense of pride covers me when I see Nicole's name. A reminder that me and Nicole will forever remain friends at best slouches the muscles of my face ever so more than usual.

From a perspective Shelby does have friends, except none of them are real. Anyone I see lives states away or doesn't visit. Half realized plans list the things they'll never take action to do. All of these little people, so connected, constantly regurgitating the same ideas over and over. It's unnatural, this spiderweb of ego-masturbation we've created. Serving to lift up the assholes and beat down the decent. People like Shelby spend all their time seeing people that are happy, people that get attention. Shelby stays here, damning herself to her own mutilation. How many nights does she come home from her job and stare at social media? How many hours has she spent hating herself because she can't be like the popular people, the "normal" people?

Her degree hangs in dust, sitting lambastedly beside rage fueled holes that violate the withering drywall. What has Shelby done. All her work in school, all the time and money spent getting her degree. The trauma she's experienced, the life she's lost, the life she's losing. Wasted. And now she's forced to content herself with drugs and animosity. I think I understand, she wants someone to care about her. She sits here alone, dreaming of a man to come sweep her off her feet. Someone to take her heart away, make her forget this place. Forget her memories, pain, everything. To just be lost in someone that cares

about her. Maybe she feels the same way I feel about Nicole, like if she could just reach out and kiss someone she cares for, she could escape the pit we find ourselves trapped in.

I'm hideous, covered in scars. I look like a monster and, unlike the lies we tell our kids, monsters don't find love. They don't deserve it. But Shelby isn't a monster, these people treat her like a freak because she's different. She writes poems of loneliness that decorate the table under various clothes. Shelby was born Ryan then chose to discard that identity for a new one. What does it mean? Is it a lie to pretend to be a boy as a girl, or to become a girl as a boy? She has breasts, a vagina, long hair, dresses in the clothing culture says is feminine. Why then does the monkey brain deny her?

Her mother was the only one that ever truly cared about her, and now she's essentially dead. She'll never be accepted, and she'll never leave this place. Trapped in her hometown, shackled to memories of a life that'll never be. Denied by her love because she was born different, treated as if she's a monster. I won't let her suffer, she doesn't deserve it. I can erase all of this. And now, I have to. The water stops flowing, bare feet take their steps onto molded linoleum. I don't want her to see me. I can't let her see me. She wanders through her house as I slither through the cracks in her vision. Watching her go about her routine is strange, an observer to her silent dance. Her naked body glistens in the darkness as she loads caffeine into the filter of an overpriced coffee pot.

She looks nice, like anyone else could look. But her face remains in an eternally realized slouch. A smell of blueberry bagels fights against the scent of nicotine and THC that stains the surroundings, and I shift towards her room. The carpet dampens my intent, and I take momentary respite in her bathroom. I breath slowly, with intent. The morning sun has started bathing the land in its radiation and it seethes through the shades lighting up my face.

It's strange. My finger runs along my cheek, and it feels cold. Somewhere behind my eyes is a murderer, about to kill an innocent person. Why do I look like this? Why do I look so weak? So worthless? I'm such a weirdo, such a fucking freak. Maybe that's why Nicole ditched me for Jake. These bags under my eyes are so obvious. They feel so unreal. My face feels so unreal. Like it's not me. Another prison locking me up. Only my eyes are free.

Lines of light flow over my skin like bars in a jail cell. It feels like I could rip the flesh off myself, like I should. Destroy this shell that's tormented me for so long. Escape my genetic damnation like Shelby did. But I can't, there's no point anymore. Shelby is back in her room. Back on her computer. Something calming infests my mind. She's beautiful. I love the song she's listening to. I love the clothes she wears. The times we've spoke at restaurants made me feel very odd. I wish I could be her friend, but I can't. There's no point. Her back turns as she starts grinding her weed up.

My movements are slow. Careful. Goth rock plays as the chunking sounds of her vices reverberates throughout this room. This tomb. The repetitive thoughts that assail me fade away. Something begs me to tell her she'll be okay. To hug her and tell her that eventually everything will turn out fine. My hand clenches the knife, and in an instant, all of the pain in her world is being taken away. A sliver of light plunges into her heart, past her hormone enhanced breasts, scraping ribs. She tries to scream but my hand clasps her mouth. Her voice hurts me, but it'll be worth it soon. Within seconds bloodstained steel bears into her neck, left to right deeply cutting through her arteries. She struggles, but not for long. Standing back, her body rests in her chair. Blood drips down from her hands onto the carpet, staining it in her sorrows.

Emptiness. Shelby is dead. This house serves no purpose, and I am alone here. My fingers run along her cheek, brushing away her freshly shampooed hair. There's nothing behind the eyes, no response. No action. The cells are dying. My body shivers. I wish I could hug her, embrace her and tell her that I'm sorry it was like this. Explain it's better this way. It's selfish, something to make myself feel better. Am I trying to convince myself it's true? I don't know. She doesn't need her cigarettes anymore, they become mine, I pour the deceased a glass of spiced rum. And with a lighter and nicotine ignite the carpet. The clothes that pile upon the floor eagerly burn up, and I leave through the same window that killed her. Back through the trees, through the woods and roads. Back to my car. A spider spins its web inside the laundromat, uncaring towards the death of the lonely girl. Sirens scream out in the distance as my car rolls home.

The visions come again, all at once. The sun as a drop of blood boiling on the horizon only momentarily distracts from the creatures roaming the ashen streets below. Horribly burned and twisted remnants of humanity wander aimlessly, so accustomed to the gnawing of their backs they no longer muster a scream. Old and young tenderly placed on barbed wire crosses, twitching in response to a death that will no longer come. Courtney wishes to scream. He looks out at those merging with the world, children melting in anguish into swing sets, sidewalks swallowing up imitations of flesh.

Courtney makes out figures through the ash and fog, writhing up from the oceans they entangle themselves upon those that remain. And only then do they show fear, but soon acceptance. Courtney tries to scream. He wishes to tell Maria the things he sees. But she never hears, and Courtney knows that what is to come cannot be stopped or delayed.

Long ago he realized the truth of our existence.

That life and death were illusions waiting to be broken, and these were glimpses of reality. It shakes him to his core, he beholds Maria among the crowd and weeps.

For no matter the joys he finds, they cannot possibly outweigh the suffering that awaits us merely moments ahead. He wishes to have never been born, for the comfort of nonexistence. Courtney screams, he begs Maria to understand him, yet she continues. Courtney puts on his clothes to prepare for another day, aware it's already upon us. The shadows follow Maria through the door.

“Soon?” He wonders.

And the screams are his only answer.

disintegration

Shelby's house is burning down, the body she fought so hard for is becoming ash. My hands are covered in blood, and it stains Shelby's cigarette like lipstick from a girl I never knew. Blood drips onto wooden boards as I step up to my swing. The thoughts are coming back, memories and broken dreams. Repetition. My life is repetition. But something is different now. I haven't touched any alcohol since I killed Lily. I'm not sure why, but it hasn't crossed my mind recently. I try to take another drag of the cigarette, but something tells me not to. The embers glow faintly in the morning fog, a source of my demise. How much money have I wasted on this? Months have passed and I've only killed two people, and in time these things will kill me. Like they do so many others.

If I die no one else will be willing to do what I am, no one. The cigarette hits grass, and smolders like the ruminations of my head. Thoughts begin forming, plans, actions. Ideas for bombs, ideas for targets. But where? Who? If I can kill multiple people at once, I can save so much more pain. My stare focuses on nothing in particular. Shelby is gone, is it better or worse for there to be an afterlife? If she's in hell she suffers for eternity, if she's in heaven she will never escape her memories of pain. Maybe there's something in between. Nicole messages me, mundane small talk. But she asks me to add her on snapchat, I can do little more than oblige. Pictures of her cats, clothes, my house. Does Jake know she's talking to me, I wonder. Nicole asks me how I've been doing, something no one else has ever done. She wants to talk about me, I want to talk about her.

We compromise and go back and forth, we talk about various things that have occurred. She asks me about things I've heard about her. I mention that people told me a video of her humping a pillow naked passed around the school, she denies it. I mention people saying she used to cut herself for attention, she denies it. She says it's embarrassing, she alludes to it being like smoking or drinking. Something she has to do sometimes to feel better. I feel more open than before, she listens to me wax about my lack of a childhood. It's feels strange, almost comedic. After all these years the only person that has ever listened to me is the

girl I've crushed on my entire life. Eventually she needs to go to work, and we end our conversation.

The sun is finally over the horizon. The fog begins to clear. I wander around my house, images of Nicole flash through my mind. Jake works with her in the clinic, they have all day to talk. To flirt. He gets to be next to her, and it hurts so much more than the fact that he fucks her. She lays in his lap as they watch movies, she kisses him. They say they love each other. I remember standing alone at the festival and seeing them walk by, 4 years ago. Nicole smiling, holding his arms, and talking about something unheard. The image still shambles around from my retina. It hurts.

I have today off, and I feel bizarre sensations. Nostalgic? The flesh shuffles into my car, an aux cord connects to my phone. Noise rock from Los Angeles begins streaming through my speakers, and I drive. Through the cracked road, past the railroad tracks so many used to die on. I have today off, and I feel nostalgic, Nicole reminded me of a time so long ago when my grandfather would have taken me places. Him and his brother, with my cousin. The first place I travel to is the old mining town, long dried up and abandoned. A walk past the bathroom takes me to the old lunch area. When I was very young my school took us on a field trip here, I remember Nicole sitting at the table across from me drinking from her juice barrel. The old lady behind the glass was giving one of the teachers a giant pretzel.

I can see us now; the tables are rotting, and my mind replaces them. I am an outsider in my own memories, stepping through a crowd of kids and looking upon the old, young, me. He sits alone at a table, no money to buy food, no money for a drink. Bees flutter around us, attracted to the corn syrup laying on the ground. He wants to talk to Nicole and doesn't. She speaks to the brown-haired girl with glasses, and they are happy. Does Nicole know he exists? Does she remember this moment, like he does? His silence engraves the answer, no. He gets back on the train they rode down and goes back to school. Hair blows in the wind, Nicole sits with her neon cheeks gazing as trees pass by. Strings from her grey hoodie shift around her, and her short hair becomes even frizzier.

I walk alongside myself in a different time, me and my cousin are travelling between the skeletal buildings, buttons relay memories of the past. Voices talk of life in the old days. Our

fathers are fishing, and we examine the diorama of this place, as if it were so long ago. So many lives once here, now gone. Mostly forgotten. We walk up the hill towards the mine entrance, my cousin and I make up stories of ghosts and demons. A man talks about cave ins, sound effects of rumbling play. Men lost their lives in these caves providing for their families, their memories reduced to a tourist trap. I tear up a little at the thought, I laugh about the ghosts with my cousin.

We travel across the bridge as they play in the minecart. I stare out across the river as I help my cousin into it. The sun beats down on us both, and I traverse the dreams of memories to another time. We wade through the river upstream; cool water douses my lower body. Where are we going? Nowhere. The trees provide shade, and rocky sand eats into my feet. I was young, long before my grandfather had instilled a fear of water. We take turns using a scuba mask to stare under the water. I fill myself with these feelings, trying to recall them back into me. A time before I understood death, a time when my self-hate could be contained. When I believed myself to have a future.

I was never innocent, but I could ignore my sins. Before I was put into homeschool, I could go with my grandfather to family events. Reunions, birthdays. How did I forget those? I breathe in the forest air, the bridge seems rotting, the minecart rusted. The window I wanted lunch from as a kid is barred off. Time has taken its toll, and once again this place seems abandoned. Many of the displays are now faded, the speakers busted. Stairs to the facsimile church are closed off and broken. Like all distant reminders of my childhood, time has ruined it. All of them except Nicole, she remains ever present in my mind. Like some longstanding curse, I remember her in these carious reminders of a life I once had. She stays perfected, unaltered by time.

This place has given to me all that it can for now, the car starts again. Slaves of Fear cannot come through my speakers, there's no reception for my phone to play it over the network. Instead, I search the albums I have downloaded. Fire of Unknown Origin comes bleeding through. My grandmother used to play it all the time, one of the albums I would consider perfect. My mother would show up to the house some days and talk to my grandmother about how a tv show they like was based on the album. I used to borrow it so I could listen to it while playing games. The music travels through my mind as I wind up the

twisting road out of the mine. Other people have memories of sneaking out with their friends, going to parties in the woods. Most of my memories are of sitting home, playing games. Lonely.

But I do have other memories, don't I? They seem blurry and detached. Are they real? Did these things actually happen or is my mind simply creating scenarios for me to believe in.

Another memory fights to the surface, the falls. A long time ago I remember going with my cousin and honorary uncle to the falls. I remember it, I remember it, but I cannot recall it. The drive there is filled with waves of nothing, something. Vague emotions try to grapple me and find only replicating lines to hold. Arriving triggers nothing, ghosts briefly string together words. Past lives of a boy looking over towards the water. Nothing more. Walking around shows me more images of a life I never had, a couple poses in front of the falls. A father backpacks with his kids along the trail. I am an outsider. I remember the sandcastle we tried to build under a bridge as kids and try to find my way back there.

I pass through the parking lot, along the trash and cigarette butts. Smooth black rocks crinkle underfoot, along the bridge graffiti of lovers and hate sing out to me. Something odd is under there, a little boy. Maybe around 10-11. Sitting here under the shade of the bridge, alone. He seems sad, he responds to my greeting halfheartedly. Running water maintains the silence, and I notice his arms. Notice his knife.

What do I say? What can I say? Something burns inside me, I want to say something. I want to do something. Time is frozen, coincidences are killing me. I ask for his name. David. I ask him what he's doing here, where his parents are. They left him here, they're going to eat in town and didn't want to take him. Rather than leave him with family, they picked him up from school and left him here. People are here they said, he'd be safe. Words flow from my mouth; vocal cords take thoughts and grant them presence. I try.

David notices the lines on my arms. I stand staring down at a suppositional reflection of myself, his arms bleeding as mine have. Wind blows under the bridge, tossing about my short brown hair. Trickling merges with the sound of cars moving overhead. Graffitied letters R+M stare blankly from behind the child with bleeding arms. Wherein young lovers have met, teens have hung out. Here below the fallower of excesses, this provoker of transport, stands a 26-year old man unable to think of

the lies to tell a child.

The mashed fears and tension of my frayed mind collapses, I am calm. I don't lie. I sit in the sand next to David and talk to him. What do we talk of? What concoctions are we producing? David speaks of his parents, to a stranger. His mom and dad didn't intend to have him, and they don't pay attention to him. I ask him why he cuts himself, he tells me he doesn't know. That it makes him feel better. We talk about the falls, I bullshit my way through the history of the town. He asks about my own scars. I tell him I do it because I don't like myself, that they make me feel better. A murderer sits alone with a child and explains that he understands the cuts on the boy's arms. I ask him if he has any friends, he says no. I see before me a fraction of the life I was, threatening to fall deeper in the abyss.

I ask him firmer, I force him to think. I force him to realize he has somebody, anybody. A small boy with freckles that hangs out with him at recess, the girl that passed out in science class. He has friends. His mind is tainted by depression, it tries to eat away at him. It tells him lies, tears him down. I convince him to help me pile up the black rocks under the bridge. No real reason, just distractions. Is it fun? He tries to tell me that he has nothing to look forward to, he tries to tell himself. Confirm his thoughts. His parents ignore him or agree. I don't. Eventually I coerce plans, leak out information.

There's a haunted house coming up soon at school. Next year the entire school system is going on a field trip to the theme park if they raise enough money. His parents won't let him participate. Won't take him anywhere. He reminds me so much of myself. Way back when, I remember my grandfather permanently blocked me from the fundraising at school because one of the moms of the rich kids had waited until the last minute to buy out more candles than the kid in first. I was first. I'd spent 4 months going door to door selling candles, and after all that they let her buy just enough to beat me out. David's parents are just lazy. Uncaring. David doesn't even know what they'll be selling yet.

Past some used condoms and faded beer cans we find a shirt, strapping it to a stick, David plants it into the mountain of rocks. How much time has passed? Is this real? I feel incredibly odd sensations. David adds me on facebook and snapchat. I give him my number and tell him to call me if he ever feels down,

needs someone to talk to. What the fuck am I doing. I feel bad for him. I try to understand him, I talk to him.

His parents eventually message him, and I take my leave. My car ride back home is filled with the same weird feelings. Music drowned out by unintelligible thoughts. A pit stop at the country boy overlook gives me time to try, and fail, to collect them. It's funny, I remember my Grandfather constantly complaining about the stop lights here. Once I get my black coffee I pull up to the red light, and nearly instantly the lights on the main road go red. My grandfather used to get mad every time we passed through here, yelling about how they need to fix the damned lights. That these were too sensitive. It used to always annoy me as a kid, but I kind of miss it.

Heading south I see the same sign I always do, our high school's. Roads I've never been down, hallways I never saw. How many years ago has it been, Danielle was the Prom Queen. Predestined by her looks, accused of being a whore by everyone else. Just like Nicole. Maybe it's true, about both. But what does it matter? It's been 8 years and I still can't get the images of an 18-year-old me out of my head, dreams of what could have been.

like the wind

Lydia notices that I don't have cigarette and tries to offer me one as I stand on the top floor of our parking garage. She seems offended I decline. Sitting out here, looking over the city lights. I can feel the thousands of people here, their pain. Their erosion. Lydia smokes beside me, the smell reminds me of my mother. Of me. I consider streets I could place the bombs I've been making at, buildings I could destroy. Would anyone catch me? Shelby's death has been ruled accidental. Truth is they didn't care. They probably showed up, glanced around, and thanked God that the faggot was finally gone. Danielle posted her condolences, a black and white picture of herself. The same smiling, head tilted pose. The one she's comfortable with, the one she knows works.

The leaves are dying on their trees, a cool wind blows through my hair. Lydia arrests the mechanical silence to try talking to me. My responses are alien, contrived out of what I've heard from others. I've worked here 4 years, why now does she decide I'm worthy of her time? Why do I no longer care? She's cute, wavy black hair flowing down past her shoulders, but I feel nothing. When I first started all my attempts at conversation were shot down, and now I do the same. She tries inviting me over, but I tell her no. Her expression is a mixture of shock and anger. I don't deserve her, she says. Why does she care?

Nicole messages me, we talk about how I used to have a crush on her in school, and she never noticed. She makes vague sentences of an overbearing family. We discuss our self-harm. Shame. Something is much more open about us this time, when we talked before, she seemed more distant. Lydia walks off with her cigarettes, the smoke trails behind her. David texts and talks to me about how he and the boy with freckles played tag on the playground. He mentions that his school posted flyers in the hall that they'll be selling candles. Same as it was back when I tried, candles. His parents won't let him take the papers around, they're busy they say. I offer to take them around the hospital, nurses, doctors, patients. I tell him I can do what I can, he's excited. Apparently, the winner gets a VIP pass to the theme park for them and 3 friends.

What type of fucked up game is it, anyway? More pedestal bullshit to build up the popular kids and tear down the weak. Those poor kids, the literal poor kids, the underclass. What hope do they have? Who are they going to sell overpriced candles to, their uncle that lives in a trailer? Auntie Marie who lives off minimum wage from a 7/11? Some of them will. Your kid comes up to you, begs you to buy their candles so they can go on a trip, do you say no? Do you tell them that it is fundamentally impossible for them to win? Maybe you break their hearts and tell them that you can't, you don't have the money. Meanwhile some overpampered rich fuck is gonna go and buy 100 candles for his son just because. Someone that doesn't even need a contest to get VIP tickets anyway. And David is going to have another reason to hate himself. The rich kid will go with their friends, parade around with their fancy clothes and phones. And David will be stuck. I can't let him. I have to help him.

I tell him to give me the ordering papers when he gets them, I'll lie and say he's a nephew or something. But I won't let him suffer like I used to, I have to try. He has so little time to be a kid, and it's being tainted. *Stolen*. Like mine. I'm 26, most memories I have before homeschool are intangible or nonexistent. Homeschool passed agonizingly slow, and 10 years of my life were ripped away instantly. College meandered around, and I faced continued rejection. I didn't understand anything about other people, I still don't. Looking back to view no memories of happiness, no memories of friends. Only pain. Suffering, loneliness, isolation. They override the others. The beast making its home in my cerebral cortex mocks me. It hides any happy memories I have behind a fog of beatings and betrayals.

Inside the hospital I weave myself between future recollections of the old and young, room by room. Selfish thoughts blister me. A man is dying of lung cancer, his family and friends crowd around him. I wish I was in his place. A boy takes pictures of the stitches in his arm to post on snap for his friends. I am surrounded by reminders of my own loneliness. I don't know why I feel this way. No, that's not true.

I want pity. I want someone to care about me, for once in my life to ask me how I'm doing. And mean it. But nowadays words like that have lost all meaning. The me it was back when I started my first job, surrounded by people. Every day, every

hour I hear the same conversation.

“Hey how are you doing”

“I’m doing good, you?”

