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## My Time among the Cannibals

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MY TIME AMONG THE CANNIBALS

By

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## ABSTRACT

*My Time Among the Cannibals* is a collection of prose poems that use absurdist techniques to address themes such as community, performance, spectacle, and commerce in late capitalism. Russell Edson, considered by many to be the godfather of American prose poetry, once referred to the prose poem as “a poetry freed from the definition of poetry, and a prose free of the necessities of fiction” (100). He saw this sort of misfit status of the form as its saving grace, a break from the work of the more traditional “self-serious poet with his terrible sense of mission, whose poems are gradually decaying into sermons of righteous anger” (99). “Beware of serious people,” he warned, “for their reality is flat.” This sense of playfulness and irreverence is what first attracted me to the form. I’ve always been drawn to the use of humor in addressing dark subject matter, so the prose poem seems like the most natural vehicle for my sensibilities. It also provides a much-needed check on certain impulses. Given my tendency to respond to events with righteous political anger, the humor typically associated with the form prevents me from hopping atop the soapbox, becoming the “self-serious poet” Edson warns about. As someone with a fairly mundane daily life, the fantastical and surrealist tendencies of the prose poem allow me to transcend the flat reality that Edson decries.

I’m also attracted to the casual nature of the form. James Tate and Charles Simic, two other prominent practitioners of the prose poem, have identified it with a sense of humility. I think this humility makes the prose poem an ideal vessel for vernacular English, the language I typically choose to work with. This makes the form accessible to a wide number of readers, and this approachability can be advantageous, increasing the reader’s capacity for surprise. As Tate describes the effect of a prose poem, “You look at it and you say, Why, I thought I was just

reading a paragraph or two, but, by golly, methinks I glimpsed a little sliver of eternity.” This is the effect I ultimately hope to achieve in the poems in this manuscript.

The manuscript’s first section, *My Time Among the Cannibals*, presents the type of concise narratives most commonly associated with the prose poem form, from the work of early French pioneers such as Charles Baudelaire and Max Jacob to Americans like Edson and Tate. It’s a style that has come to be closely associated (and arguably even indistinguishable from) flash fiction in recent years, and, indeed, a number of the pieces in this section have been published under the flash fiction label in journals. For what it’s worth, I’m not particularly concerned with these types of labels, but with the way the prose form seems to suit the types of narratives I’m presenting.

The section’s title poem is indicative of the style of these narratives, with the speaker describing his experiences in a small town. The bulk of the poem is devoted to rather mundane activities like chatting with locals at the grocery store and performing karaoke with work friends at the local bar, but much like the camera panning down in the opening of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* to reveal the worms wriggling beneath the peaceful surface of suburbia, the end of the poem reveals the violent nature of the citizens, cannibals who try to convince the reluctant speaker to accompany them on the occasional raid of a neighboring town. The speaker is conflicted, left attempting to reconcile the kindness they show him and the pleasant nature of his life in the town with these brutal actions.

The speakers in the other poems find themselves similarly torn between the mundane and the brutal, with a speaker finding himself casually transformed into a human coat rack by the town sheriff in one poem, and a wealthy schoolboy learning archery on a live human target alongside watercolor and philosophy in another. My hope is that this dichotomy will be

reflective of the real experiences of people in a country where you can sit in your living room and enjoy a bowl of chips while you watch footage of a man being murdered by the police followed by a commercial for laundry detergent on a television crafted by sweatshop laborers half a world away.

Charles Simic writes that poetry that is too explicitly political leads to “propaganda,” while “a poet who ignores the world is contemptible,” their work consumed by “narcissism” (75). With these poems, I attempt to find some productive middleground between these two extremes, presenting politically charged scenarios but forgoing any explicit prescriptions. Instead, I try to present everyman narrators through whom readers can experience and contemplate these conflicted and ambiguous situations. In his analysis of the work of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus identifies the fundamental characters of Absurdist work, work in which the “perpetual oscillations between the natural and extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the everyday, the absurd and the logical, are found . . . and give [the work] its resonance and its meaning” (126). He observes the way that Kafka’s characters embody these contradictions, reacting to the extraordinary in an ordinary manner. In “an odd but obvious paradox,” he writes, “the more extraordinary the character’s adventures are, the more noticeable will be the naturalness of the story: it is in proportion to the divergence we feel between the strangeness of a man’s life and the simplicity with which that man accepts it” (125).