“Good”

“That’s good”

Dozens of different people, all saying the same things. Like parrots stuck in quicksand calling out for help in a language they themselves do not understand. But I understand. No one wants to know how I’m doing, just like no one wants to know how you’re doing. They only ask to make themselves feel better, to give themselves the illusion of humility. What would they do if the little girl they retched up their masturbation to replied “No” to them? How would they feel if she told them she was being abused at home, or school? They freeze. Like an animal waiting for death in headlights of an overpriced truck. These people have no empathy, no compassion. Not for me, for you, for anyone but themselves. And I want to be like them. I pity myself and want someone to pity me in return. But I don’t, I inject the old man with steroids and silently remove myself from the peripherals of his family.

Nicole messages me, she asks me where I live. Upon my reply that I’m still in the same home my parents once were she asks for specifics. Apparently, she’s interested in knowing where I’ve spent all my life chained up. The road bears my family name. Just like I bear a mockery of my father’s name, a reminder from my mother of the boy she used to love. It’s a strange sensation, to think of him. The closest I’ve gotten to that side of the family in years is buying cigarettes at a gas station and talking to his sister. All I did was tell her she looked like him, and she replied the same to me. A part of me wants to talk to him, but what could I say? What could he say?

The day dragged on endlessly, and I clock out. The day is gone. I’ve done nothing but phase through the unfeeling halls of faces I’ll never remember. A quick stop at the Country Boy Overlook gives me another cup of their black coffee. I sit in the backseat of a Crown Victoria; my Grandfather and I sit in the front. He turns right on red, and the lights begin changing instantly, blocking the main road. I play games on my DS, absorbing my sorrows in pixels dancing around a boy in green. He complains to himself about them not fixing the highways, I don’t understand. I burn up in long sleeves to hide the scars on

my arm. He rambles as we drive home, tells me I'm wasting my life, tells me my Grandmother is ruining me. As we pull into our isolated road, he tells me I need to get out and get laid, I am 14. Any concept of sex I have is meaningless, Nicole is losing her virginity. I creak open the broken screen door of my house so I can go to my room and sit alone playing games.

The walls are paper thin, my parents argue about many things. One of my aunts calls my grandmother, she says I need to be out doing things, living my life. My Grandmother denies her, says I'll have time for that when I'm older. My Grandfather bellows that she's turning me into a faggot, my Grandmother says she knows I'm not interested in relationships to begin with. I take my Grandfather's pocket knife and sit in front of a mirror in my bathroom making cuts that allow scars to cover up insecurity. Tears silently stream down my face; my grandmother locks herself in her room and watches Supernatural. My Grandfather leaves to get out of the house. Behind the boy stands a man, holding a razorblade he stares into the new mirror seeing the same sights.

The boy fades back into my mind, and memories lock themselves in my throat as I stare onto a body that is not my own. My phone beeps, notifications erasing the silence. It's almost midnight, and Nicole says she's coming to visit.

to you it's just a dream

How does it feel to burn alive? How does it feel to see your sensibilities eroding into the fabric of your soul until the very atoms that make up your existence deny themselves? The girl I love is coming to my house, she says. Fancy trash abounds my rooms, and I only have minutes before she gets here. My heart races as fast as I do, filling weaved cans with papers and cigarette cartons. She messages me as she drives, complaining of a saint in a van going 20 mph that gives me precious time to clean. "Yep, there's the sign" she says, turning into my road. She calls. She asks me about the few overgrown cars that remain, makes sure she's going the right way. I walk up the hill towards the driveway, walnuts dot the ground as the rustle of grass turns into the crunch of gravel. I stand at the end of the long road, awaiting the silver bullet beaming its eyes in my direction.

She smiles and flips me off, I return the favor. The Wiccan arrives at the witching hour. Millions of thoughts explode in my mind. A car engine stops and she disembarks the broomstick she came here in. Standing outside we talk, of many things. So many things. I'm nervous, she's nervous. Shared awkwardness as we talk about the unlikelihood of any of this happening. A boy that disappeared from the face of the Earth now has his crush standing outside his house in the middle of the night. "Speaking of," comes the voice of serenity, "aren't you gonna invite me inside?" I'd forgotten I had a house. I was lost in a moment in time, with sensations I have never felt before sinking in. Things I don't understand, stinging me like yellowjackets in a summer haze. Something intense, painful.

For the first time in years another soul desecrates the wooden floorboards of my porch, overbearing static fills me as I turn the doorknob. An awkward smile on my crush's face as she glances around my living room, on the TV plays a B movie about werewolves in a small town. We joke about me watching gay werewolf porn as a shirtless man screams amongst random images. The impossible to attain dream sits beside me on the 3-piece sectional sofa. She wraps her hands around her leggings and stares at me, burning my soul. Centuries spent thinking of this moment, all the things I would say. Just for the chance to talk

to her. And all I can do is stare, blinded by the unreality of the situation. She seems embarrassed, and eventually asks more about what I've heard about her.

Should I be honest? Why not, it breaks the silence that suffocates me. I ask this irrefutable perfection if it's true she's screw 9 guys. "Lies," she says. "I've only ever fucked 4 at most. I could count them on one hand" But that's not true. I know it's not true. It doesn't matter to me, but it seems like it bothers her. She tells me that she only slept with the guy before Marty because he had a house. She tells me she only started dating Jake because she had a house. She talks more about a monster in the guise of a mother. Her father died when she was a kid, and she was left without anyone else. So many memories she shares, so many thoughts. Of all these actions she's taken, of all the things she's done. How many are lies or half-truths, sheltering herself from perceivable negativity?

It doesn't matter, as the conversation leads into my imprisonment, she asks to see the room I spent 10 years locked up inside. Like some odd fixture of a trickster god I lead my crush to my bedroom. My cat notices her, she asks his name and calls out "Garian" only to be ignored. I tell Gari to come back and meet the cute girl, but he continues out the door to the vacant house. Her frizzy hair strands out like coiling snakes on a malevolent Medusa. What does it say about me that I freeze? I feel like a prisoner in my own home, with only the desire to bend to her will. We reminisce about ancient movies we used to watch when we were young, she sits at my desk and brings up clips of the man of mystery turned walking cat. A man that lost his life lays on an expensive bed watching his crush examine clips on a 500\$ computer screen. In the house are explosives she sits unaware of, laughing at a costumed man chopping off his tail.

She looks like the big bang. Her eyes are a massive unrelenting explosion, creating stars of love. Her every breath is a solar flare, wiping away the electronic field in my head. It's like staring into a supernova. She becomes flustered by my attraction and tells me it's embarrassing to see me looking at her. She lays instead on my bed next to me, resting on a hand that stands atop an elbow pressing down into sheets and covers stained by a lifetime of nonexistence. She damns me with her smile, unaware she stares at a murder.

What does she think of? She stares at my hideous face and

into my dead eyes, bombs sit awaiting my call to arms. But I do not hear their pleas. I hear a lovely girl trying to sing post-hardcore songs with me. She's so close, and her eyes threaten to envelop me. I wish I could kiss her, and maybe it would banish whatever it is I'm becoming, before it becomes too late. I fake laughter at video clips, hers seems genuine. How long has it been since I laughed? Why does she lay here smiling at me, why does my face contort itself into similar poses?

I could stay statuesque here, forever. Lost in this living dream, pulsing on my bed. But I can't, time continues its dwindling towards eternity. It's 2:30 and she says she can't keep me up any longer since I have to get up for work at 6, the springs on my bed cry out in pain as she vacates them. My cat reveals itself once more to help me lead her to the door, I step outside into the cool autumn night, walking beside the girl I believed would never know I exist. I wish I could reach out and touch her, and now she's going to go. Standing beside her car, preparing to isolate me once again.

"I feel like you need a hug"

There's no earthly way to describe how I feel. A million years and thousands of words, letters, vain attempts at poetry. No god or man, beast or devil can possibly comprehend how those words made me feel coming out of her mouth. I have never been hugged in my entire life. I barely make human contact to begin with outside of shifting patients around or giving shots. My mind struggles to respond, to form some word or movement. Why is the only thing I can manage to tell her I've never been hugged before? "Okay no, you definitely need a hug," she beguiles me.

She's short, so I make a vague gesture to bend down but she complains that it's rude. I put my arms around her in an alien embrace, mimicking what I've seen so many others do. "Wow you've really never hugged anyone before have you?" she says, assumingly shocked at my ineptitude. "Not really." Gravitates the words from my mouth. It hurts. She's warm, her head rests against my chest. Not even a second has passed and my body is on fire, some restless synapse in my head is firing nonstop and won't go away. "It's okay, you're trying" she calls over the static. Lifetimes pass, civilizations crumble and the Earth fades to dust. I am locked in this newfound pain for eons. And then it's over. I wish I could have stayed like that forever, I wish I had never met her. We say goodbye, say goodnight. And she drives off down

that lonely road. Its first traveler besides me since God knows when.

I stand on gravel under the moon, my back to the ancient streetlight that buzzes softly in its eternal fight against the dark. How do I feel? Her car lights vanish through the trees. How do I feel? How do I feel? How do I feel? How do I feel? How do I feel? How do I feel? These words run through my mind on loop. What the fuck am I trying to say. How do I feel? *Please*. No one can answer me, I could scream but no one could hear me. I feel like I'm about to explode, like I'm about to wipe out the entire state in a nuclear holocaust. How the fuck do I feel? Please anyone, answer me. "Shut up, shut the fuck up goddamn it shut the fuck up" screams the boy at the voices in his head.

Deep breaths. Calming breaths. Repeat.

Repeat

Repeat

Repeat

Repeat

Pete and Repeat are sitting on a log, Pete fell off. Who's left?

Repeat.

Pete and Repeat are sitting on a log, Pete fell off. Who's left?

My Grandfather used to use that joke all the time. But he's dead now. Am I okay?

I'm okay. The door opens, the door closes. Locks lock. My phone sits beside my head in my bed. The alarms are set to wake me up. I'm okay. I have to get some sleep.

stormy monday

The dreams are strange. I find myself at midday in the middle of the field with Nicole, she leans in to kiss me and Jake suddenly appears. His face blurred and carrying a gun I cannot see. He blows her brains before pointing it at me. I've never heard his voice, but he still manages to scream at me. I can't remember what he said, just that he was angry. And that dream ends. I wake up in my bed and travel to the living room. Outside my front door stands a doppelganger, he stares at me through the expensive glass door. Something compels me to bring it inside, to sit it down on my couch and strip it. I carry it to my bed before taking my own clothes off and fucking me, without feeling. I feel disgusted, and as I get up it follows me through the hall. Chills run down my spine as I try to escape it. It pins me down outside, in front of my house. And I move on to the next.

The same dream I've had so many nights in the past. I stand in the corner of my great grandmother's garden, staring into the corner of the woods. At something staring back at me through the trees. Everything is collapsing. My very soul is eating away at itself inside me, a body covered in ice is on fire. I can't close my eyes, I can't look away. I stand in fear, alone. For centuries, for seconds. I no longer exist; the world does not exist. In this moment there is only a narrow stretch of land in my field of view. The thing in the trees is calling out to me, wordlessly. As it has done since I was a child. I cannot scream without a voice, I cannot move without legs. How do I see without eyes?

I slam shut my eyelids, and there it is. There I am. I stand before it, transposed into the bushes in the corner of a forgotten field. Layers of screams silently build inside me. I can't get away, I can't do anything. Their noiselessness deafens me, and I open up the shutters that fruitless block this sight. This performance continues, forever. This is all I have ever known, there is nothing else. I wake up.

In darkness my heart screeches in desperate attempts to escape its confines in my chest, I threaten to drown in the tears that stain my pillow. There are no thoughts, there are no actions. My body aches as though I've fallen from space and burned up in the atmosphere. Every cell shakes, vibrating intensely at the

expense of this solidarity. My alarm starts, a man sings of his pogo stick. I hate that fucking song, but it's enough to snap me back to reality. Sweat covers the sheets I now have to change. I sit in silence in the blackness of this place, trying desperately to reform back into my skin.

Water runs down my skin, the stains of nightmares drain through an ancient plumbing system, mixing with soap and shampoo. Dead cells mingle with imaginary creatures of disgust. The shower resonates with white noise, as if the water is trying to drown out the music that plays in the background. I've listened to them so often my mind plays them for me, I hum to myself shuffled tracks from E-Lux. Another perfect album from a forgotten band that never got as far as they should have. Water flows over my face, bringing up undecided memoirs of the me that was once so consumed with fear he couldn't even bring himself to drink. Outside it rains sideways, thunder bellows and flashes of light threaten to incinerate the trees.

As I step through the doorway my grandfather forces the child through the door in the dead of night. A radio screeches out tornado warnings, flashes of light reveal endless funnel clouds sent by God to destroy him. I watch as an old man in his youth shoves a 10-year-old outside the screen door, locking it and deadbolting the main door. He says that if I stay out there, I'll learn there won't be anything to be afraid of, and I'll stop being such a bitch. It doesn't work. My car flicks on effortlessly, across the airwaves from my phone to speakers comes soothing voices of nostalgic memories.

I remember this exact song playing many years ago, the same day I left that blind therapist. It almost tricked me, for a while. I felt like I finally had someone to talk to, someone to listen to me. But I was wrong, she was just like everyone else. She asked me to explain some of my fears, that she would look them up and find ways to make me feel better. She tried God first, the get out of jail free card in a pseudo-Christian town. Didn't work. What next? Oh, she needed to understand it more. I was afraid of *Naegleria Fowleri*, a common freshwater amoeba. If water goes up your nose it can cause an insanely rare infection known as Naegleriasis. Drugs almost never work, whether administered too late or just ineffective. The survival rate isn't even a single percent of all cases.

And so, she goes home. Does her research, cares about

me, and she comes in oh so ready to save me. "Alright, let me tell you something. Have you ever heard of the body's immune system?" Begins the sermon. "It's part of your natural defense against illness, and..." And what? Sitting there, I felt alone. Again. She never cared about me, ever. The whole time it was just some big charade, put on to get me to keep coming back. To keep lining her pockets. But I sat there, I listened to her lies. About how she looked it up and the body fights off threats like it all day. And once she finished, once the monetary value had been drained from our session. I returned the favor. Said I was cured, felt better about myself. I lied. The water fountain on the way out still seemed as though a loaded gun pointed in my direction.

It was a hard lesson, it's a lesson that repeats itself when I stop by the Overlook and buy a pack of cigarettes. The cashier thought I quit. I did. He falsifies worry for me by asking why I started again. "Those things'll kill you" he says. Pretends to want to know why I'm starting again after not smoking for months. Deflected with jokes, just like he expects me to. I don't even know myself. I knew I was going to buy them when I woke up. I told myself on the drive over not to. I screamed it as I slide my debit card in and put in my pin. I tell myself not to light the cigarette that sits in my lips. But I do. Over the 30 minutes I drive to work I repeat this ritual 5 times. Every time I despise myself a little more, and it becomes worse.

It's funny. You can't buy alcohol until you're 21 but you can start filling yourself up with carcinogens when you're 18. When you're too dumb to know better. Why do people start? I've never enjoyed being alive, always used to tell myself it didn't matter if I died or not. But what happens if I die now? All these people are lost without me, trapped in this eternal cycle of suffering and rebirth. And I still inhale this black death into my lungs. We all want to die, don't we? What other conceivable reason do we have to continue? It's not an if, it's a when. Maybe they're all just too scared, like I was. Maybe they hope they'll end up finding someone or something someday that'll provide some form of comfort in this unfeeling no man's land we stride through.

Coffee smooths out my throat to allow this poison in. Another cigarette lit up in the chilly autumn morning, the parking garage echoes with the emptiness of uncaring stone and metal, cracking paint on broken pavement point the way to salvation for some, loss for others. Atop the parking garage I can stare out

over the city, all these streetlights as candles in a vigil. Cars humming a sad hymn towards the deaths of lovers lost in a maze of myriad pain. It's isolating, to see the man in his car smiling so sweetly with his lover. It's haunting, to know that someday they'll part ways. Everyone does, no matter how much you love or lie. One day they'll be taken away from you, strung out on the intoxication of time. Why do they try? Why do I want Nicole so badly when I know it'll only end in loss?

It's become easier to focus recently, for so long all I ever thought about was myself, my pain. Food was tasteless, and the only thing that could draw my attention were the songs of artists that clouded the silence. David's parents won't give him the money to take his crush to the haunted house, so I offered to come give it to him when I get out of work. It's an odd time we live in where a serial killer can have a casual conversation with a child, even right now I see his exact location on my phone thanks to the unprivate lives we live. Do his parents even care? I can pick up the ordering papers for the school's mandated mockery system while I'm there. Even if I help him win, there are plenty of other kids that'll suffer and be let down for it. But at least he hasn't been cutting himself anymore, or so he says. He could be lying. I feel something though, when he tells me that. Let's me know I've made him feel better. What is it?

Fundamentally Loathsome

God, I feel like a hoe. Like such a fucking whore. Maybe Mom was right, she was always fucking right. What the fuck is wrong with me? I have a boyfriend, I live with him. And I snuck out so I could talk to a guy that's got a crush on me, someone that says he's liked me since we were kids. Nothing happened, but maybe I was hoping something would. I don't want to be with Jake anymore, I don't know if I ever did. I just had to get out. Get somewhere far away from my Mom. That's the only reason I dated him, wasn't it? No, I did love Jake. I wanted to be with Jake. I wanted it. I remember back before Dad died and we still lived above the garage he worked at. I remember the day Dad couldn't pay off our rent. God, I remember it. Mom was out with her friends, and Dad came upstairs with Mr. Ferguson. I hate it. Stop thinking about it.

Dad told me that he didn't have the money to pay for us to live there, that he bought me a birthday present when he shouldn't have. Stop thinking about it.

Stop thinking about it.

Stop

It was just a CD, all I got for my 7th birthday was a CD. That's all it was. That's all it was. Why? Was he lying? He told me Mr. Ferguson was going to let us keep staying there but he wanted to talk to me. He just wanted to talk. Just a talk. But he didn't want to talk. He didn't want me to say anything. Him and Dad took me to my bedroom and put me on that moth food masquerading as a blanket and Dad left, told me to just do what Mr. Ferguson said. I was sitting at the edge of the bed, worried about losing my house. I didn't know any better. Great, start crying on lunch, that'll look good.

He took off my shirt, and I got scared. I didn't say anything though. He told me not to. He made me pull off my shoes, and socks. I remember getting really warm as I tried to tear off barely stitched together cloth. Like I was on fire. Then came my pants. "Slowly," he said. "no need to rush." I stared at the door the entire time, the knob. I couldn't run even though I wanted to. A sandpaper hand moved itself across my legs, across my body. His body. It forced itself into my panties, into me. "Stop crying, you know you want it."

I didn't want it. When he ripped them off me and turned me over, I didn't want it. I can feel him, still. I can see the teddy bear sitting on my nightstand. I can hear the bed squeaking, Mr. Ferguson's labored breaths. I can feel the tears in my eyes as I try to ignore it, teeth clenched together to hold back a scream. My face is turned over to my room, but I can see him on top of me. I never should have worn that shirt, those pants. It kept

happening, every time Mom would leave, and Dad brought up Mr. Ferguson. What's wrong with me? Dad killed himself over me, if I hadn't been talking about how much I liked a song playing over midday radio one post school ride home none of that would have ever happened. Mr. Ferguson never would have noticed me if I hadn't been playing with my Mom's make up. I'm a bad person. Everyone at school called me an emo bitch for cutting myself, told me it was just for attention. The guidance counselor told me I should stop being such an attention seeker, try afterschool activities. I tried. All the other girls, the pretty girls. They made fun of me. When I was 13 I couldn't take it anymore.

No one knows what Mr. Ferguson did to me, and everyone was making fun of me for being a virgin. I'm an idiot, but all those 16 and 17-year-olds seemed so happy. One day I gave in, I let someone use me. All it did was make it worse. Over and over and I never really felt a thing, did I? Mom always said I liked it, that I wouldn't have let Mr. Ferguson keep doing it if I hadn't. Called me a little whore. Told me I should be proud that someone as rich as Mr. Ferguson had taken interest in me. I hated it. Every day after Dad died and we moved in that fucking trailer was the same thing. I needed to wear make-up, the hottest clothes. We lived like shit and she spent all our money trying to act like superstars. Every boy I've ever been with ends up hating me, it's my fault. It's my fault because I'm a bad person. Why can't I change it?

Why does the little vampire like me? Is he lying, does he just want to use me like the rest of them? I tried to love the others, I really did. But I can't. No, I can. I did love them, I swear I did. I loved Jacob when he used to black my eyes. When he told me that if I ever left him, he'd kill me. I loved Derrick when he left his girlfriend to come fuck me in his car, when the only time he ever talked to me was when he was horny. But they didn't love me, not really. What would make the vampire any different? He had me in his bed, and he didn't even make a move, not even a kiss. When everyone else would have already had my clothes on their floor he just stared at me, talked to me. Maybe he doesn't like me, just wants to find out how awful I really am. But it was kind of nice. The glovebox has bandages. The glovebox has a razor. The long sleeve under these scrubs can cover the scars from the wandering eyes of everyone in the clinic. The same arms that wrapped around him feel stings of a different kind of embrace. He's handsome, and all this time I've assumed he was lying about being a virgin, like he thought it'd give him a better chance with me. But when I hugged him, he froze up like I'd started speaking French to a dove.

Have all the things he's told me been true? What kind of life was that, locked up alone in a room for all those years? He's lucky he's still normal. A lot of people would have lost their mind in a place like that. Could I just leave Jake for him, though? What if he doesn't want me to?

What ifs keep going through my head. But when I hugged it him it felt kind of weird...Different maybe? When I go home to Jake he usually just sits in the living room playing games, only really bothering with me when he wants to stick his dick in me. The vampire awoke from his tomb and found some form of fascination in me before, and I turned him down for Jake. Jake had a house, Jake was easy. The vampire was stuck in college, meandering around in his parents' house. It doesn't matter how much I liked him, I couldn't lead him on. And now I'm suffocating.

It feels like I made a mistake all those years ago. But if he actually cares about me, what happens when he gets over it? I remember being with Marty, stuck in my house. One of those days where it feels like everyone hates you, where it feels like you'll never amount to anything. I stole a bottle of pills from the clinic and took every single one. I laid there on the floor of my house feeling my life drain out of me, and then Mom had to stick her nose in it. Had to save me from myself. Hollow, she just didn't want her prize whore to leave her. Her living piggy bank was threatening to stop funding, and she had to stop it. Talking to a boy I used to know alone in his house is the first time in my entire life I've ever felt accepted. The first boy that's ever treated me like I wasn't just a slab of meat. I want to believe him. I want to go back again.

But I can't. I can't believe him. Men lie. They lie and say they care to get into your pants, and they move on when they find someone better. There are entire sub communities dedicated to learning how to manipulate women into sleeping with you. Ever read any of those? Some of it is so sinister too. Like finding a girl that is or was an alcoholic, and then sharing posts about how you used to be. What was it again? "I'm sorry to all the people I hurt being drunk all the time, but I'm not like that anymore. I'm gonna be a better person from now on." Yeah, right. You're supposed to post that and hope the girl replies and hope that she sees some sort of kindred spirit in you. Someone that knows what she's going through. Someone that went through it and could help her get through it.

Then there's the predatory hunting things, like finding girls that are crying in bars. The ones that seem weak and open to manipulation. Doesn't that seem even the least bit evil to anyone? What if that's what he's trying to do to me? He's heard all this shit about me and thinks I'm easy, thinks I'm a whore he can use to get laid. Once he does, he'll lose interest. Like all the others. I *want* to believe him. But why should I? Why should he be different from everyone else? What type of guy says he loves you when he doesn't even know you? A liar.

He's just a liar like everyone else, he has to be. No one could love someone that looks like me, that acts like me. A hillbilly that's too short, with fucked up teeth and nonexistent boobs. Even my fucking voice, an overbearing accent to accentuate my stupidity. This hurts. I'm not having fun, but oh surely these little safety cuts are just for attention. It's why I

hide them. I hate this. Feeling this way, living this life. Maybe I should believe him, maybe I could give him a chance and not ruin it for once in my life. But I deserved to be beaten by Jacob, I was cheating on him. I deserved for Mr. Ferguson to do what he did to me. I'm a bad person, why must I drag other people into it? Do these thoughts even make sense? Does the pain bleed through the coverings? Lunch is over, back to the happy face. Sips infused with french vanilla. Wipe your fears away.

irrational collision course

Through sliding doors of unwanted mystery strolls a granter of truth. Lydia trails behind me. The lights of the city are gone, overcast now, the city is grey. She asks why I started smoking again, she asks for a cigarette. I still have time to make it to David's school, why not give her a moment to puke up pity my way? She asks me what's wrong, says I seem different. She's right, but I don't know why. Carcinogenic fog filters around us in the dampened cars as we try to give each other explanations on the destruction of our bodies. Lydia started smoking in school, blames peer pressure. I don't really know why I started, mostly to have something to occupy my time.

Lydia says she could think of better ways to occupy it, cue the awkward pause. A movie she says, we could go eat. Just as friends. A gust of wind tears leaves off a tree, rustling as they fall towards the ground. The conversation continues as white noise, why is she talking to me? Is it because I've moved up in the monetary rungs? My furthering of this career was never done for money or interest, just boredom. And now the no name nurse she first met is higher than she is, now he has value. That's all it is. White noise filters out to the miracle of sound. I wish I could stay like this forever sometimes, the long drive home surrounded by music. A cigarette burning up in my hand void of thoughts, of pain. But I can't, time drains itself away and I fall to the visitor parking of a school. The same I went to so long ago; the last one I went to before being locked away.

Walking up the steps I can see the boy playing with a whip in the grass, so long ago. Michael is a cowboy, and the Indian has to stop him. Neither side wins. The doors push open like they did back then, and to the left the principle's son grabs the boy's arm and tries breaking it. "If you ever talk to me again, I'll kill you, you fucking faggot" growls the school's prized child. A math teacher laughs on her way to the office. I stopped by the water fountain, the strange metallic taste is nostalgic. Flashbacks of the days when basically all I had to drink was milk and water, before I tried quelling the thirst with booze. Reminders of the days when the rich kids would parade around with soda and coffee. Milkshakes and Arby's. I was stuck alone, my parents too poor to

even send me the money to buy lollipops or pickles from the star cheerleader.

I don't recognize any of the people that stand in the office, and I mimic small talk I've heard as I wait for my turn. The same printer that rested here before shovels out posters for a haunted house, clicking away under the duress of wasted funds. The lady at the desk eventually drags herself away from gossip and tells a strange man where to find David. At recess. The playground at the middle of the school. Stepping through these halls brings back more memories, ideas of the boy that wandered them alone. But was I? Even Alex would talk to me if he wasn't being looked at by anyone else, it was only when he had to show how cool he was that I became a punching bag. Dehumanized and destroyed daily, but I still wish I could have stayed. That vain hope that maybe someday I would have been accepted.

But the playground solidifies it, David sits alone in a corner. Mulch litters the slides, and I pass by the swing set. The beast forces recollections of the boy being shoved out of it by the principle's son, at the apex of a swing. I remember wood digging into my hand as my wrist snapped, I remember the embarrassment of crying. Of being too weak to hide the pain. Of mocking faces laughing at me in a haze of blurred vision. One of the kids took me to the nurse's office, a teacher tells me to suck it up. But I can't, I scream and cry unable to contain myself. Reducing myself below the filth that causes blood to flow from my hand. Facility calls my grandfather, and a drive to the hospital results in x-rays. And a cast.

What kind of life was it to feel so ashamed that no one would sign it? Bethany, the blonde-haired cheer queen did, but maybe she only did it because she had to write for me in English. With the cast blocking my ability to hold a pencil, she was forced to associate herself with the outcast. I wonder why she even volunteered? It doesn't matter, of the 3 people that bothered to sign it only Nicole meant anything. Etched into my arm with marker, her name followed me through the classes of isolation and worthlessness. A constant reminder of feelings I couldn't understand. A dim light calling out to me that maybe someone didn't despise me, that maybe she wasn't like the others.

Maybe Bethany was just preparing to work with the special ed kids, she posted a picture recently of a black eye one of them gave her. Or maybe she was trying to be nice to me, if

she was, I feel bad for her. She doesn't deserve to be married to someone like Alex. He's cheating on her and it's like the entire town knows. It's a shame to think back of the innocent little schoolgirl, bright eyed and dumb, thinking she'd marry Mr. Right someday.

David's eye light up when he sees me, his downward gaze reflecting upward in a moment of realization that someone out there cares for him. Something I never managed to have, an adult that actually pays attention. Abandoning this pit of bullying and lies he drags me to his locker, shuffling through homework and posters for events long overdue he gives me sheets of paper for names, a slave's manifest for the work due. The first to offer their soul for expensive candles is me, a signed name at the top and money in a bag. The contract is sealed. David walks with me out to the other playground, the beast tries to tell me of water balloon fights and potato bag races, failures and bench sitting. But I don't listen. David is excited, he's been trying to get his parents to give him the money to take his crush to the haunted house the school is doing but they won't. I don't spend my money on anything anyway, and David looks like he's about to explode when I give him a 50.

Recess ends and David makes his way back into the school, it's hilarious. The strange feeling that boils inside me, something I can't particularly describe. The sensation of assistance. Some kids make fun of David for hanging out with me, and he tells them off. Shuts them down. He's a stronger kid than I was, less complacent. It's almost sad to leave these empty halls for the grocery store. More songs of 90s bands long gone, more cigarettes. None if the products lining the shelves matter, the coffee in my hands has to wait. Under waves of a pop song singing about happiness I hear a voice in the next aisle. "Is it bad I'm kind of happy Ryan's gone? It made me really uncomfortable to be around him." Laments a voice graveled from cigarettes. Soft steps on the tiles I glare at lead to me to Danielle and Alex, indifferent to my presence. I examine salad dressing like an alcoholic fancying the top shelf whiskeys he spends his life savings on. They wander the store together, hand in hand. Mocking a dead girl, mocking the obese man suffering under the weight of his own body.

Following like a malevolent butler, winding through shelves lined with who gives a shit. Lit under fluorescent lights

Danielle sings hateful psalms of bigotry, of pain. Caught up in her own little world of violent wonder. Bile fills from every cell of my body. I killed Lily, I killed Shelby. Innocent people in a world of hate. Danielle deserves to die. Every aspect of my being is forced to hold me back I ensnare myself in their selfishness. All that talk of love, of acceptance. Everything Danielle has ever said to anyone, lies. She stands here a towering symbol of inhumanity. Allowed to live a life of pleasure while others live in pain and self-hate. She produces it, enforces it. I have to leave before I lash out in public. Drive home so I can plan, clear my head.

The speakers blast songs of love and loss, psalms of dreams and sleep. The beast agrees. All of Lily's suffering, Shelby's, everyone's. People like Danielle are heartless. No feeling for anyone but themselves, no empathy or pity. Tossing away souls like stones in a lake. Why do they deserve to live? They don't, none of them do. Every action they take, purposeful and accidental, causes suffering. Their very appearance is a poison to the self-esteem of others. To happiness. In school they were bullies, like so many others. I drive home with thoughts of hate in my head, of spite. David's sales papers sit in my passenger seat. Ashes fall out my driver's side window, the grey sky becomes blacker than the coffee resting between cushions of disuse.

Through the door and onto a desk, bombs are perfected. Gloves are worn, parts are used. False initials scrawled into plastic from 7 towns away. Danielle has to die. My phone shows me a map to her exact location, next to Alex. Alone in the woods. My phone shows me Alex's wife, alone in her house. She shows me a story of alcohol and nicotine, of a lonely car sitting in its garage. Alex is cheating on Bethany and she sings her songs of truth. Danielle posts phrases of love and acceptance. A poem of faithfulness overlaid onto a makeup encrusted face, with a married man sitting just out of frame.

Adultery. The wholesome Christian girl is cheating on her boyfriend with a married man. Bethany knows, doesn't she? Alex is cheating on her and she just accepts it, is she afraid? David's sales papers sit on my desk, Nicole messages me. Nicole. Nicole? She's different from the others. We're different from the others. I love her, the only thing on Earth that provokes these feelings from me, the only thing that ever has. It's different. The beast agrees with me. When she left her boyfriend and snuck out to my

house, I would have felt no remorse for kissing her. I feel no remorse for him.

Jake hasn't suffered like I have, he doesn't deserve her. He doesn't love her. Alex and Danielle are just seeing other out of lust, neither of them feel for anyone. How could they feel for each other? It's not like that with me and Nicole. I feel like she understands me, like she's different from everyone else. The rest of these whores masquerade around without feeling, without care. Nicole messaged me to tell me about how she feels. That she feels like a hoe. There's sadness in it, but I don't care. I want her. I *need* her. I want to make her realize, to hold her. The more I think about it the more I understand. It's not about sex, all these ideas. All the fantasies I had about her. It's just the thought of being close to her, to anyone. That's why she's different. Because I can be, because I want to be.

We're different from the others.

the siren sings a lonely song

Sand swallows up my shoes. A wind blows across an endless white plain, and in the horizon stands a lonely sky. Fixated into it a burning sun. A pale blue sea calmly watches me, beguiling me to enter. Serenity. Peace. Staring out into it I can feel my fears being pulled away, drowning under the surface. Walking along the beach I pass by emptiness into emptiness. Someone is waiting for me, standing alone in this endless empty. Who is he? He speaks to me words filled with static, layered over into unmeaning. He's not angry with me, is he disappointed? A solemn expression turns back towards the sea.

What does he want? I ask him everything, nothing. I can't speak, but he understands. I can't understand him, yet I feel. I rest myself on the cool white sand, and his hand takes leisure on my shoulder. Wordless conversation falls out as waves flicker quietly into the land. My vision blurs and darkens. The smell of smoke, scorched metal. Like the rubber tires that burned outside one of the pill houses my mother used to drag me to. Lily's body lays on the asphalt, motionless tears stream down her cheeks. Along the road Shelby rests against a road sign, staring out to me in a pool of her blood. She's beautiful, glistening in the light of a fire burning in the distance. There in the light, frostbite takes hold of my skin. A mountain of burning flesh, melded together, hands reaching out to me. Calling me. Red and blue lights rain down from above, and the hands beg for my embrace. Compulsion overrides my senses, and my body moves on its own.

Noiseless sounds blow through the streets, like a radio without anything plugged into the aux cord. My hands reach out to theirs, and in midst of dead air I feel myself about to be taken in by the embrace. No thoughts, no fear. Warmth. But the turkish duo of post punk reels me back in. Peeling me away from the nightmare, dragging me through atoms and molecules. Arresting the neurons in my mind. Replacing me back into my sheets, lighting the phone next to me. Behind a ringtone sits Nicole's name. Her voice a symbol of heroin injecting itself into my ear canals.

"Come get me" belays the drug. She's at her friend's

house, sitting in the bathroom so she can talk to me. A picture progresses through the airwaves, a small hand trickling along a pierced belly, the dragon holds a crystal, and the succubus runs her finger against a magic ball. She's drunk, talking about a dream she had last night. "Me and you were on vacation, I was in one of those skimpy bikinis and making you take pictures of me" comes a sultry tone of damning lust, "when we got down to the beach, I made my cousin take pictures of us together. Like all the other girls around here"

But she's not like the other girls, she tells me as much after I say it. She just has weird dreams. An automated black hole filled into a glass burns my lips. She's sobering up, she says. She wants to come over. She stays on the phone as I load into my car, recognizing the CD blasting. She giggles from a whispered scream, trying to match the music. An address is given, volume is lowered. Gravel rolls around as her friend breaks through the door "Who's that?" distant curiosity asks. "No one," Nicole says, "I'll call you back in a second" she whispers. The heroin is gone, dead air fills the car as I plug in my phone. 75 down a 35 as I shuffle into Making a Plan. Fitting. This small town filled with morning fog, blowing through the trees. Lily is dead, Shelby is dead. Danielle will be too, soon.

Why does life go on? Ed, the co-owner of the Country Boy Overlook arrests my car at the stop light as he pulls down to get the day's supplies. Green to red, like clockwork. Two people have been murdered and these machines continue as if nothing is wrong. Sitting here, looking at the leaves falling through the trees. It's peaceful. No one to judge me, nothing to hurt me. Just songs playing through my speakers to serenade me as I watch the lights turn, shimmering in the fog. Nicole calls again. Outside smoking a cigarette on the porch, waiting for me. I tell her to put it out, she asks why. My own cigarette burns in my left hand as I try to convince her she doesn't need to start. It's dangerous, they'll kill her someday.

She listens to me mellow on about how she's a good person, she's beautiful. She's everything I've ever wanted, metaphors about her being a light shining in this pit I've been falling down so long. Her voice smiles over the phone, "Why do you like me?"

Do I even know the answer myself? This entire time it's echoed like a scream in a voidless abyss. I tell her it's because

she's the only person I feel like I can talk to. That she's beautiful, that she's different from everyone else around here. That I relate to her. I tell her it's true... I tell myself that it's true. But I don't know if it really is. My grandmother was right about sex, it's unnatural. People nowadays just use it for fun, something to pass the time. Back before birth control sex almost certainly meant children. It allowed us to try and pass it off as something to do with the one you love, as a form of commitment. When fucking someone might mean you die in 9 months giving birth it was special. But now with condoms, modern medicine, birth control. What does it mean now?

Nothing. Sex means nothing. You can go out and have sex with whoever you want to with almost no repercussions, my grandparents never even slept in the same bed. They stayed together for over 50 years until they died and hadn't had sex for more than 40 of those years. Where am I going with this? Nicole is making it hard to think straight. She's not happy with Jake, I can hear it in her voice. It sounds like she hasn't been happy with him for a long time. Sex. It's primal, a fabrication of the curses lying in our DNA to recreate itself and spread like a cancer. That's all it is, and now it's thrust in our faces for everyone to see. Love isn't real, the innate desire to reproduce has been emblazoned into our very cores. That has to be the real reason I like Nicole.

But why her? Out of every other girl I've met why is she the one that makes me feel this way. Maybe when my parents slung me up against the wall as a kid it fucked with my head, but I like her. She talks about how her mother didn't want her to move in with Jake because he lives an hour away from the clinic she works at. Complains about her Mom never agreeing or supporting her in anything she's ever done. Every word out of her mouth transitions electrically into soundwaves that fill my skull with emotions. I haven't felt anything in so long, but she makes me. When I pull into her friend's driveway Nicole smiles at me from the porch and flips me off. I smile back and return the favor, naturally. I haven't genuinely smiled for years, and just being around her contorts my face with alien architecture until my lips form the curves of normality. It hurts.

She makes her way down the stairs to the driveway and slithers into my passenger seat. "Hey" comes the rusty velvet flowing out of her lips. Hey. Just hey, and my body is on fire. She asks if I'm having fun staring her, blinded like a rabbit in the

spotlight hunting of a redneck's drunken outing. She's mostly sobered up now, the radio softly provides background to the dying noise of wet tires tearing up highway. Conversation from my lips comes out so naturally, so easily. But I want to have sex with her. Glancing at her smiling face in the sunrise, her leggings giving away her figure. She's so beautiful. Why does my mind think that? Why is the beast living in my head made tame by her? Sex. Centuries ago sex with her would have meant kids, it could have meant death. But now we live long enough for people to lose attraction.

Without kids people fade out of love, like a failure of natural instinct. Sex today is unnatural, a crutch to lean on to feel like we belong. Something I've wanted so long, to feel normal. Danielle and Alex are cheating, for pleasure. For no good reason other than to make the primal part of their brain release happy little chemicals. I love Nicole. It's not the same. It can't be the same, but the entire ride home it kept creeping in my mind. Fucking her, in my bed, in the car. Little thoughts take it away though, holding her hand. Thoughts of going to movies or concerts with her. Laying with her watching tv or listening to music. It's not the same.

When Nicole falls asleep in my car on the ride home it's like heaven looking at her chest rise and fall with every breath. I quietly open the door to pick up this unbearable weight I'm shackled to. There's a tornado warning, the boy screams as his mother drags him out to the porch to shave his arm hair off under the gutter. She says it's disgusting, awful. My first steps into puberty spent in fear as she tells me stop screaming. I carry sleeping beauty past the realm of dreams, into my room and onto my bed. It's beyond anything I've ever felt before. The girl of my dreams is asleep on my bed, in a room I'd spent so many years locked up inside. Maybe I still am, despite all the renovations I've done to this house it still resonates with the memories of non-memory. My grandfather's old room is a storage area, with a small desk. Shelves filled with bombs and materials. A liquor cabinet now in disuse. Muddy floor, light filtering in through dusty green shades. My great grandfather's gun sits in the desk. Locked out of my view. No matter the changes, I still see my grandfather's bed. I can still smell the overwhelming musk of his sweat from years sleeping in the same unwashed sleeping bag.

I can remember so long ago when I was a child and was

too scared to sleep by myself because I was convinced the devil was planning on killing me in the dark, I remember sleeping in his bed. Listening to the tape of lullabies they'd bought me to shut me up. I remember him threatening to destroy the Gameboy SP I had because I tried to explain checkpoints in Super Mario World as God bringing Mario back when he died. I remember laying in the dark at night, facing the window and praying to God to save me from Heather. When Grandmother made him build an addition to the house so she could have a bigger room I remember getting yelled at because I did a cartwheel and wound up impaling my foot into a bag of nails. I remember the spanking I got for crying. I remember crying at night facing the square in the wall where the window used to be, staring past it. Past the bathroom now on the other side, past the backroom. Past the hills and trees. Way off in the distance, so very close. Crying every night because Heather raped me, because her friends raped me.

I cried when my cousin's friend raped me. When my grandfather had a friend whose daughter raped me. Asleep beside me was a man that told me I was going to hell for it, that I wanted it. No matter who I told, no one ever cared. So, every night I cried alone to a wall, assured God hated me. The worst part is that it all seems mundane compared to everything that's happened to me. The images and thoughts are burned into my cortex, but it falls by the wayside. I'm not allowed to feel bad about it. My old therapist laughed it off, said I should feel good about it. The looks of relief on people's faces whenever I told them, for them to realise it was never a guy. I tore my skin apart day after day, and they sit and laugh about it. Projecting themselves into the body of a 6-year-old, like they're running a harem and not terrified beyond belief and more uncomfortable than someone sitting on a bed of melting engine oil. It runs through my mind every now and then.