The poems here belong to this Absurdist tradition and present speakers who are similarly stoic in the face of the absurd. While this is frequently a source of humor in the work, it is also an attempt to capture the sense of stoic resignation that oftentimes accompanies the working class position they occupy. Their everyman position is further amplified by a relative lack of cultural references that could date the poems. Simic writes of omitting references that are too



specific from his work in an attempt to achieve an “anonymous, timeless” quality (16), and I suppose I am trying to do the same thing here, creating an environment that can stand in for any number of smalltowns in America. Of course, much of the inspiration ends up being pulled from the smalltown in Kentucky where I grew up.

The second section of the manuscript, *The Biography of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter*, trades the anonymous quality of the first section for explicit references to both that smalltown and the corporate behemoth at the center of its economy. By now the retail chain’s impact on the local economies of towns (particularly small towns) where it chooses to open stores is well-known, a phenomenon often referred to as “the Walmart Effect.” Charles Fishman, the author of *The Wal-Mart Effect: How the World’s Most Powerful Company Really Works -- And How It’s Transforming the American Economy*, writes,

A megacorporation with sales that consistently rank it as the number-one or number-two publicly traded company in the United States and in the world, Wal-Mart has impacted wage rates, prices, and economies on a local, national, and global scale. It is arguably the world's most important privately controlled economic institution. It not only has no rivals, it actually influences the prices set by its suppliers and has often seemed impervious to challenge, let alone accountability. (6)

My own hometown has not been immune. By effectively driving out most other retail options (both in terms of employment and consumption), it has become the sun in the solar system of Grayson County, taking on many peculiar social aspects in the process. In addition to going there for groceries or furniture, people go there to run into old friends or acquaintances. High school

kids hang out in the parking plot, a location where the homeless and travelers also sleep in their vehicles.

With the poems in this section, I attempt to convey the Walmart Supercenter's omnipresence by placing it at the center of every piece, exploring the tragicomic potential of the setting in oftentimes surreal ways that continue the narrative style established in the first section. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, English critic Mark Fisher writes that it's "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (1), and the speakers in these poems find it similarly impossible to think beyond the world of Walmart. The pieces range from personal in tone (the speaker and his brother debating the best way to go about spreading their grandmother's ashes in the Walmart Supercenter) to historical (a speaker whose memories of 9/11 are tied to the Walmart Supercenter) and mythological (a reimagining of the tale of Adam and Eve where Eden has been replaced with the Walmart Supercenter).

The most obvious antecedent for this is Joe Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendys*, a collection of epistolary prose poems in which the speaker uses Wendys customer feedback cards to explore a range of confessional and philosophical tangents, humorously building the fast food chain up as a sort of Godlike presence in the process. This can be seen in a piece titled "August 19, 1996" in which the speaker fantasizes about a "Wendys life-support system" he can be hooked to in his last days, equating Wendys with the life force itself (35). While my poems in this section attempt something similar, my hope is that the more specific, local focus in many of my pieces will set my treatment of Walmart apart from his treatment of Wendys. This focus comes through not only in the references to small town Kentucky culture, but in the speaker's dialect. The casual, conversational tone of the pieces is reinforced by the unassuming form of the prose poem, and prose's privileged status as the vehicle for most everyday communication (the type of thing you

might see in a Walmart advertisement or product review) is continually exploited, drawing the reader in with a familiar form before subverting their expectations.

The manuscript's third section, *The Levita Dispatches*, breaks from the comparatively straightforward narrative mode of the preceding sections, presenting prose poems that are considerably more collage-like in construction. In his book *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson regards "channel switching" as the "very epitome of a postmodern attention and perceptual apparatus," describing artistic works that blend fragments from disparate genres and cultural areas to create an effect like "switching channels on a cable television set" (373). The resulting texts demand active participation from readers, challenging them to "reorganize the . . . fragments . . . according to schemes which probably reveal more about the reading mind than the text itself" (79). The poems in this section function along these lines. While individual sentences and sentence fragments present content that still bears a tonal and imagistic resemblance to the poems in the preceding section, they do not build up to conventional narratives. Instead, they leap between disparate topics in a surrealist manner, relying on the power of suggestion and juxtaposition. The ellipses that separate these fragments serve as a sort of visual stand-in for the noise that might mark the switching of channels or stations.