I keep telling myself the same things, that I'm weak for crying about it. The amount of disgust at feel at myself is quadrupled by the pain of reminisce. Trying to tell myself to believe the same things other people tell me, that it's different. That I enjoyed it. Rolling through my mind like a fine wine, I find no solace in the belief. Yet, with Nicole sitting in my room these iterations fade away. My grandmother didn't believe in love, she was disgusted even by the thought of holding hands. But sitting here next to her it seems so real, so tangible. I can see Danielle

and Alex on my phone, both of them together in the woods. I can see Bethany alone, passed out drunk in her garage. Sleeping off the sprained ankle one of the special ed kids gave her.

But I see Nicole in my bed. I remember when I brought someone from college home to finish a paper, I felt good. It was fun. Then the day after I spent all day at work with my coworker telling me I was weird, I was too sloppy. He made fun of me for every little thing he could, made fun of my muscles being weak from being locked in my room for a decade. Until he eventually started on me with my grandmother, making fun of me for being controlled by her. Various little things from him all day. The assistant manager had accused me of having food in the cooler, gave me death stares. Gave me the “I think you did so no matter what you say you’re guilty” talk. The stare. All day he stared at me, the same stare I’ve seen all my life. The kind that tells you you’re worthless.

I was a day late on my insurance and they charged me a 50\$ late fee, so I was out of cash, and spent all day starving. All day being mocked and abused by the workers there. No matter how hard I tried, how by the book I was, they found ways to tear me down. I could show up to do something I’d been asked and get slammed through the doors onto the ground. I cried a little stream towards the end of my shift, my coworker was so proud of himself when I did. And when I finally got home my grandmother came up to me and told me “I can’t go to church tomorrow now, I can’t trust you. I’ve never been able to trust you. You’re an asshole.” She kept telling me no one liked me, no one ever would. That I would be used and useless my entire life. Spurred on by my classmate coming over. I couldn’t be trusted, I might have a girl over. Grandmother said she didn’t believe in it, not just sex. But kissing, hand holding, even cuddling. She had to stay home to make sure no girls came over.

An hour of lecturing from her and I eventually went to the bathroom and washed my hands. I was strangled by my burning eyed reflection. Suffocated by it. A disgusting piece of vermin wandering the Earth in misery and isolation. The bottle of rubbing alcohol was opened and poured over my arm. Sitting in my cabinet, between gauze pads and bandages sat a black and red razor. Inside it were loose blades, my fingers slide over the silver. Seductive. Intoxicating. *Horrifying*. I don’t want to. Over and over in my head. Stonefaced and scared beyond belief. My

arms are not my own. My body is not my own. The flesh is me, the mind is someone else. Imprisoning me in an alien corpse, it forces me to watch as it sits a fine edge against bare skin. I don't want to.

A quick cut. Weak, barely perusing beyond the epidermis. Again, again, again.

Faster.

Faster.

Stop. Focus, the beast tells me what I need to hear. What I always need to hear. "I'll feel better when I do." And out comes all the pain. Why does it come back? How long can I repeat the cycle until it wins? I haven't done it in a long time, I can keep fighting. The smile on my face widens thinking about Nicole, my parents are dead. The girl I love is sitting on my bed in their house, they can't stop me anymore.

The expensive bed serves a purpose, the sheets rustle. A night of drinking with her friends worn off, awakening in the house of a murderer. Upper body up. Hands on the bed. She looks around my room, at me. A smile that could arrest kings and dethrone the police. A terminally blushing face beaming out neon life into me. Piercing eyes evaporating every essence I have of a soul, erasing all sensibility and muddling my every breath.

"Did I pass out in your car?"

might like to linger

“Yeah, I didn’t really want to wake you, so I brought in here”

“That’s fine”

That’s fine.

That’s fine.

It is fine. It’s so calm in here, talking to her. She’s laying on my bed, staring at me in my chair. The fantasy comes true. Everything blanks, it keeps blanking. She’s so easy to talk to, so welcoming. So... understanding. Is she faking it? Her eyes brighten as the words intermingle in stale air. She laughs at jokes; a complement twists her mouth into a crescent moon. Maybe my grandmother was right, Nicole had said she wanted to be with me before. That she dreamed of me. Said that if Marty hadn’t had cancer she would have gone out with me instead, she’d have gone out with me in a heartbeat. And all of it, every last word, was nothing more than lies. Little misgivings and a bit of misdirection. Like the leaves starting to fall from the trees. It hurt so much when she ditched me, to feel how effortless it was. Painless.

But now I have my own house, my own job. Money. It fucking *hurts*. It’s like a parasite eating away my insides, to the core, tearing apart every fiber of my being. My grandmother was right, all along, wasn’t she? I’ve been worthless my entire life. A disgusting waste of a plague upon the earth, and only now that I have money do I have value. But I love her. I don’t want to believe it. The beast tries breaking through, tries warning me. He’s afraid. He’s always afraid. My desk chair creaks as the object of my obsession glides to it from the bed.

Nicole says she wants to show me something, but she wonders if she can without showing me too much. She slides down her leggings and resting on her thighs are cuts. Deep cuts, to the vein. It’s strange. She seems so real, so human. She says it’s embarrassing. Just something she does to get by. She makes a joke about how she thinks it bled through the bandages. I love her. If I could just reach out and touch her, I could be happy, we could go places. See things. I could make her happy, I know I could. If I could just kiss her... But she’s with Jake. I don’t care

about him, I care about her. We talked for so long, and it felt so right. But I keep hesitating. I want to believe she likes me, I want to believe her so badly.

But I remember the last time we were talking. The last time I was so close to being allowed to be happy. She told me she wanted to be with me, but she couldn't leave Marty because of the cancer. She lied. I knew she was lying too, one day she started getting distant. I started having nightmares about one of her friends. Of them in bed together. The week before I went to my first festival, she posted a picture of her and Jake at a park feeding fish. She still wouldn't admit it. I spent that week trying so hard to believe her when she said nothing was wrong. Trying to tell myself she was the one person that wouldn't hurt me. But she was. I couldn't lie to myself, not when it was so obvious. I drove up to the city the festival was in and did nothing but think the entire ride. I started crying, kept crying. Like a little kid. Weak. I had a dream that day that him and her were having sex together, in my living room.

A puppet called me from my bed, and there under a spotlight was Nicole. A gaggle of mascots and actors from kids shows cheered her on as I walked in and she laughed at me. "How could I ever love you? You're not even out of college" she said, so full of snark and spite. So correct in the assessment.

I woke up and puked. I kept puking as I remembered seeing his dick going in and out of her. Cum dripping off her body as she mocked me. I felt like shit on the drive up there, barely able to see the road through the tears. I wanted to puke again. Gagging on my own emotions. I loved her, she said she wanted me. The only person in the world I thought cared for me lied and didn't even have the courage to tell me. That night she changed her relationship status. Nicole is now in a relationship with Jake. New relationship.

"cute couple"

"You two look so good together"

"I'm so happy for you two"

I wanted to kill him. I wanted to drag his face through shards of glass and stuff the wounds with salt. I still do. I fucking hate him, a man I've never met. All these years he's been with Nicole. The moments they've shared, holding her. Comforting her. It should have been me. I puked in the hotel bathroom and washed my mouth out with cheap minty mouthwash. She tried

telling me she didn't want to hurt me, that's why she didn't tell me. Lies. I drove home the second day to kill myself. But I couldn't. Couldn't die some useless wretch that had never done anything. Another laughingstock. I can't die without kissing her, just once. I can be happy with her, if I can just have her. Why can't I just trust her?

She didn't want to hurt me? That was the excuse, over and over. I don't think she was telling me that, she was telling herself. I'm afraid she never cared at all, that all of it was just some dance so she would have someone to support her during the break up with Marty. That she used me. What if my grandmother is right, what if after all this time I'm too useless, too weird, too unwanted to ever mean anything to anyone? What if the only reason Nicole is interested in me now is because I have money? I don't want to believe it. I really don't. But it won't leave. It keeps going through my head over and over, that the only reason she pretended to be interested in me in the first place was because she thought she could use me. I remember her telling me I had nothing to offer her. I thought she was joking back then but she wasn't, was she?

But none of that matters. The measure of a person's worth isn't left to God or Devil. It's not your friends or family. It's you. It's what you value about yourself or your life, and the only thing I value is Nicole. Without her I'm worthless. Without her I am less the dirt collecting in the backseat of my car. I want her more than I have ever wanted anything else in my entire life. Even though she hurt me I still love her, more than that I need her. She lied to me for months, and there's nothing to prove she's not just lying now. But I want her. I love her. I'd do anything just to hear her say the same. Just to continue these conversations we have.

When I dropped her back off at her friends, I thought of all the times she's rode with Jake. Bought him presents. I want to fucking explode. Alex and Danielle have no idea what they're doing. No love, just sex. Hurting other people for pleasure. I know what to do. Nicole says she wishes she could have stayed longer, but it's fine. This place wants a show I can give them one. I have to find Alex and Danielle alone and kill them. I'll make them suffer, steal Bethany's car so her tracks are there. She's just as much a part of this as they are. She'll take the blame, I'll keep going.

I have turn in some of David's sales. He's a good kid, and he's getting the shit kicked out of him in the lobby when I show

up. Why can't I help him? Why couldn't anyone help me? The vice principle just shrugs me off when I complain, more interested in the envelope full of a new coffee maker. The bullies run off to high five each other and talk shit. An announcement on the intercom recommends the kids try the new vending machine.

David is crying on the steps. He says everyone hates him, says he's alone. The girl he likes won't go to the haunted house with him, she's going with some baseball player. He hates school, wants to run away from home. I'm an excellent liar. Growing up I learned how to cry on demand, how to act scared. Act happy. I had to. Trying to be normal, no, trying to appear normal. Trying to be like the other kids. I tell David a story about me and Nicole, how one day the girl I loved went to a school dance with my best friend. How much it hurt seeing them making out. I tell him that it'll be okay, I didn't need her. Now I'm a rich nurse with a lot of money and everything I want. He has to go to school so he can be like me when he grows up. Happy.

The same lies people used to tell me, just in a different set of clothes. The pleasures are pleasureless, but in the most illustrious of a punishmental way. I ate a stake created by one of the most famous chefs in the bible belt, with the finest wine. And it tasted of nothing. I know it tastes good, but I can't taste it. Not fully. Is that happiness? To know you should enjoy something, to be so close to enjoying it, and be absolutely unable to? You know, one day those kids are gonna grow up to be their own little pieces of shit. After being bullies in school, after getting more than enough of their fill of assholery, they'll grow up into more perfect little hypocrites.

None of them deserve to win anything, not like David. He has to win the contest. I'll buy a thousand candles myself if I have to. I took him out to eat after school and he barely touched his food. Just sat there trying not to cry, trying not to be weak. He draws little pictures into his BBQ sauce, nibbles pieces off his chicken. He reminds me so much of myself. Sitting there at the Country Boy Overlook with my Grandfather, thinking of Nicole living her life without me. Thinking of Michael moving on.

I'll help him, but now I need to figure out a way to get to Danielle and Alex. If I can get rid of them, imagine how much everyone else's lives will improve? Getting rid of such an abundant source of negativity. I wish I could have stayed with him longer. I wish Nicole could have stayed longer. Goddamn it,

there are so many fucking distractions now. It's overwhelming. I never had to think so much about myself before now. Before I killed Lily, before I thought about killing Shelby, it's like I didn't exist. I went through life following the motions, following the tracks others had laid for me. Now it's like I've fallen into some sort of dream, and I can't handle it. I have to go see a movie with Lydia too, what do you think she wants? An ugly fuck like me getting a girl like her to like me? No. Every guy that's ever come through that hospital has tried with her, and she turned down each and every one. What makes me so special?

She probably thought I was trying to ask her out too when I first showed up to the hospital. But why would I? Compared to Nicole she's nothing. But I can't really blame her, most guys around here don't talk to a girl unless there's a chance it'll get them laid. I'll admit I'm lonely, I always have been. But I've never talked to any girl outside of a desire to pass time. All I ever wanted from anyone was a friend, but every move I make just puts people off. Like the instant I open my mouth they can tell I'm not like them. Not worth it. Or even then, they already have friends. Relationships they formed in school, people they've known their entire life. I wish I was still home with Nicole, if I could have stay with her just a few more seconds more. To not have to think about more death. More of my own uselessness.

testify to the icon in the sky

I've been thinking about what to do to Alex and Danielle. They need to suffer. They need to know why they deserve to die. Before I kill them, I'll make them pay, I'll squeeze every last drop of pain from inside them until they finally understand what they've put other people through. Until they remember how much they hurt other people. Even each other. Bethany is going to the liquor store, buying more bottles to drown away her fears. I wonder if she's praying? Driving up to the festival was the first time I had prayed for a very long time, and like oh so many times before it didn't do anything. Nicole still started dating Jake, I was still just the useless boy she'd been leading on.

Is Bethany praying to God that Alex isn't cheating? Is she praying he still loves her, or that he ever did at all? When I was young, I used to pray the storms wouldn't come, I prayed that God would help me, and he never did. I remember sitting in a church praying that God would kill Heather, that he'd forgive me for allowing myself to be used. I didn't enjoy it, didn't know anything was wrong. I asked him to help me and he never did. He allowed me to keep getting surrounded by them in that oven pretending to be a playhouse. Why did I deserve to be punished for that? Why is Bethany being punished?

It's weakness. Nicole never really wanted to date me because I'm weak, it's why everyone could abuse me. I was always the punching bag because I couldn't fight back. Alex hurts Bethany because he knows he can, because he doesn't care. If you asked around the entire town knows, and they just let it happen. Dead leaves die again under my feet as I trace the perimeter of the house. Through the blinds to see Bethany is passed out on the floor of the living room, wine staining the carpet. Pursuing intercourse with the blotches already there. How did I get here? It's like someone else is driving my body, some force inside me compelling me to get in my car and drive here. Alex's mustang is out of the garage, he's sitting in the woods with Danielle. The thought disgusts me. Thinking of them kissing or fucking, wishing it was me and Nicole. If God exists why does he allow me to think these things? Why do images of Nicole and Jake still pull up the bile from my stomach?

Alex and Danielle don't know what they're doing, or they don't care. Alex's garage door opens without a fight. Tools sit along the wall in dust, a framed picture of Alex and his old teammates rests alongside them. I never had those memories. Why do people waste it? They have lives I would have given anything for, and they're just taking them for granted. Alex and Danielle go to church every Sunday, why? Do they think it'll get them to heaven? Like God is going to bring up the adultery and just say "ah well I see you were at church Sunday, come on in." How can Alex not see the irony of sleeping in a bed with his wife that has a giant cross above it?

Why do people like them get to be happy when people like Lily and Shelby don't? People like me? Is it even worth killing them? More and more kids are being born each day that'll just end up the same way. David or one of his classmates may well end up being the girl laying on the floor in front of me covered in blackberry wine. Without Nicole my life is forfeit, is it how Bethany feels about Alex? Staring at her is pitiable. I could kill her right now, take one of her kitchen knives and just rip everything away. But I won't. She needs to be alive so someone can take the fall. Her hair is soft, but filthy. I bet she's been crying. The TV is playing top pop, is that what she fell asleep to? Songs of happiness to serenade her sorrowful stupor? What kind of life is this anyway?

I nearly shit myself when my phone started ringing. But Bethany was too far gone to notice, too far gone to notice anything. Lydia calling from the other side, says her car broke down and she needs a ride. Why me of all people? I wonder how she'd feel knowing I'm standing over a drunk girl in a house I've just forced my way into, looking over photos and memories that aren't mine. Memories of decadence, of power. Pride. All built on the countless abuses of others, of the weak. Yet the pictures on the wall pay no heed to me, the garage door slides down in silence. Evil like this, so impervious. So above everyone else. And yet the shadow that lingered on their walls came and went without them even realizing it.

I wanted to look around more, find something I could use. Why did Lydia even call me? I should probably turn my cellphone to silent anyway, I'm just not used to anyone so much as texting me. I feel strange, driving out to get Lydia. Very strange. *Uncomfortable*. I've been ignored or abused my entire

life. My family seemed to hate me, when they were alive, they were always disappointed in me, no matter what I did. My other relatives pretend I don't exist, I've never got birthday or holiday letters, no gifts or calls. I'm used to that, in a way. Not this. Why does this hurt so much? I keep thinking I'm going to show up to Lydia and she's just gonna mug me or something.

Every single person I've ever trusted has left me, hurt me. My friends in school all stopped talking to me as we got older, needed to be one of the cool kids. My family berated me constantly, always telling me I was useless. Unwanted. My cousins used to beat the shit out of me and destroy the few toys I had. With a poor family I would never be able to get them back. When they fed one of my DS games to a chihuahua, the game was gone. Forever. I remember saving up a bunch of money to buy some games from Nicole, not because I wanted them, so I would have a reason to talk to her. To interact.

I keep thinking of when she left Marty for Jake. She told me that she wanted to be with me, but she couldn't. I trusted her, she's the only person I ever have. And she betrayed me, lied to me. What makes Lydia any different? What makes anyone? It's not just me either. When I started working at the hospital, I wanted to help people, I really did. More than anything else I wanted to know that I could make someone, anyone, happy. I wanted to see fathers smiling when their sons had successful surgeries. Kids joyously hugging their parents harder than they ever had before. But you know what I've learned the past few years? Do you know what I see?

Relief. I see relief. Whenever someone comes in the family and friends are all so lovey dovey. So supportive. When they're with the patient they're just puking up support like pus from a wound. And when the patient recovers, all of that is gone. In an instant. People act the way they're programmed, and once the trigger is complete. They revert. They go back to bickering, back to fighting. Complaints, nagging about projects. As soon as society tells them they can be assholes without having to feel bad again, they get right back to it.

But that's not the relief I'm talking about. I'm talking about an old man blinking out after fighting cancer for 5 years. It's slow sometimes, they lose their hair from the therapy. They spend a few months paranoid about whether or not it's working, then they learn that there's been no regression. It's not responding to

therapy. The look of complete, enveloping, absoluteness when someone knows they're going to die. When I first started it sent chills down my spine, then the family starts crying. You have to explain that you can't save them. That nothing can save them. End of life care. No saving, no hope, no future but a slow death.

You watch them dying, losing their senses, their mobility. Losing everything. Walking down the floor you can hear them crying in their rooms, praying to god. When you go to change their bedpan, clothes, diaper, or maybe take them for a shower.

"Hello Miss Thompson, how are we doing today?"

"Oh I'm doing well, my son called earlier. My granddaughter got accepted into the gifted and talented program at school today."

"Well that's good, I used to be part of that when I was in school."

"What year did you graduate?"

"Oh, I was taken out of school before I even finished middle school. Homeschooled"

"That sounds fun."

"Something like that"

The repetition is out of the way. Then we have to move them. "Ooooooooooooooh God" they whine. Oh god. If not that, they whimper. Like a dying animal. The family shows up because they know they're supposed to. But over time they just stop.

They're hand in hand praying with the patient one day, then they realize they'll never get out. Daddy will never sing again.

Mommy will never be able to walk. They're chained to tanks of Oxygen, they can't play with you. Go hiking, fishing, hunting.

Their life is over. And that's when it happens. That's when they understand the patient is no use to them, and never will be.

They stop showing up, they stop calling, they just... stop.

Then when they get the call dear old dad has kicked the bucket, when they realize their parent is out of the picture. That's when I see relief. A sense of guilt. They're glad it's over, that the person that spent a lifetime raising them is dead. Gone. They say funny things to each other, about better places and being free from suffering.

They tell each other things they don't believe. The truth remains the same, they are happy they're dead. They're happy they no longer suffer. But not for altruistic purposes, for the internal monster assailing themselves. It's the preacher that refuses to end the sermon. The damning of denial intermingling with decaying love of a desolate box of memories.

"why won't they just die?"

The person that took care of you becomes a burden, a waste of resources. They're going to die soon anyway, they become a waste of time. How many times have I wheeled a man to the lobby to meet his son, how long did he wait there? I've seen veterans that went through hell break down crying when they realize that they've been abandoned. That they're unimportant to the kids and society they sacrificed everything for. Ever since I started I've wanted to do something for them, to hug them. Tell them it's going to work out in the end. The daughter of an old lady that died from cancer ended up in a wreck, the EMTs brought her through in critical.

She was afraid. Crying. I lied to her. I asked her if she was a Christian, when she said yes, I told her she didn't need to be afraid. That we were going to save her, but if we didn't that she didn't have to worry anyway. She said she'd been a good person her entire life, went to church on Sundays. I told that if she died, she'd see her family again, all of her loved ones that passed on would be waiting for her. I stayed and talked with her for half an hour until they put her under for surgery. I told her she'd be fine, while telling her how death wouldn't be painful for her. She'd be happy in heaven with people that cared about her. We shared a prayer.