The section takes its name from the Levita Township, a small cult that existed near my hometown while I was growing up. Information about the insular world of the group was scarce, leaking out in mysterious fragments that took on new life in the conversations of those of us on the outside. My hope is that the pieces of these fragmented poems will serve a similar function, intriguing readers enough to fill in the gaps with their own speculations.

In his essay "The New Sentence," Ron Silliman describes a type of prose poetry in which the sentence relates to the paragraph in the same way the line relates to the stanza in more

traditional poetry, occupying a function that's more rhythmic than typical prose. Rather than all of the sentences in a paragraph serving the same theme or subject (the way they would in fiction), the sentences resolve themselves "at the level of the sentence" (394), standing as self-contained units that can then be set into play with one another at the paragraph level. Silliman's own work in *The Alphabet* models this, stitching together everything from sex jokes to political musings to create collage portraits of contemporary American life. The work of fellow L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Lyn Hejinian finds her using disjointed prose poetry to similar ends.

My own poems in this section function in a similar manner, with particular attention being paid to the sentence. Sentences like ". . . conspiratorial chatter in the bleachers of the annual softball game between Team Space Camp and Team Bible Camp . . ." and ". . . in the made-for-TV movie chronicling my childhood near-death experience and subsequent visitation of Heaven, something endearing in the obviousness of the mother's wig. . ." suggest the types of surreal narratives found in the preceding sections when taken on their own, but when placed alongside one another in the same poem they converse in new rhythmic and tonal ways. In addition to the aforementioned L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the poems are heavily influenced by the montage theory of Soviet director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein. He writes of images as "montage phrases," describing the way "[t]he simple combination of two or three details of a material kind yields a perfectly finished representation of another kind -- psychological" (32). These poems aim to produce details sharp enough to take on this suggestive power when combined, generating a cumulative psychological effect different than that produced by more traditional narrative poetry.

The manuscript's fourth and final section, *Against the Confederate Living*, was the result of feedback from my dissertation co-director, Dr. David Kirby. After reading an earlier draft of the manuscript, Kirby suggested I bookend the manuscript with poems that allowed the reader to enter and depart the cannibalistic world suggested by the manuscript's title. I restructured the opening section with this in mind, cutting a number of poems and moving the collection's title poem to the front to serve as a clear introduction. The poems pulled from the first section were then used to create the fourth. My hope is that the brief return to the more traditional narratives of the opening section will give the reader a sense of grounding and resolution by the collection's end. I also think this new distribution of the poems creates a greater sense of balance and more comfortable pacing for the reader, with shorter sections buttressing the longer *Levita* section.

While the poems in the first section utilized a variety of points-of-view, anticipating the frequent shifts in voice that would characterize the third section, the poems in the fourth section are all written in the first-person, lending them a more intimate tone. The title poem opens the section with what I hope is an obvious play on the title of Robert Lowell's landmark collection *For the Union Dead*, evoking both the southern landscape that most of these poems take place in and the sense of tension that the speaker feels toward it. The poem serves as a sort of microcosm of the entire collection, combining humor and resignation, working class concerns and art history, irreverence and sincerity. This tonal mixture anticipates the poems that follow. Poems like "Legacy," in which the speaker recounts a job that requires him to bang his head against various objects, or "Poem," in which a naive speaker marvels at the beauty of his own simple thoughts, indulge in ridiculous humor while still sincerely touching on themes of frustration and wonder. Poems like "The Other People" and "Everybody Knows This is Nowhere" deal with incredibly dark subject matter (in this case, public executions) while still finding some light and

humanity in depictions of the simple pleasures of sharing time with family or having a drink. The dark themes are further balanced by a poem like “Our Anniversary,” an unabashed love poem that still operates within the absurd realm of the other pieces.

The collection ends with “Leitchfield by Lamplight,” a poem in which the speaker finds that every business in his small town has been turned into a church. This casual transformation suggests the possibility of the sacred in the mundane, a possibility that poetry, at its best, can reveal, and one that all of these poems are, in their way, working toward. The poem ends with a character pressing their ear against an inanimate object (an ax) as if it is about to speak. I like to think that somewhere in the infinite possibility of the white space following the text’s end, it does.

My hope is that, while the general surrealism and dark humor that pervades the content of all four sections will provide the manuscript with a sense of cohesion, the formal shifts between sections will also create an engaging arc, charting the progress of the prose poem form from its most recognizable narrative application to a more experimental application and back. Though the work seeks to avoid becoming didactic, I hope that the third section in particular offers a substantial response to the political tensions introduced in the others through its encouragement of active participation. In *The Art of Recklessness*, Dean Young writes, “Art’s great obligation is to its own liberty, and by demonstration, the realization of ours” (36), and I would ultimately like for this work to transfer some sense of creative empowerment to readers in this manner.