She never came out of the OR. Only her body, the dead and dying fragments of blood and flesh that once represented her. The surgeon said he'd never seen someone in a situation like this go under with a smile on their face, told me I was a good man. But I didn't feel like one. Her mother died alone, suffering. In my opinion her mother had only stayed alive through force of will, long enough to see her daughter one last time. But she never came. Always another excuse, always another meeting, always anything else. I spoke to her mother before she died too.

"Marissa isn't coming, is she" came the rasp behind an oxygen mask. The bedcovers shifted as I removed the shit she'd been laying in the night before. "Ms. Payne I'm gonna get someone to help me and we'll get you showered and into some fresh clothes, alright" says the boy, trying to ignore the ignorance of the other overworked staff. "Marissa isn't coming" raspy again, tears streaming down her cheeks. Ruining the seal on the mask. "why do you do this, why do you come to this floor" It's not often the patients realized I was operating below my paygrade. "I like helping people, the CNAs down here don't do

as much as I'd like. All of you deserve to be as comfortable as possible."

"Before we die?"

Before we die.

Ms. Payne said she wasn't afraid of dying anymore. She'd spent her life trying to do right by Marissa after Mr. Payne died, and Marissa had been ignoring her. Distant. That's what killed Ms. Payne. She fought off cancer, lived through turbulent times, worked herself to the bone. And what finally got her in the end? Knowing her daughter no longer needed her. Knowing her daughter didn't care for her. She told me it was fine, that she didn't want to be a burden. But her eyes betrayed her. Whenever I checked on her, small streams beget the truth. When she talked about how her daughter was all she had left, that all her friends were dead. The wavering voice burned through the polaroids.

When she finally died, when Marissa finally stepped through that door. The body of her mother laying there, lifeless. *Useless*. That's when it hit. Relief. Marissa's face eased, muscles relaxed. Relief that she didn't have to pretend to care anymore. Relief that nagging little voice wouldn't bother her. I see it all the time. Relief the useless pile of garbage sitting in the bed wasn't a problem anymore. And the most disgusting thing about it? Prayers.

Every time, every patient. A minor inconvenience or a dead man walking. Prayers. They go on their preferred social media, they go post their selfies with the dying, and they say "Prayers for my..." whatever noun or pronoun would be beneficial. Then all their friends, random people that have never even seen the person, go and comment "prayers". What good comes from that? Nothing. Most of those people don't even pray, just post the word. All it serves is to fuel the circle jerk of self-pity and egotism. No effort, just a little "oh teehee I can feel good about myself now"

It's the same thing when a school gets shot up, prayers. If David's school got shot up, you know what I'd do? Talk to him, not some half assed fake sympathy to drag attention to myself online, I'd talk to the actual person. Those people dying in hospital don't want your fake prayers, they want to see you. What little time they have left should be personal, all that time you waste jerking off for internet points? They're dying. All they want is comfort yet even in the face of tragedy people only focus on themselves.

People always focus on themselves. They move on, have their own lives. And then pretend that the deaths of their loved ones affect them, only because we're programmed to. Programmed to pretend to have hearts, to have souls.

I wish I could believe they did. I wanted so badly to help people, to be able to help people feel the things I never could. That I never will. But I don't see joyous families learning their grandad is going to make it. I don't see teary eyed hugs when the results come back clean. All I see is more emptiness. More pain, more suffering. Repeating day in and day out. And I can't block it out. Their faces follow me everywhere I go, in the black coffee I drink on break. In the tufts of hair that clog the showers. In the falling leaves that rustle in the breeze as they blow past manufactured plastic pumpkins. How many times have I been the only one there as someone's dying? How many times has the random man been the one holding hands with the old and forgotten?

wish upon some other star

I love driving these roads at night. Passing the streetlights, with their faint glows slowly absorbing into the darkness. Stars overhead, window down. Cold wind flowing through the car. With everyone asleep, with these empty roads going blending into each other. Soft music playing through the speakers. I love this. It's the only time the Earth seems as lonely as I do. The moon hangs in the sky as an ephemeral companion, joining me in this dark ride to nowhere. It's comforting.

I guess it's not to nowhere this time though. Lydia is sitting by the Deadman's Curve gas station. I remember this place, when I was younger my grandfather bought me a near beer here. Just for fun, cause I asked. He probably shouldn't have, or I should have thrown it away. When we got home my grandmother saw the empty bottle and broke one of my games. I couldn't do that, it's a sin. A sin to even think about alcohol. Her father was a drunk, and she didn't like the way he was when he was drinking. She didn't even allow me to look at bars or liquor stores if we drove by them. Just a simple little thing, and she destroyed a game I'd only ever played once.

Back before they moved away one of my distant relatives on my grandfather's side used to live in a trailer down the road from us. I was never allowed to go down there or hang out with his kid, but he was there. One summer day there was a massive tornado outbreak, dozens of people were already dead, and we were under a warning. Despite my grandmother's protests my grandfather called them up to us, seeing as we had a basement and they were living in just a mobile home from 1986.

It's odd, I was always so terrified of storms. Always so certain this was going to be the one that finally got me, but that day was different. My grandfather was too busy talking to the neighbors to call me a pussy for crying, and my grandmother was too much of a recluse to leave her room with other people in the house. I can't even remember the kid's name, but I remember me and him playing the game while the winds tore the tin from the old barn. I wasn't afraid. Me and him were in our own little world, was it fun? Maybe. It's funny how easy it was to not think about

the storm when I had him to play with. When my grandmother took the game out and smashed it to pieces in the yard, I wasn't sad because I lost the game, I couldn't really play it anyway. I just wanted something to remember that day by. Something to hold on to, to remember the time I briefly had a friend.

Lydia dances into the car with a lit cigarette. Her black hair flowing like drifts of Appalachian snow. Like the waves on rivers in dead memories residing in my head. "Why did you call me, out of everyone else you could have called" is an innocent question. She says it's because she knew I'd be awake, she was hoping I'd be free. The rest of her friends are at work or busy. There's something about that. "The rest of her friends" carries implications. Am I her friend? We're coworkers but we never really talked outside of work. And when we did, she carried the same aura of disgust towards me people always have. The same feeling that I was weird, and she didn't want anything to do with me.

"Hey can I use your aux cord, I wanna show you something" She says, already unplugging my phone in the middle of one of my favorite instrumentals. "Ever watched Blood of Pallas?" Of course I had. My mother used to watch that movie all the time, back before she gave a bag of all our VHS tapes to one of her boyfriends I did too. "Control of me, right? I love this song. I own the CD. I have that soundtrack on cassette too, from back when I was a kid"

Wheels turn into empty streets. The car is filled with talk of old times, nostalgia. I never really expected Lydia to be into music, but she sits in my passenger seat singing along to some of my favorite songs. We talked about how we used to watch DVDs of all those movies everyone shits on nowadays. She shares the same sentiment I do of loving those movies as a kid, having watched them so many times that even years since the last viewing, you can go through them nearly frame by frame. I brought up the time my aunt suddenly bust into the living room to make sure I wasn't watching porn or a sex scene, ready to beat my ass, only to realize the main character and his wife were just dancing in one of the old films. And Lydia instantly knew which scene it was.

"Have you been feeling okay recently? I didn't really know how to ask but you seem kinda down."

Lie and say it's just the hospital getting to me. Lie and say

anything, anything but admitting it's been harder to hide it. Harder to pretend. Lydia talks about a junkie that came in the other day, someone she used to go to school with. There's a waver in her voice as she talks about having to ask him what drugs he was on, trying to find out any possible complications from treatment. He used to be in nursing school till he started taking drugs, now he's just a shell of his former self. He didn't even recognize her.

She puts her hand on my thigh as she talks about various patients, conversations drown out the music in non-meaning. I'm listening to her, I'm responding to her, but it feels like I'm not there. The boy driving her home isn't real. I feel like a body snatcher piloting someone else's skin. Everything I tell her is just reactionary, lines and facial expressions stolen from movies and tv. If I try to talk to her, actually talk to her, I'm afraid she'll make fun of me. It's like I'm trapped. I want to be friends with her, I really do. But I don't trust her. And the worst part of all this, the thing that completely cements it.

When we got to her home, she wanted me to walk to her door. We were talking about something I couldn't care about and, before she went in, she kissed me. One of the most attractive girls in town kissed me, me of all people. How do I even describe it? What is a kiss supposed to feel like? Was it supposed to feel good? I feel like I'm about to puke. It felt just like it did when Heather kissed me. It's the first time I've ever been kissed outside of the rapes, and it felt just like it. Minus the fear I suppose. I felt awkward. Dirty. I don't want anything to do with Lydia that way. I just want someone to talk to, a friend. And somehow, I've given off the wrong impression. But I can't just tell her that, can I?

It kept running through my mind on the way home. She noticed it was off, noticed me back away from it. It almost didn't even feel wrong, it felt like nothing. Which is worse. I felt nothing. I don't feel affection for anyone but Nicole, I don't even feel sexual attraction. It's like Nicole is my last hope for anything, any semblance of happiness. Like the only emotions I feel outside of hate come from her, the only thing I love. Even after all these years she hasn't really changed, she's still the girl I used to crush on in school. The love I have for her is still there, even after she lied to me. That was the lowest point in my entire life. It's like the universe itself was telling me I wasn't allowed to be happy,

seeing her walking with Jake in stores sometimes. Her constantly posting lovey dovey stuff with him. Thinking about him fucking on her down every day. It eats you.

When she started talking to me back then it seemed like everything I went through was worth it. Like maybe after all those years of nonstop pain life was finally turning around. I stopped enjoying nearly everything after that, started drinking more. Chain-smoking. The beast latched onto it, and every single second of every single day since he hasn't stopped reminding me of it. Reminding me that the only girl I love cast me aside and didn't feel a single thing about it. But I don't know that, the beast just wants me to think she does so I'll lose her too. It doesn't work, I still want to kiss her, but Lydia? I didn't feel anything. The entire thing was a masquerade. A play with me in center stage. And now that Nicole seems like she actually wants me in her life I can't trust her. I keep thinking that immediately after saying she wished she could go out me she probably went and fucked Jake. I don't have anyway of knowing how she felt, so I only have my assumptions. The musings of the beast.

I want to be happy, hope is the only thing I have left. And I'll have to give Nicole a chance for that, won't I? There's no point in giving Lydia, someone I am completely disconnected to, a chance. All that would do is drag me down further. This music playing on my radio, these melodies and riffs are so tangential. I almost didn't notice I was sitting in my driveway, I'm not even sure how long I have been. Why is it becoming so much harder to focus? What the hell is wrong with me? I won't be any better than Nicole was if I pretend to like Lydia, I don't want to tell her no. I don't want to be alone. But even if I did, Nicole proved I can't trust anyone. She drove the nails into the cross, tore apart her pieces of silver. And now I'll be stuck in this limbo forever.

ever wonder if it's infinite

David's going to the haunted house today. He's going alone to place the girl he likes is going with someone else. Just like I did when Nicole and Michael went on field trips. Just like I did when Nicole and Jake went to the festival. David will never get the girl he likes. And even if he does it'll be when she's had her fun with everyone else, and he's her last option. Just like me. Just like so many others.

I don't want to believe in hell. But I don't want to believe in heaven either. If someone like me that suffered so much in his life made it to heaven, what's waiting for me there? An eternity of lamenting my past mistakes? Epochs draped in eons withered within the mind of the lonely child. But I won't go to heaven. I've killed two people, I'm going to kill more. But what's hell? Fire and brimstone? Darkness, void, pain? People used to tell me to look on the bright side. To think about the good things. But there are no good things. You tell me to look for something I don't have, to find the holy grail. People like Alex and Danielle never have to work for it, they never have to try, they just do. They talk and effortlessly people like them. I talk and people puke. Danielle blinks and half the county cums. Lily spent hours working on make up and 5 years in a gym, she was ignored. Lily tried. Shelby tried. Both weren't getting anywhere.

I killed them. I saved them. But what if they're going to heaven? Or hell? Lily will spend forever crying that the one guy she thought was interested in her killed her. She'll spend forever crying about the life she never had. Shelby was trans, before that she was Ryan. A boy that loved boys. Does God care that Ryan couldn't function as a straight white Christian male? Does God care that Ryan rejected his biology for inner peace, or will Shelby just end up burning in a pit with murderers and rapists for the rest of time? Was that "God's plan"? That funny little thing people bring up to those in the lowest of the lows. That little get out of jail free card for anything bad in the world. Is it God's plan that Lily and Shelby were absolutely miserable their entire lives, only to end up miserable in the next?

There's a peace in nonexistence. Getting raped repeatedly as a kid won't matter when I'm dead. All those people

Nicole slept with, her choosing someone else over me after leading me on? It won't matter. Lily getting bullied. Shelby suffering years of alienation. But there's something eating away the cells of my cortex. Something a part of me is deeply afraid of. I feel like I've been through all of this before. Somewhere in a past life it seems like these same emotions have been played out in dissimilar similar fashions.

What if we're all bound by karma? If our actions in one life dictates the next, what does that mean for our souls? The abused victim that commits suicide out grief, only to be damned to live over it again in another life. Repeating the same mistakes forever. If that's true, then there's no escape. My actions that I take, these killings. My punishment will be to reborn as another useless bug in another worn down town. And I'll do it again. Over and over and over. Alex and Danielle are happy, they live perfect lives and without my input they'll probably die old surrounded by facsimiles of loved ones. And be rewarded with another perfect existence. Maybe killing them will break the cycle. Maybe I got to Lily and Shelby before they locked themselves in. Maybe Alex and Danielle will have to go through a life of repentance, to earn their happiness.

None of that is true of course, not really. I have dreams of things I could have never seen. I've walked the streets of London with horses riding by. Stood in the sands of a vast desert as a pharaoh spoke a tongue I couldn't understand. But those are just dreams. I once dreamed I ran over a dog on a stretch of road, and it made me so paranoid I didn't go that way anymore. And the day I finally did? A dog jumped from a ditch and I slammed into him going 60 mph. But it was just a dream. I knew there was a dog at that house. My brain was just taking pieces of information and playing out scenes of randomness that coincidentally occurred in life. I dream I shouldn't go swimming because I get struck by lightning, and the pool gets struck by lightning the next day. It seems magical doesn't it?

But what of the dreams where I get eaten by Teletubbies, where I sing in a band? I've had dreams where I am a vampire, dreams where I'm a detective. And none of them mean anything. There's no god, no afterlife, no judgement. There's no meaning to any of the bad things in life. But it still hurts. I spent an hour puking in a hotel bathroom when I realized Nicole chose Jake over me, crying that I was useless to the one person I care about.

I cry in my bed sometimes thinking about the life I never had, those 10 years I lost locked in my room. I will never get those back. The bullies, teachers, my parents. They were right, I'm not a man. I'm weak, real men don't cry. They don't let some random girl get them down.

The worst feeling of all it, the thing that pulls up those shameful tears of a bitch, is that it doesn't matter. I won't get a second chance, no do over. I'll die someday and just blink out of existence. It's like a pulsar in the deepest parts of my soul. People like Alex and Danielle never have those moments. Shelby spent most of her life at home stoned out of her mind playing games, she felt it. Lily spent all her time desperately trying to get people to notice her so she wouldn't. But you can't stop it. That's the cycle. It's not magic, it's not god, it's not karma. It's human nature. Uplift the strong, beat down the weak. Strength begets strength. Weakness unto weakness. But if I kill Alex and Danielle their effect on people stops. No more lonely girls basing their merits on being more like Danielle. No more weak men wishing they were more like Alex. Bethany will go to jail for a crime she didn't commit, but she has to. If I go no one will be able to continue this. But what can I do? Kids are born every day, and everyday this cycle keeps going, growing.

My life will eventually be inflicted on someone else, it probably already is, there's no way to stop that. But I can at least punish people like Alex and Danielle. They're monsters, parading around in human skin. No feeling, no emotion, no attachment, no love. Not like Lily or Shelby. Not like me. Lydia wanted to go to a steakhouse together on our lunch, and on the way there I saw Nicole's car parked in the Japanese place. She's eating there with Jake. The very thought of her spending time with someone else, while I'm stuck masquerading with a girl I can't care about, is devastating. I pretend the ribeye is excellent. I laugh at Lydia's jokes, tell her lies about how attractive she is. But I don't remember driving here, I don't remember waking up, going to work.

How many days have passed? How many months? Countless conversations between me and David, me and Nicole, and I don't remember any of them. Every piece of meat grinding between my teeth allows the silent thoughts of Nicole to overwhelm me. When Lydia kisses me as we're heading back into work, it doesn't do anything for me. Nothing helps me ignore

the images of Nicole kissing Jake. Of her and him walking around over these last few years. All the time they've spent being with each other.

David messages me, he's going to the haunted house today. *Alone*. He doesn't want to, he says it'll suck. I don't know why I try to talk him into it. I don't know how I do. The same scenes I've seen will play out for him, the girl he likes prancing around with someone else. Holding someone else for comfort from legally distinct horror villains. He'll regret it if he doesn't go. You always will. Always lingering in the back of your mind in that little box of could have been. Isn't it better to know? Even if you fail and it's the worst thing you ever feel. As much as it hurt, I didn't regret going to the festival. The souvenir shirt I have serves to further remind me. Seeing Nicole walk around with Jake, smiling and happy. Laughing at his jokes, holding onto his arm. Those images never leave me. They smolder inside and threaten to suffocate me with the smoke.

But it let me know Nicole never really cared. If I hadn't gone, I'd have been consumed by thoughts that she had, of not knowing. Or maybe she did. Maybe she really did care and life just got in the way, emotions. I can't claim to know what goes on in her head. Maybe I just want to believe Nicole didn't care, to make it easier on myself. At least David will know he doesn't have a chance with the girl and, who knows, maybe he'll accidentally have fun. He deserves it. From our talks he's stopped cutting himself, but I don't know how long that will last. If he's anything like me it'll build over time, until one bad day pushes you back into it. It hurts to think about him growing up like me. All over the world kids are. Is this just gonna keep going forever? Will we move to other planets and star systems and continue this same tribal charade we have since our inception?

When David asked his teachers for help, they ignored him. When he fought back against the popular kids the teachers put him in afterschool detention. It's the same shit it's always been. They tell you to ask for help but they don't mean it. You ask for help you're weak, you get laughed at. If you're a guy you're less of a man for not being able to bear it. And since no one really wants to help you, those that do try can only spit back the same lines. Lines you've heard a million little impersonal times.

Danielle posts one. A selfie of herself captioned "Don't give up, I believe in you" like it matters. But it doesn't mean

anything. She just wants likes, a way to further her ego. Bethany's story is a liquor store's worth of flavored vodka and alcoholic tea, "partying with the hubby" it says. More bruises from working with the special ed kids, more symbols of her unthanked assistance of the filth society tries to ignore. She lies to keep up her charade, but she's not with Alex. He's driving out to the woods to be with Danielle, and Bethany's sitting home drinking until she passes out. Like she's done every day the past month. And I'm driving back to her house, phone on silent. No distractions this time. Alex and Danielle are going to suffer for their sins.

dead souls

E-Lux is serenading me on the ride. It feels good. *Really good*. I'd be afraid of getting pulled over for speeding if Alex's house wasn't in the boonies where cops don't have anywhere to set up speed traps. Every single ounce of pain they put on other people is going to be poured back into them. Alex used to beat the shit out of me in school. He used to make fun of anyone that talked to me. Always reminded me of Nicole going out with my best friend. When I was locked in my house hurting myself, he was partying with girls in his. It was never just me either. If he saw weakness in you, you were his toy. Less than human.

He's grown up now but he's still the same, just hiding that abusive kid behind the façade of an adult. He posts sarcastic comments on Facebook to get his rocks off, mocking anyone he can that won't get him in trouble. He cheats on his wife for no reason other than the simple fact that he can get away with it. There's no humanity in him. Just a desire to bolster his own ego by reminding himself how much better he is than everyone else. That's exactly why he's fucking Danielle. Because everyone else wants her. Because it means, once again, he's above the insects he burns under his magnifying glass of primal power. No love, no life. People like him are already dead. Walking around thinking they're better than everyone else, focusing only primal urges and dopamine.

They aren't alive, they just exist. They don't suffer, they don't change, they don't grow. What's the point of them even being born? And what of Danielle, the girl genetically predisposition to good looks. Able to get anything she wants without raising a finger. What's her purpose? What's her story? She doesn't have one, and when she dies some other pretty girl will replace her as the thing for horny boys to follow around.

Someone with her lack of skills would have never gotten anywhere in life if she couldn't suck off dudes to move up the food chain. Everything she does just to feel powerful, to exert her force on others. She's never faced pain like people like me. What I'm going to do to her will be a start. Maybe I'll tie up Alex and strangle her with his intestines while he's still alive. I'll cut off her silicone tits he's so fond of and shove them down his throat.

I can peel off their fingernails and make them lick the wounds.

They'll learn. For a briefest of times they'll learn what it's like. My car rests itself in the gravel of one of the countless skeletons of gas stations dotting the backroads. I can cut through the woods to get to Alex's. I could vomit up my entire digestive tract from the pure anticipation. These trees flow by me like wind in a hurricane. I barely have time to think. But I can see his house in the distance closing in, like there wasn't even any space between me as I step to the windows. One by one the framed pictures of a broken house reveal their scenes. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. And there, in the bathroom. Sitting in the tub, Bethany. Is she naked? The water is running but she didn't plug it up. She's not even awake, the bottles lining the floor should be enough to kill a normal person. But she's habituated herself to it. It's another flavor of self-harm, more meaningless pain Alex and Danielle cause.

Once again, the garage door opens like it's welcoming me inside. But the scene is different this time, there's glass coating the floor like the ashes in front of my furnace. What exactly happened here? Pictures are broken. There's a hole by the door that leads inside the house proper. Probably caused by the wrench sitting on the jagged floor. The inside of the house isn't much better, clothes and furniture are strewn around like someone let a parade of cats march through. Torn up papers sit on the kitchen counter. Where are the keys? Bethany doesn't even notice me opening the door. The snide fear that she might be dead faded when I felt the pulse.

She needs to be alive, she needs to take the fall. This reminds me of the dope houses I got taken to when I was a kid. Minus the wacked out corpses that littered the trash piles. The entire place smells worse than the slop bucket my grandparents used to keep, worse than the fields of cow shit I used to wander to pseudo escape my confinement. It fucking reeks.

The keys are resting on the mockery of what used to be a bed. There's a knife plunged into the center and it looks like it had previously been welcomed into the myriad holes that dot the rest of the mattress. The knife was my first choice. But I found something far better when I stepped back into the garage. One of those flat head shovels is sitting in the corner. It's beautiful. My fingers running across echoes forth memories of the boy digging in the yard. My mother would show up to the house with her

boyfriend for the week, and I could sit outside digging. If my grandparents were arguing I could go outside and just dig. Dirt. Sometimes I found small rocks. I almost don't want to move. I can see it so clearly it my mind. I can feel it. The summer breeze blowing in my hair, the sound of metal tearing up ground. That smell. Like... youth?

I used to wander the junkyards as a kid, run around sawmills seeing what I could find. That smell was everywhere. A kind of mellow sourness. It feels so much like I'm back there. Young again, back before I got locked up. Back when I still went to school, when my biggest concerns were finding a way to get Nicole to like me and dreaming of being a forensic investigator. I don't really understand why my eyes try to water at the memories. I was foolish back then, I didn't fully know how the world worked. But I remember digging a hole so deep the ground was above my head. The warmth of the sun on my face in that moment was so breathtaking. I didn't think about Heather and her friends like I usually did. Didn't think about getting bullied. It was just me and the hole. The Earth.

There's no time to think about it. The shovel goes into the passenger seat of Bethany's car, her speakers play a compilation of pop hits from the 2000's. Someone kissed a girl, and she liked it. She really did. This car smells like soured wine and nicotine. The black ice air freshener isn't doing any favors. Some of the drive is gone. Driving to Alex and Danielle's little hiding place. What would the boy think of me? Sitting in the backseat listening to classic rock on 97.1, grandfather at the wheel and mother in the passenger. He's trying to rest his head on his hand like Leon from the opening of Resident Evil 4, but he's not tall enough. He doesn't say anything as his mother asks for money. Drug money. When grandfather mentions a smell, and mother says it's a crackhouse somewhere he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand why he's not allowed to go with his mother into the trailer she's walking into.

He cries in the backseat because he feels unwanted. He cries in the backseat because he thinks his mother loves the pills more than him. Cries because his grandfather wouldn't buy him a videogame but gave her money for drugs. I can't even hear the music. I can't hear anything. Just a subtle acknowledgement of the directions maps is giving me. My right eye forms silent god rays. It never got better, did it? No one ever hugged him, loved

him. I'm sorry for myself, that little kid that wasn't allowed to cry hiding it when he did. When mom came back out grandfather just dropped her off at another house, neither one talking to me. She just remembered to say bye. "See ya little man, be good." Be good. This moment is an eternity. I was never allowed to be good. I couldn't understand it. "Mom." Moses walks between the red sea on the bridge of my nose. Mom can't hear me anymore. I lost her too, even if I never really had her. If I could just say something to her. I want to hug her and scream out to the world "Mom, I love you" but I can't. Even if I could it wouldn't be true. I don't even know if she would return the favor. I need to blow my nose. The only thing I love is Nicole. If I get caught then that's all over. There's the mustang. Nicole is my last hope. She was always my only hope. To feel happiness for one solitary time in my entire life. She's not like the rest of these people.

She's a good person, isn't she? She hurt me more than anyone else. But she makes me feel something. The way she talks, the sleetling coils seething from her lips. If I could hear that forever. If I could be next to her forever, just staring into her eyes. She was always nice to me. Always the only one that ever seemed to so much as pretend I was a human being. Why did I bring a shovel? If Alex has a gun, he could easily pick me off, Danielle and Alex could easily take me 2v1. Why am I afraid? I want to die. *I want to die*. But if I do, I lose any chance I have with Nicole. Alex and Danielle will keep going. Keep living. Keep being happy. They don't deserve it. Useless fucking creatures. God damn it.

Turn around. Turn the car around. Go home. Stop it. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. I wonder if my Dad is still alive. My biological Dad. I remember having a snowball fight with him one winter. I remember my superhero gloves. But I can barely remember his face. Mom. Dad. I wish I knew why they didn't want me. I wish I knew what I fucked up the first time Nicole was talking to me. Everything I do I fuck up. I ruin it. God damn it. God *damn* it. I want to scream. The shovel is sitting in the passenger seat like a malevolent specter taunting me for being a coward, like always. What would Mom say if I meet her when I die? God. Why does this veil of weakness coat my cheeks?

Damn it. If I leave Nicole will just fuck off for someone else again. I'll be weak again. And none of my pain will matter, again. Why should Alex and Danielle get to be happy. Why the fuck

can't I be happy? Fuck them. Why should they get to be all lovey dovey? Why do they get to be all so pretty little perfect when I never even had a childhood? A life. If they kill me... any chance I have of one will die with it. Useless pieces of pearlescent trash. Disgusting filthy maggots riding around in your fancy cars mommy and daddy bought. Shovel. Break the wood. Tear the skin.

I can hear their radio, or a phone. Something is playing songs. Look at them talking. Laughing. Happy. No. You don't deserve it. You don't deserve it. I do. *I do*. So absolutely entrenched in their betrothal they don't even hear me crunching the leaves. Alex. Right behind you, *you*. That's not even a word. I can't even dignify it with a response. Dig the shovel into the back of his neck. Scream Danielle it won't do any good. No one can hear you, you're all alone out here. Beat him with it. Crush the skull in. SCREAM DANIELLE I CAN HEAR YOU. Running through the woods, not even towards the car. Does she know how I felt now? Do you feel it you putrid little fucking whore? She's never worked in her entire life. Never put any effort into anything she's ever done. Her phone is still blasting music back on that bloodstained plaid blanket made solid. I can hear her breathing. Her perfect hair she's so proud of is sticking out from behind a tree.

Die. I want you to die. The shovel swings so hard into it that it clips through her neck and rebounds from the bark, stinging my hand. I'm going to make her pay. Not even trying anymore. Just lying there crying. Crying that she doesn't want to die. Praying to god. God couldn't save her now anyway, holding her neck like she can stop the bleeding. Twitching. Writhing around in her own piss and shit screaming to be saved. Crying. Suffering...

I've never felt so lost. So far past the point of redemption. Why was I smiling. Why do I want her to suffer? She looks so pathetic. A lifetime of thinking her and Alex were monsters. Like she's some sort demon meant to be purged. But she's so scared. I can't take it back. I can't take it back. What the fuck am I doing? She's not a monster. She doesn't deserve to suffer any more than Lily, or Shelby did. Or me. She didn't deserve any of this. Alex didn't deserve any of this. I can't stop it now. I can't tell her she's gonna be okay. I can't tell her I'm sorry. I can't even force a sound from my vocal cords. The words build up and pitter out

like rain into a volcano. When I put the shovel on her head she starts screaming louder.

The same scream I've heard in the hospital. That last desperate realization you're going to die. The guttural existential dread of being wiped from existence. "Oh god please" comes out screeching as I put my foot on the shovel, and the shovel through her head. She's gone. Her and Alex both. Forever... I feel cold. Like my entire body is below absolute zero. Some sort of song is still playing, faintly. It's almost drowned out by the rustling of leaves. Am I breathing? My eyes scan the treeline, but I'm alone. Just bark and leaves. And me. What do I keep looking for? The shovel is weightless in my hand. Alex isn't moving. He isn't breathing. "I'm sorry" says the voice to nowhere, heard by no one. It drowns out in the empty void of decay. They can't hear me. The trees can't hear me. No one is left to hear my cries, there's no God to smite me. No devil to reach up and drag me into the abyss.

Is this me? Fingers stain the face of the man with my skin. I can see it in Bethany's window. Blood. Meaningless blood, coating every inch of me. I can't feel myself, but the reflection touches his face. He runs his hands from his eyebrows to his neck. It's not me. It can't be me. I wouldn't do this, it's the beast. He did it. He made me do it. He's making me park Bethany's car back inside her garage. He's making me put the shovel next to her, to drip blood all over the house. He's staring at the pictures of Alex on the floor knowing that's the only thing left of a man he killed.

He's not me. I wouldn't kill them. I wouldn't frame an innocent girl for murder. I couldn't.

I do know that for the sympathy of one living being, I would make peace with all. I have love in me the likes of which you can scarcely imagine and rage the likes of which you would not believe. If I cannot satisfy the one, I will indulge the other.

Mary Shelly's Frankenstein

wayward son

There is a place far deeper, and far colder, than non-existence. It's you. It's the blackest recesses of your face when you stare into a mirror. It's that deepest, darkest, most hideous part of your soul you try to hide away. To hide from. All the negativity you hold, every thought of ill will for other people. Every fear is born from it. Even the most miniscule amount of hate found its birthplace there. Try and deny it exists. Try and pretend you aren't like other people. It just grows. It just waits. Someday you'll get mad at your lover and lash out. You'll beat your kids. When you're alone and steal. When you curse your friends. When you lie about things you have no part of for gossip. Someday that blackest part of you will overtake the light.

When it does who ends up hurt the most, you? Your friends, lovers, family? Does it matter? I've been a victim my entire life. It was comforting assuming the world was out to get me. But I played the part. When I sat alone in my room praying Marty would die of cancer, that he'd suffer and die for daring to be with the girl I love. I blamed the beast. When I drive home and think of how hilarious it would be if Jake had a heart attack, or got ran over by a truck. If all of his family was to just up and die in the most violent ways. I blamed the beast. When I puked in an empty hotel room, silently hoping Jake would abuse Nicole, give her an STD, or otherwise make her life miserable. Make her regret not choosing me. I blamed the beast. The inhuman entity taking refuge in my head. I cursed it for all the hate it felt towards Nicole for dating someone like Derrick, and not me.

In that moment it hated her, hated that she would rather date someone that abused her over me. It didn't care about her feelings, it just wanted to be happy. Even if the feeling was reactionary anger towards sadness, that though briefly existed inside my head. And now I sit staring in front of a mirror. Alex and Danielle's blood won't come off my skin. These cuts are the deepest I have ever made. Deeper and deeper. The blood pools itself in the cracks that snake through the linoleum. But they won't bring the dead back to life. They won't kill the beast. I can't even feel them. I want to hurt it. I want to die. I have the revolver laying right beside me. But when the barrel rests against my head, I

hesitate. I've been hesitating the past 6 hours. Because I don't really want to die. I want to kill some part of me. The part of me that wants to be loved. The part of me that hates. The beast. My grandmother used to say it was the devil getting into me, a demon that was taking me over to turn me to sin.

When I told her I wanted money to go to the dance with a girl. That was sin, it was Satan inviting himself in. I had to resist it. But it's not. It's the boy, the last forsaken remnants of the child I never was. He wants to be loved. He wants to be with Nicole, like he did when he was a kid. There it goes again. "He." Like it's a different person. But it's not. It's just me. It's always been me. I told myself I killed Lily and Shelby because they were suffering. Because they were never going to be happy. That's true. But I'm afraid. Before I killed Lily I didn't have any purpose, no motivation. I was going to kill myself. I'm afraid the only reason I started this was because I wanted to distract myself from the call of the void. But that's not true either, is it? I really do genuinely think I've done the right thing for them.

Then why am I afraid of dying? If I really think life is meaningless why do I fixate on Nicole, why am I so obsessed with being happy if I know in the end it won't even matter? How do I justify Alex and Danielle? I keep trying to think of reasons. I was trying to believe they were monsters, that I was doing the world a favor. But it was just an excuse. I didn't care about how much they hurt other people. I cared about how much they hurt me. There was no justice. I was angry. I've been angry my entire life. Angry that people ignored me. Angry that people hurt me. Angry that people didn't like me. The razor slides through my skin like piss in snow.

There's no beast. No monster. It's just me. An angry child lashing out. I wanted to hurt them because I've been hurt. Because I hate the idea that other people are allowed to enjoy life. I can't go on. I don't want to. The gun goes to my head, the hammer cocks back. But I won't let myself pull the trigger. I want to stop it. All of it. If I die other people will continue to suffer. But I have no right to be the one to fight it, if I myself still feel these things. If the part of me that still feels continues, I'll never really be able to do this the way it needs to be done. Indifferent. No anger, no picking favorites. Just the peace of death to everyone. We're all animals. None of us deserve to suffer. Nicole is the only good thing in my life. The only good person I've ever met, the

only one that's ever been nice to me. To ever even try to understand me. The real me.

I want her to be happy, but I can't bear to be without her. And the thought of her being happy with someone else hurts. No one is here to tell me what to think. To mock me. But I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed I love her. Ashamed I need her. I'll keep doing this until me and her are the last two people on Earth, and when it comes down to it? I won't be able to kill her. She's too precious to me. I have to accept that part of myself. I'm human, aren't I? I'm capable of feeling love. But I don't deserve a chance to be happy. I spent my entire life letting myself get walked over, abused, beaten. And it wasn't their fault. It was mine. My psychology professor in college always talked about how women want strong men. She always said that no girl would ever date a man that actually loved her, because there's no challenge. The weaker men would only ever get girls when they had their fun with the strong. I believed her because it was easier than admitting I was undesirable.

When she asked me if I had a crush on anyone, she laughed at me. Said I should give up. That I'd never have Nicole. She said bullying was natural, that it thinned the weak in olden times. Maybe she was right. But I have to try. I can't justify it with my actions. I can't proclaim that life isn't worth living and then stay alive because a girl makes me feel like it is. But I can't die. If I could just find a way to rid myself of that part of me, maybe I could go through with it in earnest. But I need to think. There's a storm coming soon. There always is on Halloween. It used to make me happy knowing the other kids couldn't go trick or treating either. But they deserve to. I wanted to take David out, but it'll be too cold for him to walk around in a costume.

I need to bandage these cuts, stop myself from bleeding out. Mom can't hear me. But it's neat to imagine she can. To talk to her while I wrap gauze around myself. She can't answer any of my questions. She can't tell me anything. Can't give me advice. I can thank her for introducing me to some of my favorite bands, tell her we have something in common as I put on an album. But it's too late now. I can't try to make amends with any of my family. I wish I could tell them I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm different from them. Sorry I wasn't the boy they wanted me to be. I'm sorry to the teachers in school that had to put up with me. Sorry to the other kids that had to be around me.

I was different, always. Maybe it was being raped by Heather and her friends. The daughters of my Grandfather's friends. The random woman on my Grandfather's fishing trips when he left me alone in the restaurant. I'm sorry I didn't enjoy it. I'm sorry I didn't enjoy kissing Lydia. That's such a most predominantly defining source of pain. Not being normal and knowing it. Those people with down syndrome Danielle used to mock, they don't fully realize they're not normal. The mentally handicapped some of the nurses and CNAs actively revile. They don't understand why you hate them. But the obese people that can't walk through a store without glares. Transsexuals and gays that can't sleep at night without thinking about all the people that wish they were dead. They know. Just like me. And they can't change it, that's a part of who they are. And they're hated for it. For being human, like the rest of us.

We find reasons to discriminate against something as minor as hair color, religion, melanin levels. Things that are part of people. But I'm sorry I wasn't normal growing up. I wish I was. Even when I was a kid I knew, when I walked around the hallways and all the other kids had insults to give me. Hearing the entire class laugh when I mispronounced a word thanks to the speech impediment I used to have. I wasn't normal, and I apologize. It hurt so much to know that. To know some part of me was just...off. I couldn't change it, no matter how hard I tried. When I tried to talk about the same things the other kids did it came out wrong. I repeated the same jokes, but I must have fucked them up because no one laughed. I tried to make people laugh so they'd like me, but it just gave them more fuel to make fun of me with. I tried to be nice to them, so they'd like me, but it just made it easier for them to use me.

When the gym teacher pulled me out in the middle of the class and had all the kids gather around so he could look me in the eyes and say none of them were laughing with me, they were laughing at me. I already knew that. But... it was interaction, acknowledgement I was real. When the math teacher had all the kids choose who they liked, who they wanted to be partnered with, who they didn't like, who they didn't want to ever have to sit next to in class. It didn't surprise me when she said no one chose me. That most of the school said they would never want to be my friend. That the kids I chose said they'd never choose me.

Being sorry is weakness.

When I worked my first job, all of my coworkers made fun of me. Taking stuff to one department and having one of them immediately tell me to leave. That they hated me. Having my food smacked out of my hands so they could all laugh at me. Constantly being told I was a failure, I couldn't do my job right, even though I was trying. The store manager telling me that, if I ever tried to leave my department, I wouldn't be able to go anywhere else because all the other department leads hated me. I understood. When they started telling a new cashier I was a rapist, when one of the other workers started spreading a rumor I was sleeping with her. Or wanted to. That I was going around telling people she was easy, in an open relationship. When she believed them... I wasn't surprised. Getting told by girls to stop talking to them, that they didn't want to go out with me. Even though I wasn't interested. It wasn't surprising. I just wanted a friend. But I'm not normal. It hurts so much. Trying to be normal and having people just be instantly disgusted by the uncanny valley nature of my attempts.

Being told I couldn't work certain days because I'd just be a bother everyone else. I'm sorry. The world would have been a better place if I had died when I was little kid, unable to swim, drowning in that pool. But my grandfather saved me. I know I'm just a burden to normal people. A disgrace to humanity. But I'm scared, okay? Too scared to kill myself. Too scared to do the best good deed I could. It's why when I got my car I used to drive as fast as I could around the most dangerous road in town. Hoping I'd crash and die. It's why I started smoking. It's why I started drinking. I took the bare basics in framing Bethany, if they look into it even a little all the evidence would point to me.

I don't want to die but I know I'm not normal, I know that no matter how hard I try I never will be. I'm just wired differently. I put myself in bad situations to try and goad the universe into doing it for me. Because some part of me was always hoping I could have Nicole. She's the reason I stay alive. "She's a liar. A manipulator." Maybe all those things people said about her were true. But I don't care. That's not the side of her I see. She's not like that. The only one that's ever shown me real kindness isn't a bad person. Just for once in my life I don't want to ruin something, but can I keep being myself? I've been told a thousand times that no girl actually wants someone that's "being themselves" but there's not a point otherwise. I want Nicole to like me, not some

fabrication. But when I was being myself before she left me for Jake.

Maybe it was the wrong time. I complained about him just being a rando, and she said she'd known him for a long time. All I could think about at the time was that she'd been playing me the entire time, like my psych professor said about girls using guys crushing on them for support. Maybe she was telling the truth when she said she wanted to go out with me and couldn't because of Marty. I want to tell myself it was Jake, and she was just mincing words. I want to believe her when she said she didn't want to hurt me. Maybe it would be best if I tried. If I don't get arrested, I could just put all this behind me and try with her. To feel happiness for once in my life. To eat at a restaurant and not feel like the entire place is crashing in on me. Me and her could get coffee at the country boy overlook and maybe for once it my life it won't be tasteless.

But I don't want to continue this. Not really. Not when I'm not sure why I'm doing, not when I have doubts about myself.

I wish I would have met you

There's a part of me that almost wishes I had given Mr. Houdini a chance instead of Jake. But I don't really know if I mean that. It's like no matter what I do I keep fucking it up. I'd have fucked things up with him too, I probably will if I give him a chance now. But there's something off about him. He's much more confident than he was last time, much more outgoing. I bet he doesn't even really want me anymore, he's probably been with better girls than me. I keep thinking about whether or not I blew my chance. It'd be my luck I suppose.

You know what I want in life, what I really want? I want to be happy. That's it. It's all I've ever wanted, to just not be a fuck up. It feels like no matter what choices I make they just keep being wrong. When I was choosing what I wanted to do in life, I wanted to go into forensics. I had the University set up, had the housing. Everything. But my mom talked me into Nursing instead. She said I wouldn't get a job, wouldn't get good money, wouldn't this and that. I listened. When Malissa told me to go out with Derrick, I listened. And he never even cared about me at all. When Malissa set me up with Aaron, I listened. And he never cared.