*I. My Time Among the Cannibals*

## My Time Among the Cannibals

It really wasn't all that different from the other places I'd lived. I'd still find myself in line at the bank, receiving weather predictions and news of family additions from men in hunting caps and women in denim skirts, or smiling and nodding to faces I recognized from church as I wheeled my cart through the fluorescent aisles of the supermarket. On Fridays I'd go down to Al's Bar for karaoke night, and a few of the guys from the factory and I would drain \$5 pitchers and belt our way through a catalog of classics, waiting to see if it would be the beer or nostalgia that ultimately did us in. I never did adjust to the whole cannibalism thing, though. Sometimes I'd get a call inviting me to join some of the guys for a nighttime invasion of a neighboring town in preparation for a big Sunday picnic, but I'd always play sick (*Would love to, but I haven't made it six feet past the bed today*), forcing a few coughs for effect. The next day, a few of their wives would arrive at my doorstep with a basket – a bottle of cough syrup, some apples and chocolate bars, a foot wrapped in tinfoil, a Get Well card signed by most everyone in the neighborhood – and I'd come to the door in a blanket to accept it, feeling genuinely blessed to be surrounded by such kind souls.



## History

My time as an inventor was mostly uneventful. I devoted years to frivolous objects – trinkets meant mainly to amuse children or those still stuck in childhood, gadgets capable of bringing new ease to household tasks that were already painfully easy to begin with. There was one project I was genuinely invested in, though – the design of a new type of water filter. The water cycle was all the talk back then, and panic clung to every word. People were disturbed by the thought of all that history making its way into their bodies – water that had slicked the fur of long-extinct creatures washing against their teeth and gums, water that had buoyed armadas sliding down their throats, water that had bathed the faces of wholly unremarkable men and women sloshing around in their stomachs. My filter was designed to extract all of it. The only problem was where to dispose of all that history after it was removed. It was initially proposed that we dump it into the ocean, but that would just perpetuate the dilemma. It was then suggested that we fire it into space, but there was simply no room in the budget. Ultimately, we decided to hide it in plain sight, to spread it out in every conceivable public space. Before long, people had grown so used to it they forgot it was even there.

## Future Design

The construction crews work so quickly now. I can remember when it would take months just to erect a single building – the entire summer would pass, and by the time the kids arrived back in town, the men would still be out there with the ungodly racket of their tools, banging away at the bones of the thing. But then something changed. I'd leave town for the weekend and on the drive back I'd spot apartments and shopping complexes where I was sure I'd passed only an empty field days before. I'd wake to the sound of hammers and drills, but by lunch all would be quiet and a new business would stand just down the street. Finally it seemed as if the buildings were appearing instantaneously; it was hard to imagine that a group of men was even responsible for their existence. And it wasn't just the suddenness with which they were popping up that was alarming, but also the fact that they could appear anywhere. I read an account in the paper of a man returning from work to see a small accounting firm where his kids' tree house had stood that morning. I saw a story on the news about a sports bar appearing overnight in the surgical wing of the local hospital. I can't say I was shocked when I went to take the trash out one morning and turned around to find a fully functioning grocery store where my home had just been. The old cashier nodded silently to me when I walked in, and I did the same. I could see a crate full of watermelons where the television had stood. The bedroom was now a freezer filled with every variety of meat imaginable. I found a spot next to the canned soup, curled up, and went to sleep. I awoke to a customer patting my head, asking, *How much is this one?*

## City Hall

After the giant is killed in the square, we cut off a patch of his flesh and place it under the microscope. We see that each of his pores is a tiny ear, and this discovery delights us. We wonder what else we can place under the microscope, what we can see. We place a penny under the microscope and see the kind of ocean a new species can crawl out of. We place a dollar under the microscope and see a man dousing the side of a farmhouse in gasoline. We have no clue what any of this means, but we are excited. We are hungry for new things to examine, things that can't fit beneath the old microscope. We decide to construct a larger instrument. Immediately a faction forms against this. *Have you forgotten the whole reason we killed the giant?* they say. They break in during the night and smash what we are building with hammers. They place the broken pieces under the old microscope, and what they see they describe to each other in a language we do not know how to speak, one they adamantly insist we learn.