No one has ever really cared about me, even my parents. I keep telling myself dad did but sometimes I don't know about him either. I want to be happy, I want someone to care about me. I want to believe he wants me. I want to believe he cares. But everyone else has fucked me over, why should I believe he wouldn't? Why should I trust anyone? What did I do in my past lives to so astoundingly fuck me over in this one? I cried myself to sleep at night after Derrick left me, cried in school. I made cuts on my arm so deep I honestly thought I was going to die some days. But I told myself it would get better. I stopped when I hit vein. I can't give up. No matter what I do I cannot just give up and roll over. I deserve to be happy.

I thought Marty would help me with that, but he didn't. He didn't have any drive or desire beyond sitting home smoking weed and playing games at his parents' house. And it left me stuck with my mom for years. Jake had a house, a good job. He was a way out. I'm not a monster, I chose him because I liked him. I was attracted to him. I wanted someone that wouldn't use me like Marty did, just a money dispensing sex doll. I couldn't risk that again. The vampire might have escaped his tomb, but he still lived there. Hell, he still does. We've talked about his parents before, why does he still live there? They sound like assholes and, if I were him, I would have burned the place down and moved. I've been to his place at least once a week since I went the first time. He even took me home while drunk, and he didn't make any moves. Maybe it's the way I look.

I only really wash my hair every other day, washing it too much is

bad for you. But I can see the frizz in the mirror. I can see the fat in my stomach, on my arms. My legs. I can see every little pockmark, pimples forming on my forehead. I shaved this morning, but I can feel the hairs coming back. Why am I so disgusting? Why is it that no matter what I do my body rejects every attempt at self-improvement? Why do the other girls have it so easy? I wore braces for 10 years, and now I have to wear a fucking retainer when I sleep. My teeth want to go back. I almost forgot my lunch.

Why does he like me?

Even if he did before, why should he now? I hurt him. I know I did. What the fuck is his problem that someone like him looks at someone like me and says “ah yes, that’s a girl for me.” If he knew me, really knew me, he wouldn’t. God what the fuck is my problem? I wish Dad hadn’t died. He used to care about me, he would have known what to do. But he’s gone. It’s funny, don’t you think? I’ve had a boy lusting over me his entire life, I have a nice car and live in a house I didn’t pay for. This French Vanilla Latte is delicious, the speakers play my favorite album. Mom used to buy me everything I wanted. We lived like shit, sure, but I could get almost anything I wanted if I asked. I had the best car in high school, the best grades, I was voted most likely to succeed. But I’m not happy.

Why? What the fuck? I enjoy myself, but it’s never... happy. It’s like, I keep walking around faking my smile hoping someday it’ll be real. That someday a part of my brain will click and go “Wait this is good, we aren’t sad anymore.” I loved Derrick. I’ve loved every boy I’ve been with, mostly. But it fades. It always fades. If not for me, for them. It feels like I keep repeating myself. I keep thinking the same things, over and over. Thinking of every little miniscule thing that could go wrong. It’s not my fault. Why should it be? If the world is out to get me what can I do about that, I’m one girl compared to over 7 billion people. And it sucks even more thinking about him. I know I hurt him, when I got into a relationship with Jake, he acted like I never cared about him. I did. I really did, I almost kissed him. I have feelings.

Do you think it’s easy knowing in a few days I’ll be eating thanksgiving dinner with a man I don’t love anymore? Do you think it was easy lying to myself and telling Marty I loved him, when I was thinking of ways to leave him? It’s not. Every picture I take is a portrait of imperfections. I hear my southern accent selling me out as a fucking hick trying to be something she’s not every time I speak. I used to pray when I was kid, I prayed and prayed and prayed. And none of them were answered, and you know what? That’s fucking terrifying. I don’t want to cease to exist. I really, really, don’t. But the thought just kept eating away at me, that maybe there wasn’t really a God. That maybe in the end all of this will just be for nothing and I’ll not be a thing anymore. I cry at night thinking about it. I cry in the shower with a razor blade telling myself it’d

be better to just let it happen, that there's no reason to go on. But there is.

I'm not weak. I won't give in, not ever. I'll keep going, even if I have to crawl. I've been put in a piece of shit world that doesn't care about me. None of this matters in the slightest. Every cut I've made, every reason I've had to do so, isn't going to mean anything when I'm gone. Even if I'm never really happy, I have to try. What's the point of just giving up anyway, if I'm already here? I might as well make the most of it. I don't even know why I'm pulling into this graveyard to see Dad, but it makes me happy. Even if he can't hear me.

The vampire is here again. Same grave as the night I saw him last time. I'm not going to talk to him, again. I didn't even see his car in the parking lot, did he walk? Is it rude to eavesdrop? He's talking about how much he wishes he could talk to them. He met someone called Eric the other day when he was at the school. Eric is doing well. There's a bird in one of trees, singing. The wind blows against my face with the slow static of leaves. I can hear a field in the distance blowing too. Mr. Vampire's bangs gently swaying, kind of flickering almost. It's chilly. I can hear him walking away. Hesitation. I should have talked to him, but here I am sulking with my back to some random grave thinking about how funny it is.

I've seen him here twice and I didn't talk to him either time. What are the odds? The coincidentalness of it all is enough to get a laugh out of me. Enough to put a smile on my clown face. The bird is still sitting there singing along, not a care in the world. I tried to join it, but I was never really that good at whistling. Sorry buddy. Moments like this are why I have to keep going. The pure idiocy of it. It's like a dream. I feel like the shittiness is never going away. No matter the amount of effort I put into pushing it away, the toilet is clogged and it's just gonna get worse. But sometimes it gives a little bit, sometimes a bit of the shit goes down and you can smell the air freshener. You know what? If he doesn't make a move I will. Even if it all goes downhill, I'll know I tried. Who knows, if I had tried when I was a kid maybe I wouldn't have ended up like this.

There's no real way of knowing that however, no way of knowing that it wouldn't have just ended up making it worse. There's no way of knowing anything for certain in life, just random chaos that aligns in positive and negative outcomes. As a kid it used to feel like it wasn't worth it to fight, if it was all meaningless anyway. But you know what? Fuck it. If none of this matters I won't remember embarrassing myself when I die. I may fuck up, I might screw everything over. But it's a might, not a guarantee. That's the joy of chaos, you never know what's going to happen. You just keep going and seeing what happens, and it doesn't matter if you fuck up cause you have an entire life to keep trying.

Long sighs like this make me feel better. I'm not a kid anymore, I'm a big girl. I can make my own decisions. Even if he rejects me, even if

he just uses me too, even if we end up hating each other and he never talks to me again. I'll have tried. Maybe for a few moments we can make each other happy. It's worth it, isn't it? To try. To not let all this fucking bullshit drag you down too. I deserve to be happy, I'll keep trying regardless of what happens between us. That's all you can do sometimes.

your feelings and mine are all lonely

Bethany confessed. There was a newspaper in the Country Boy Overlook this morning that said she admitted to killing her husband and his mistress in a drunken crime of passion. The churchgoers are using their deaths as a way to try push for us to be a dry county again. Like it would do any good. Me and all the other “dangerous alcoholics” just went a few minutes south of the county line to get it before. Funnily enough I saw a bunch of these concerned citizens at Bicker’s Liquor the other day when I was buying a bottle of whiskey. I didn’t drink it though, it’s just sitting in my grandfather’s old room. I want to hate them for it. Hate them for the double think.

I want to hate them for not doing even the most basic investigation into the deaths. I wanted to be caught by now, I think. I should have been. But they’re just animals, it’s not done out of malice is it? They’re just doing what they’ve been told. Doing what their preacher tells them. What their parents told them. It makes them feel better, makes them think their lives has meaning. They stand around talking about how Bethany killed Alex and Danielle, gossiping and talking about who did and didn’t deserve it. There was a girl laughing at Danielle’s funeral about the time they were with some boys on a lake and Danielle accidentally hit one of them in the face with a Walleye. A boy was talking about how him and Alex got super drunk at a bonfire party once and accidentally puked on the radio.

I heard a lot of stories like that. I feel bad. The flowers were plastic, I’m pretty sure Danielle’s casket was too. The preachers each gave different eulogies, but they were basically the same in content. They spoke about the peace coming to the deceased, but the words were more meant for the living. I sat in between people I’d never met, fully aware I killed the body in the closed box. But I stared at the picture in the golden frame and I didn’t feel anything. I tried to, but they’re both not suffering anymore. I killed them for the wrong reasons, but in the end, it was for the best.

What about the people that are left? Lily didn’t have anyone, and Shelby’s mom was too far gone to care. But most people, normal people, they make friends in school and keep

some of those friends into adulthood. Even if you drift apart, it'll still hurt when you learn your childhood friend is gone. Maybe this was damned from the start. I need to cut it off with Lydia before she tries to go any farther, but we're going to see a movie tonight. Is it true that I don't want to hurt her? It's not. I don't want to feel bad about telling her I don't like her. I don't want to hurt myself. I kept telling myself I didn't have friends, kept telling myself that no one liked me. But it's been my fault the entire time. I have David now don't I? Even if he's just a kid. Plus, there's Nicole, the girl I've loved since I was a kid. She's so close now I can almost feel it.

David won that contest thanks to me. I waited until the last second and bought more than the other kid that would've won. I was so excited, and he was so happy. I was sitting in the bleachers clapping when he went to the center of the gym to get his moment in the spotlight. It was nostalgic. Most of the funds go to the higher up staff and pleasure centers for them, so the bleachers are the exact same ones from when I was in school. There's still an ocean's worth of trash in and under them. I was sitting on the same side I was when they were doing sex ed in there, back then my grandmother denied the school the ability to teach us so me and the rest of the rejects went and laid down looking over between the gap in sets towards the kids that did. The teachers themselves didn't believe in it so the state sent a video they were projecting onto a little sheet. We couldn't hear anything, hell we couldn't even see anything.

That day was really weird, thinking about it. They brought all the boys in my grade to the gym and had the girls set up in classrooms, but all the kids whose parents said no got taken to the bleachers in the gym adjacent to the boys that were allowed. I remember that dimly lit viewpoint focusing on the glowing square providing the only light in the room, bouncing off the floor and shadowing the wall. I remember the tomgirl next to me caged behind the bars blocking the light on her face. What was her story? She's a lesbian now, but that's incidental. What kind of life has she lived, what kind of person is she? I remember the gym teacher yelling at us to sit back so we couldn't see. I can still smell that grimy musty smell the bleachers have.

When we got out one of the basketball players was talking with us, revealing the unholy information he'd found. "It gets all hard and then as it's getting bigger it bounces like" he said as he

did a small wave motion with his hand. We all laughed talking about it, all of us. I'd already had sex, rape admittedly, but I knew the basics. I'd sort of filled myself in more as time went on. I also knew I couldn't tell the other boys, even if I wanted to play it off like I enjoyed it they wouldn't believe me.

I remember sitting here in a scooby doo costume my aunt bought me, hiding down in it because I was scared of the other costumes, at least until one of the teachers forced me to get out from the replicant dog's turtle shell because I was sweating and obviously uncomfortable. Why are these some of my only memories? I didn't even notice the day going by. It just went by, like me. Room by room clocks tick on the wall. Hospitals are so dehumanizing, so clean. Every patient is a basically a number, ticking down like the second hand. Lydia is waiting for me in the parking garage, sitting by her car smoking. We're not supposed to smoke in here but cigarette butts litter the concrete like rice in a carcinogenic wedding ceremony. Providing us future patients, providing us images of our death.

You don't understand what it's like. Have you ever seen a loved one hooked up to tubes, wheezing every breath? Have you seen a man breathing through a tube moaning in pain unable to move? Someone that can't move sitting in a bent-up bed unable to scream as they shit themselves in the night, being turned over by an indifferent 20 something chewing sugar free gum? I can hear them dying, it never stops. They come in, they get their x rays. I act like I can't prove anything before results come in. They blow their life savings for a cure, their family goes hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, they get hooked up to monitors and call signs, and they die. They keep dying. There's no relief, no respite. Whenever the head manages to pierce the surface a wave crashes down to bring me under.

Lydia wants to take her car the theater. There's a vape with a soft green LED plugged into a purple charger. "Hey wanna try this? It's really good" Lydia asks blowing a cloud of unknown potential, "it's got Raspberry in it." It makes her taste like it too. She sings along to the radio. With the tune of a melancholic love song, she sings softly, staring into my eyes at a stoplight. Tell her no. Tell her no. Don't put your arms around her as you're standing in line. Don't smile when you order a large popcorn to share. It's not real.

Why am I doing this? Why do I hold her in the corner of an

oily theater? I don't care about her. Why can't I feel anything from her kiss? Please, just let me feel something. Stop these annuitant images of Nicole kissing Jake. Stop thinking of her standing with him behind a thanksgiving spread. Don't let that thought trail you to her spreading her legs.

Don't imagine all the times she's been held by not you, just like this. Don't think about her staring at a boy with Lydia's eyes. Focus on the movie. Focus on Lydia. Focus on literally anything else. The Golden Idols. When I was kid I begged my grandfather to take me to see it. A fog of cigarette smoke blurs in the evening after school. I just got out of afterschool detention for fighting back against Derrick, I was reading books about space instead of doing homework. I already finished it anyway. We had to leave early because I started crying, there were noises from the other theaters that sounded like thunder. I can feel it. Grandfather's mad, "Fucking pussy, do you know how embarrassing that is?" he whispers in a snarl, "20 fucking dollars and 'boo hoo oh thunder' little cocksucker"

He gives me a spanking with his bare hands on the side of the road, the McDonalds is open. 2 large cokes from the drive-thru. Don't cry. Drink the soda and don't cry. If you cry it'll make him angrier. Another jump scare, Lydia nuzzles up closer, listening to my heart. My arm wraps tighter around her waist. I can feel her breathes. So many men would kill to have a girl like this in their arms. We complain to each other about how cheap movies have become. Generic spooky rollercoaster rides. She holds me tighter and kisses me, her face is wet. Tears. "Do you like me" comes a whisper, "I like you."

Of course I like you, why wouldn't I? Why would I lie to one of my coworkers? Why am I thinking of ways to let down the hottest nurse in the hospital? Why don't I really want to. I'm weak, worthless. No better than anyone else. I don't want to tell her no because if Nicole doesn't want to go out with me, I'll be alone. I stare into the dusty faux curtains lining walls. The popcorn kernels and solidifying remnants of sodas spilled before. Away from the underlying realizations. This is probably what Nicole was doing, wasn't it?

If Nicole does end up wanting to go out with me it'll hurt Lydia just like it hurt me, to just see me and Nicole together one day feeding fishes or something. Me smiling, Lydia crying realizing all these times we've hung out were just my back up

plan. That's what my problem is. I can't let go of Nicole even if I tried.

I have a detonator in my house for the bombs I've been building all year. I know what I need to do with them, but I can't risk losing Nicole. I won't. This has all been for nothing. This entire year. If Nicole says yes, I'll forget it ever happened, move past murders. Lives I've ended, stories I've cut short. Memories I've erased from this earth forever. "I need to tell you something." Lydia says when we pass under the lights, away from yellowed glow of the box office. She turns on her car and stares into fogged up windshield. "It's cold out tonight, isn't it." She says turning on her playlist. "what is it?" "I..." tears form in her eyes and her voice breaks, "I have type-2 herpes. I've only had one outbreak, but I have it. Please don't be mad, I'm sorry"

"You have herpes?"

"I'm sorry please. I just"

"What the fuck Lydia why didn't you tell me?"

She screams "I'm sorry"

Tears fall down as she whimpers "Please I know I should have told you, but I wanted to be with someone again, every time I tell someone they stop talking to me"

"No shit they stop talking to you, you're lucky we never fucked"

"I know it's bad, but I just feel so unlovable, please. I'm sorry just-"

"No Lydia we can't, I'm not risking it."

"We can still go out, I'll just give you hand jobs and stuff. You don't even have to touch me. "

"Lydia no, I'm not"

But she's already started sliding her hands in my jeans. My resistance isn't real. I want to feel something, but I don't. She sings to a song from the empty speakers. I need to tell her I'm not into it. "please, please" she grabs my hand to push it under her shirt. To meaningless skin. It's just an exocrine gland. Feel something. *Please* feel something. My dicks hard, but that's just instinct. It doesn't feel anything either. Another song blasts full volume through her radio, she sings brokenly into my dying face. Her voice wavering softly to the beating heart. "Stop, Lydia." I say, pulling her arm out against her pleads, "I can't do this" Lydia's tears come out silently, they sell out her understood beliefs. My face hides in my hand as I ask her to drive me back to my car.

Nicole. That's the only thing that stopped me. If I risked it and wound up with herpes I'd be just like Lydia. She's tainted, I can't let her taint me too. I am not a good person. I was playing Lydia just like Nicole was playing me, knowing full well Nicole is coming to my house tomorrow. What do I even say for myself? I don't deserve happiness. I don't even deserve to feel, not if I'm gonna be like this. I'm sorry Lydia. You deserve so much better than me, but you'll never get it. The second guy she slept with gave her an incurable disease. Now she'll never be able to sleep with anyone truthfully again. She's been cursed. No wonder she's never told anyone though. If any of the other staff knew she'd be looked at like a leper. Some sort of whore.

What the fuck is my life? Society looks at people like Lydia as if monsters. I feel ugly but I'm handsome, I feel worthless, but I have good job and a house. Hell, if Lydia's anything to go by I even have a big dick. I knew that. But goddamn it, it's not fair. I don't care about any of that. The only thing I care about is Nicole. I'm Christ and she's the cross. This is my own fault, Lydia didn't deserve anything like this. No wonder she hasn't told anyone, people would shun her, they'd look down on her, all over something that isn't even her fault. Why do I feel like a piece of garbage left out to dry? I'm selfish. I don't even care about the people I've killed, do I? I'm not sure anymore. When Lydia told me, the first thing on my mind was that she was using me. How disgusting, I thought. I was so angry because it seemed like the girl in the driver's seat was just using me because she thought I'd be easy. But I was using her.

I was thinking about her feelings, but I wasn't actually considering them. It's just me, me, me, me. Numero uno. I've been playing God, letting emotions get in the way. Lily? Oh well obviously I think she doesn't deserve to suffer, so I'll kill her. Shelby's a nice person I'll kill her too. Alex and Danielle are assholes, they need to be punished. Feelings, emotions, love, hate. That's where all of it comes from isn't it? Pain. Love is the only thing I still feel. I haven't been able to hate for weeks. Not the same way I used to. If Nicole rejects me again maybe I should shoot myself with my grandfather's revolver. I should have done it years ago anyway. I can't do anything, I'm just a human. I might not be normal, but I still am. Picking and choosing who I kill isn't any better than people dying on their own, hell it might be worse.

What about David? He's going on a school trip right

before Christmas break, that's a good deed isn't it? After all, I was the only reason he won. No. My fingers scrap cells from my face. I'm not better than all those parents that cheat their kids to the top. I'm no better than the bullies. No better than anyone else. God, please. *Please*.

God isn't real.

I can't pray to anyone. I can't talk to anyone but me. David's VIP of the entire school system now, he's happy. I'm happy because he's happy, because he's better than the other kids. Come on. Calm down. I'll kiss Nicole tomorrow, everything will be okay. Everything will be okay. I'll be okay. It'll be fine. I want to hurt people. I want to hurt them because I've been hurt, but I won't anymore. Me and Nicole will kiss just like in my dreams. I'll move on, I'll get better. Come on. I can't focus. I feel so disjointed, I can't even see my surroundings. I need to think. I need to get inside my house and shut the door. Lock the door. Pet the cat. Don't open the bourbon. Don't drink this away like you used to. Focus. I'm falling apart. I have to face it, if I don't it'll just get worse. If no one wanted to help me, I'll help myself.

I just need to think.

all apologies

I had dreams again last night. I don't really remember most of them. It's stress, you know. Shelby and Lily showed up to my house at night to pick me up, Alex and Danielle were sitting in the back. Shelby was beautiful in the moonlight and talking to me like we were friends, we were all about to go out and get drinks before heading to a concert. The moon wasn't in the sky, it was just stars. The entire horizon, all the trees, and the grass. It was all stars except for where I was looking. Shelby was smiling. She gave me a hug before I hopped in the back. We were all joking about the good times we had working at a store that doesn't exist, just floating through space. Shelby's hair glowed iridescently as she turned corners, dark flow brushing her hair sweetly. I don't remember when I woke up, or why.

I sing along to payphone on the drive to the grocery store. The butcher cuts me and Nicole two steaks. The old floorboards have been there, untended, since I was a kid, and they sound quite like they want to let you fall to the basement. I remember being a kid and one of the employees telling me my grandfather went downstairs to use the bathroom, I remember falling down every step. Nicole wants me to pick her up from an old gas station, probably so no one sees us, I guess. Just in case I don't live up to expectations, again. It's fine. Talking to her comes so naturally, like she's my soulmate. My other half. It's cheesy, but it feels like it. She slithers around me while I prepare the food, her frizzy hair bobbing rhythmically to She Past Away. For someone that doesn't enjoy food, I can cook a mean steak. It flutters the muscle to hear Nicole complementing me. Staring in her eyes as she eats something I made, smiling at me.

I tried to get up and get a snack while we were watching a movie, but she shoved my head back down on her lap. For the first time this couch doesn't seem like a useless investment. Stroking my hair as we watch TV, Jake doesn't even know she's here. She wants to go for a walk. "Might as well put global warming to good use, right?" she says. She makes the grey world so bright. It's like as soon as she stepped outside the overcast went away. The sky opens up just so the sun can see her better.

So much of my life I've felt hopeless. I took every insult to

heart, ever believing that nothing would ever go my way. It always seemed pointless to me, to look on the bright side. To try and find positives where I couldn't. I think that's why I've always been fixated on Nicole. She's perfect. Her hair, her skin. She glows. I've lived my entire life surrounded by nothing but darkness, and she shines a light in for me to crawl out. Her voice as she talks is nothing short of a miracle. Hope. I can feel it. Sitting in the sun with her. Talking about meaningless things. Far away from anyone that could dare hurt us, just looking down at the fish occasionally surfacing in the pond, waiting to be fed. I don't feel sick. No images of my death to haunt me, no thoughts of a wasted life. She doesn't feel like Lydia. She feels like an electric chair, killing everything away.

Back when we were first talking, when she was still dating Marty, she sent me snaps of her eating food in restaurants. She talked about eating day old waffles from waffle house. I used to hate her for that. Those snaps were from when she was going on dates with Jake. There's a waffle house right next to where he lives. Where they live. I think about that sometimes. She was cheating on her boyfriend with Jake and talking to her backup plan while at Jake's house. It used to make me angry. But it doesn't. She's human, she has feelings. It doesn't matter if she's really been with as many guys as people say she has, none of those rumors matter, she's still the same girl I've always known. Why should I be insecure about her sex life? What matters is she makes me happy, just by being close to me. I probably would have done the same. I have. I texted Nicole while at Lydia's before. I've sent Lydia pictures of the outfit I was planning on wearing when Nicole was coming over that day.

Human nature is a funny thing. I think she wants me now, and I really don't care if it hurts Jake. I can't judge her for picking him first, and maybe she'll leave me one day too. But it doesn't matter how long you spend with someone, what matters is how you spend your time together. She probably loved Jake, probably Marty. All of them at one point. All of my bitching, all of my talk of meaninglessness. But the girl I love is in my arms. All that talk seems silly. I feel happy. I can see us having wonderful years together, maybe we break up or not. You have to hope you don't. She could cheat on me when I'm not home, she could lie and see someone else like she did with Marty. But it doesn't matter.

What a great feeling it is, to have hope for once. I can see us driving in a car to concerts, festivals. We go to see movies together, play card games. I play songs on my keyboard and put my years of self-taught piano to use. My past, my future. All the times I've spent worrying and afraid, crying over things that mattered to me? They don't mean anything, not in this moment. All the suffering, all the lies, and the doubts. Gone, rendered null and void with her in my arms.

Right now? All that matters on the entire planet is me and her. I've waited lifetimes for this moment never expecting it to ever come, but it did. I've dreamed about it, fantasized about it. This very spot even. She says my name, and when I look at her the moment is perfect. We both lean in for a kiss under a blue sky. No sounds but the wind. Her kiss feels like peace. Like ball lighting exploding in repeated plasmatic lobulations of pure narcotic bliss. I want to keep living. Want to stay here until I die. It's just like I always dreamed it would be. All those years of wondering what it would be like, and I was right. Like all those daydreams of her I had in school. All the nightly imaginings. It might even be better than I thought it would be. But it feels so right. The only real difference from the dreams is that now I am the man with the gun.

And there shall be no more sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the old order of things are passed away.

The Revelation of Saint John

what's that coming over the hill

Nothingness drips down inside me like caffeine into a stained glass. The ringing in my ears that deafens even the mightiest of nuclear fires isn't enough to distract me from the blood that slips down my chest. The gunshot echoes still now, tomorrow, for years and centuries. It screams out unto eternity. The girl I loved is dead by my own hand, by a revolver passed down my family for generations, by a bullet that so many years ago was meant for me. Nicole is gone. The brain matter that made up her being runs down her skull like melting yogurt left on the fridge. It paints the grass red, it cools and sticks to my face. She's gone. It's like... nothing. I can feel nothing running through my spinal nerves, firing off into my body.

Do you know what God's ultimate punishment to mankind is? I thought it was hell when I was a kid. Fire and brimstone, suffering. Maybe death. My aunt thought it was cancer, the plague of the end times. My mother said it was the pain of childbirth, she used to talk about how the breakdown of the family system and the rise of single parents was a rejection of our punishment and a sign of the apocalypse. My grandmother said it was free will, the freedom to sin and damn ourselves. But it's none of those things.

The dove was never a symbol of God's grace. The rainbow a symbol of hate, not love. Jesus Christ was not sent here to save us, but to completely and utterly damn us. God's ultimate punishment to mankind is hope. He gave us hope, built it into us with the entirety of his every action. Fed it to us with his every begotten word. It's what pushes to keep going. If it wasn't for hope there'd be no reason to go on. Our sun will eventually consume the entire planet, and once it's done it'll blink out and leave our solar system cold and broken. Every aspect of humanity's existence will be gone, and we'll leave nothing for any other life that may be out there to ever find. Not that they would anyway. Even now our planet is dying, we've killed it. We keep killing it. Killing it away and hoping our ancestors will blast off to the stars.

And go where, Mars? We might not even make it that long. We could blast ourselves to smithereens in World War 3, get

wiped out by an asteroid or rogue planet. Maybe a wandering black hole will decide to stop by for a chat and rip us out of orbit. A supervolcano could send us into a winter to kill off our crops and starve us. Overuse of antibiotics is already leading to simple diseases that can kill a healthy man. All it takes is one push, one tiny little insignificant push. And we're gone. We're never leaving the solar system. Even if we could build a ship to carry us, we wouldn't reach the nearest star. The humans we sent would run out of resources on the nearly 100,000 year commute. But we tell ourselves we can make it. We're scared of the world ending because we hope we'll keep going. That humans are just so special we're going to make it.

And all of us. Every single human being alive right now, will be dead within the next century. Or so feeble that they barely classify as conscious. But we hope. We hope like cancer patients and fight and fight and fight. And the only reward is more suffering. I understand it now. It was so tempting to just give in. I could have just given into the hope that me and Nicole would work out. But that would be selfish. We would have broken up some day, we would have hurt each other. I won't force Nicole to feel that decay. And, even if by some stretch of the imagination we stayed together, you can't fight death. Should I force her to watch a boy she loves slowly dying, leaving her old and alone unable to find someone else? No.

There is no hope. No feeling. This is it. The last stringent of feeling I had rests in my arms hanging limply towards the pond. The wind blows the trees, across the field like it always has. Like it did before I was born and like it will after I'm gone. Uncaring, unfeeling. Don't you see? Lily, Shelby, Alex, and Danielle. All human beings. All animals. Just like you, just like Nicole, just like me. All of us. We don't deserve to suffer, we're born into a world against our will and the actions that occur are beyond our control. We act on instinct. We live, we suffer, and we die. That's all. No higher purpose, no meaning. We just hope there is. We hope there's some reason for it all, we lie and tell ourselves we hear the voice of God. We hope that those dying dreams of breaking down cells are images of an afterlife. Proof that in the end it'll all be worth it.

Do you ever feel it? That chill creeping up in the back of your mind? That queasy sensation that all of your suffering, all of your pain, is pointless. It doesn't make you any different to anyone

else. Kissing Nicole was the highlight of my life, and in the end it won't even matter. The only other person that felt it is gone, and when I die the last memory will be lost. Every story that has been told, can be told, or will be told. All our advancements, all our failures. Every great war and every plague wiped out with vaccines. All those missionaries that get lynched, all those schools built. All that hope we have. And for what? Burnt up and brought back to the stardust we came from?

The body in my arms is getting colder, the wind carries with it the stench of ancient cars. Meth, heroin, oxycontin, cigarettes, and alcohol. It snakes its way through fences, down through vents and windows to people standing shoulder to shoulder in gas chambers. This wind used to blow against the backs of Indians, hunting buffalo in the fields, warring tribes fighting for blood and kinsmen. It carries the fading dreams of countless souls lost in the Jetstream. Across the pyramids of Egypt, through chains it tears apart the backs of slaves. It carries the plague across the land, blowing with it a black death that bleeds from pores in front of churches and pits.

It blows the dust and ash of an earth blown apart by a meteor, zipping past screaming dinosaurs in their final moments. Through blackness of spacetime beyond comets bringing water to the molten earth, flowing around our birthing sun with the infant seeds of our world. Back through countless galaxies, through collapsing stars and all consumptions of black holes. To a single moment in time, to a single point in space. To an incomprehensibly meaningless speck, waiting for the voice to let it loose. How long did it wait there? How many millennia did it just wait before something set it off?

And now it just flows. It doesn't care, it doesn't feel, it doesn't think. There's no reasoning to it, no avoiding it. Even now it surrounds me, digging into me through my blood-soaked clothes. But I can fight it. I can stop it now, I couldn't before. I'm not selfish anymore. Please understand that. Please.

Nicole was talking to me once before, she realized I was worthless and chose to reject me for Jake. That's how I view it, that's how I understood it. But when she was talking to me, when it felt like I was close. It made me feel good for the first time in my life. I woke up in the morning and didn't hate the sun shining on my face, I sat in my car during breaks at college completely unfazed by the bullying of my classmates. I thought I had her. I

thought she cared. And then I lost her, hell, I never had her in the first place. But I would do it again. I did it again, and it felt good. Sharing the wind with Nicole. You need to understand that being so close to someone like that, being with someone, it just makes it easier for the wind to push you. You give the wind more space for the breeze to hold on to.

There it goes again. It's cold, mocking. Blowing through my entire body like the rains on Neptune. No matter how many years we had, no matter how much love we felt, no matter how hard we would try. It gets us eventually. Always does. I keep telling myself it would have been worth it. But that's just me. Wanting to be happy. Wanting to fight against nature. Nicole was perfect. She didn't deserve to suffer me, didn't deserve to suffer life. Just like I don't deserve to be happy. It was selfish to think I could. Now I'm putting bricks on the body of the girl I love. She'll be eaten by fish. It hurts to think about it, how close I was. "I love you" comes out for the first time in my life. The first time I've ever heard the words, and they came from my own mouth to the corpse as I sunk it to the bottom of my pond.

She didn't let anyone know we were talking, her car's parked almost 40 miles away. Another random lost girl in the missing person's capital of Kentucky. Never to be found again. I'm sorry for Jake. Nicole's pain is over but if he does really care about her, he'll never get closure. It was always easier to believe he didn't, that he was just using her. But it was just to make it easier on myself wanting to steal her from him, like he stole her from me. Like she was a piece of property. Never once considering how she felt, or him.

She's still beautiful, I can make out her murky face through the pond scum, her radiant cheeks shining through the fish shit and amoebas. Marked by the garnet pieces of her life that pollute waters unspoiled for over a decade. My reflection in the water stares back at me, like I'm down there with her. Dead and bleeding resting comfortably beside the one I love. Where I want to be. It is me down there. All that love I felt, just gone, lost forever. But it's not anyone else. It's my hair. My fingers run across my face, collecting the drying blood of the girl I killed. It's me. It always has been, I just never wanted to believe it when I looked in the mirror. Never wanted to believe there was so much anger in me. So much hate, disgust.

I feel empty walking away from the pond. But Nicole is

better off now, and soon so many more people will be. I'd been working on bombs all year, I could thank my grandfather for that if he was still alive. Now that Nicole's gone there's nothing to stop me from using them, nothing to lose. For everyone else she was just another animal. Another face in the crowd. But she was everything to me. The shadows of the field remind me of recess. Sitting on the hill by the basketball court at the playground, baking in the heat and looking out at the other kids. Hating them, lonely, wishing they'd play with me. But they just keep on running around. Alex is in this place at the corner of the school where the cameras can't see, making out with three girls. Michael is under the slide with Nicole.

Ryan is swinging and talking to Dustin about videogames. Some kids are busted by the gym teacher for playing on their DS. There's dust kicked up from the two boys fighting. I can still feel those pebbles coating my clothes in that residue, the evening sun bleeding my sweat from me as I ostensibly went to sit next to Michael. To be near Nicole. I can see her pink highlights, when she talks, I can see her braces. Focusing on lips I thought I could never kiss. I can feel the concrete sidewalk digging into my skull as one of the girls stomps my head in for accidentally cutting in front of her on the way back in once recess ended. Another image of another teacher whose name I didn't care to remember laughing at me as the girl stands on me while walking inside. Another post school evening spent crying alone in my room while my mom smokes in the attic listening to grunge music. Looking for things she could steal and sell off for drugs.

I never wanted any of this.

A familiar feeling breaks me out of reminiscing on better days. The nightmare. It's right behind me, in the corner of the field. Staring at me. Lifetimes I've spent haunted by it, decades I've spent paralyzed and unable to move. Follicles stand straight up as I turn around. I never could just come look at what it was, could I? Even from afar when me and Nicole walked the grass. I forced myself away. My eyes scan the trees, nothing but bark. Nothing but dead leaves and grass. All this time, all those tears, all that sweat and fear. And after all this time, there's nothing there but trees and birds.

Funny. I've been scared of the place for years, my entire life it's arrested me in my sleep. Like a constant threat to my dreamworld. It's occurred to me before that I should check, but I

was always afraid of what I might find. I don't know what I was expecting, demons maybe? A long dead body or secret? After all those nightmares, there's a sense of disappointment in turning away from it.

NIRVANA

I was up all night you know. Planting bombs, making sure the detonator worked. Didn't even think about the bourbon. I left my cigarettes on my desk. It was misty when I drove here, early in the morning. The roads were all quiet, like the night before. David is excited today, at least, he called me excited about the field trip, now that he's Mr. Bigshot VIP the girl he likes wants to go with him, now he thinks she likes him too. Just animals. Alpha lion has food for the lioness. David doesn't even know the man he's been friends with for almost a year is a murderer. Doesn't know a few days ago he killed an innocent girl and buried the body underwater. I've never met David's parents, even though I've been to his house.

It's a ramshackle little place on a dead-end road, floorboards are rotting. The water runs cold, and the entire place is heated by a rusty kerosene heater. But David's dad drives a brand-new diesel guzzling four door truck. His gun collection pridefully sits in a shelf, displaying itself with every new addition on Facebook. Mom has herself a nice SUV, heated seats and a TV in the back. Both vehicles run subscription satellite radio. Byzantine silverware mingles with the opulent pots and pans that hide in cockroach nests that fancy themselves cabinets. Collecting dust as their owner drags home various fast foods. It's all about the show. All about appearing to be successful. Wear your 300\$ camo and walk around with an overpriced gun engraved with who gives a shit, and act like someone does.

The waitress appreciated me ordering something other than black coffee for once. Nothing special, just cream and sugar. It's one of the sweetest things I've ever tasted. One of the first things I've tasted in a long time. I've never been so empty before. So devoid of just, anything. I can see the road from this seat, same as I used to. Just not staring out hoping I'll get a glimpse of Nicole driving by like I used to. David's entire school system is going on the field trip today, pretty soon there'll be an entire marching band of buses driving down. For such a small town it'll be every kid from every family. The next generation. Let's be honest. There's a part of me that hated every single one of those kids. I hated their parents, the bus drivers, parents. I always did, even

the cup. Sugar dissolves. Regrets. I could be caught for this, hunted down and given a little needle to end my life. It's funny we punish murderers by killing them, isn't it? I'd be labeled a monster; the entire world would remember my name. On every TV screen, every computer, every phone. All of them beaming my face. Another story, another distraction. Another thing for people to masturbate over.

"heard about those kids, awful. Really awful. Hope they catch the bastard."

"My heart goes out to the parents of those poor kids"
"thoughts and prayers"

Let them. They don't understand. It's about more than these kids, it's about their kids, and their kids' kids. Every one of them will have their own stories, their own suffering, their own death. And they'll have kids, and their kids will grow up just like their parents. And they too in time will have kids, as they were. That's how this works. It's how the cycle perpetuates itself. Killing these kids won't just save them from their suffering, but every single person that would have come after them. It's more than them, more than me. It's an eternity of pain I can wash away. Life is a carcinogen, it grows and spreads exponentially. You have to stop it before it grows. Before more people are born into lives of nonmeaning and repetition. More people like me...

One more thing before I go, just in case something happens to me. I have a sister. After my father left my mother he moved on, I remember a single Christmas gift he gave me when I was a child. A little builder toy set. He knocked on the door and ran away, left it between the screen door and the main door. He was never involved in my life, not after I found out who he was. I ran into his sister a long time ago in a gas station while buying cigarettes. First time I had seen that side of the family since I was probably 10. "You look like your brother." I said, unsure as to what I could even say. "So do you." She equally awkwarded out. We stood there in silence for what seemed like a century, but she spoke "He wants to talk to you, you know. He just doesn't know what to say."

That was years ago. He still hasn't made contact, hasn't even tried. I always wanted to talk to him, wanted to say something. I used to wonder why he didn't love me, why he didn't want me. Always knew in my heart that he loved his kid more than me. But that wasn't fair. He has a life now, a family.

Why would he ever want to sully it with someone like me? And beyond that, I never tried to talk to him either. Maybe he's the same as me, too petrified of rejection that he can't muster the courage to try. Maybe he wasn't ready for a kid, I don't know. But I do know my sister isn't like me. She has a family that cares about her. His profile picture is a few years old, but it's him and her. I've stared at it over the years. He has a picture of her on a couch with a stuffed pony, she's smiling. Happy.

The one time I went to his house to see her was when I was just a little boy, barely out of 2nd grade. He had an SNES plugged into a CRT with a jet ski game in it, she was just a baby then. Even back then I wanted her to be happy. To not be like me. She has glasses, you can see them in some of the pictures of her and her grandmother. My other grandmother. She won't be like me, she can't be. If we were in different places I wonder if she would be in my shoes right now? Maybe it was some bizarre combination of events that turned me into this, but I was a weirdo when I was a kid. Maybe I was born this way, just eternally destined to whatever the hell this is. Until she dies too, whatever the cause. Until she finds peace. She'll be happy, she'll feel loved. She's allowed to have friends, allowed to go to birthdays. She has birthdays.

I...I'm not really sure what I'm on about. The world is a strange place. None of us control our births, we don't even get to choose where or how we're raised. It's up to parents, to friends, teachers, all those things I never had. It was just TV and movies for the most part. I used to act like Jim Carrey as a kid, he was almost like a dad to me with as many of his movies as my mother had. Dean and Sam were my brothers. Clark was a cousin. Peter and Stan were my weird uncles. Niko, Batman, Johnny Depp, Mario, Link, Leon, Angel, Flash Gordon, Frank, Garian, Ash, and Travis were my friends. The other kids didn't like that very much, so I tried to be like them. But I couldn't. I wasn't interested in sports, wasn't interested in cars, wasn't interested in girls, wasn't interested in cards. Wasn't interested in anything. All of it was just dead air.

I just went home through those doors and sat in a room playing games or watching TV. Walking into my grandmother's room while she was in the bathroom so I could secretly borrow movies, under the watchful eyes of Elvis Presley and Johnny Depp posters that lined her walls in place of family pictures. I

blocked it all away and went into different worlds. But it stayed there, stayed with me. I can see that now. These kids are just a small portion of the world. If I don't get caught, I'll keep going until I am. Until they finally lock me away or kill me. Love, joy, pleasure. Those silent moments of solidarity. It can't compare to all the hate, all the bullying, all the tears, the pain. It feels like it was always too late for me, no ever tried to help me. It's like I wasn't meant for this world. The same way a lot of people feel. But I have a purpose now. I'm not worthless.

Paying for another cup of coffee, stirring in sugar and cream. I can taste this. The buses are coming up the road, way off in the distance. Over the bombs I spent all night placing. Just like my grandfather used to tell me about, right in plain sight in the road. No one ever pays attention to the lines. David's in one of those buses, his final moments will be spent on top of the world. Riding high towards the VIP package he'll never reach. The car starts at the tail end of Miracle of Sound. The buses are coming as I pull up to the red light, forever too sensitive, it's already changing. The buses are slowing down, stopping right over little pieces of heaven. I'm not worthless.

My face in the rearview mirror is smiling back at me. I can't stop these tears. The smile just keeps getting wider. Red Rover is coming on, I love this song. My face is beautiful, isn't it? It's me. After all this time I've finally done something good with myself. It's hard to see through the tears, and I can't stop laughing. I've never felt like this, not before now. My life, my pain, my failures. That's over now. Looks like over a dozen school buses, filled to the brim with kids. Some smiling, some sad. Some lonely. Victims and abusers. But there's no hate, no judgement. None of them deserve to suffer, no matter who they are. And now they won't. They won't grow up, they won't fall in and out of love, won't break bones. They won't have kids. They won't be anything. Just gone, forever.

My light turns green, and I pull out on the northern road back up to the hospital. The only road there, like I have every day the past few years. But it's different now. My hand is moving to the detonator.

For all of these children, the cycle ends here.

And thou, that yonder standest, living soul,
Withdraw thee from these people, who are dead

Dante's Inferno