## The General is on Television Again

Despite the egg on his face, he refuses to step down from the podium. *It's war paint*, he insists, his neck swelling like a fighting rooster's. Most of the audience eats it up. *A truly brilliant yellow*, notes one reporter. *One can't help but be reminded of the sun*, adds another. People all over the country start wearing it after this. Grocery stores can hardly keep their refrigerators stocked. Throughout the suburbs, chicken coops dot the backyards. Breakfast becomes an awkward, troubled time. My daughter sees eggs on her plate and refuses to sit at the table. *Barbaric*, she says. Her younger brother has no interest in eating them, instead puncturing the yolks with his fingers and smearing yellow lines beneath his eyes. *Please, please, everyone*, I say. Out in our coop, one of the hens takes to eating her eggs. The habit spreads through the brood like a fever. *You have to put them down when they start in on that*, says our neighbor. *But I'm just so tired*, I say. Soon the yard is littered with excrement. The smell is enough to keep us from leaving the house. From the window, my wife looks out at all the splotches of white and says, *It does look sort of interesting. I think I'll try painting it*. She spends all afternoon working on it in the garage and then hangs the finished work next to the mirror. *What do you think?* she says. *It looks like shit*, I say, *It's perfect*.

## Western

I stumble into the saloon, an arrow jutting from my chest. *Ah!* exclaims the sheriff, hanging his coat on it.

## The Medium

Finally, the dead begin to speak, but in a language neither the medium nor any of her clients can decipher, a muffled tongue that billows in the air around their heads like a worn-thin banner of vowels. She's frustrated, but does her best to disguise this as intense concentration, rubbing her palms in small, circular motions on the table and gently rattling the amulets around her neck with the rhythmic nodding of her head. When this fails to impress, she tries to convince them that the presence of a voice is miracle enough in and of itself (*The mere fact that you can even hear anything places you in hallowed company*), and then that the music of it all is enough (*It really is quite beautiful, almost like a violin underwater*), but it isn't. In the end, she delivers an apology disguised as a pep talk over the possibilities of the fourth dimension and passes out small purple envelopes containing partial refunds to everyone involved. Still, she makes enough for groceries. Not enough for fresh organic goods from the new place off the square, but groceries nonetheless.

## Actor Gets His Teeth Fixed

No dental insurance, Actor pays the full cost out of pocket. This, Actor's convinced, will solve everything. But Actor's head is much too balanced now. Actor is not accustomed to it. Actor's head falls into Actress's nose during the love scene and draws blood. Actor's head knocks a glass from a table and splashes wine across the stage. All this jostling about rearranges Actor's thoughts. Actor sees haloes around the props. Actor's lines come out all verbs. The lights reflect off Actor's smile and cause Stagehand to fall from the rafters. He flops on the stage like a fish on the shore. The audience sits wide-eyed and silent, Nurses in the cheap seats digging for their flasks, the Dictator in the balcony nervously fondling his medals. Actor's training has not prepared him for this. Actor smacks his cheek. Actor grinds his new teeth together. Actor lies down beside Stagehand and mimics his flopping forever.

## The Hammerglass Burdens of the Prison Window Designer

There's much to consider when designing windows for a prison. How will the side that receives the looking treat the side that does not? Will nostalgia, when refracted through the glass, affect the growth of grass in the yard? If the sky becomes a sea, will there be life vests for its swimmers? Those who design prison windows are more prone to fits of insomnia. Their trade journals advertise shoes specially made to accommodate their constant pacing. They drink frequently, learning to solve complex math equations while hung-over. They commit suicide at staggering rates. These kinds of statistics are always met with incredulity. People picture the three-story homes with jet skis in the drive and say, *Really?* But then, when they stop to consider the professional demands, the hammerglass burdens of the prison window designer, the way those three-story homes are nearly always built without windows, they say, *Well, yes, I guess I could see that.*



## Promotional

You are receiving this letter because a recent review of our surveillance footage revealed that you have visited our establishment at least once a week for the past three years. We are not writing so much out of gratitude for your patronage (though we certainly appreciate it) as we are out of an interest in what you do after taking your food back to the booth – chiefly, the weeping. It's not that we haven't witnessed weeping in our establishment before. Thousands of hours of surveillance footage from our dining room cams have shown us a veritable flood of pre- and post-meal tears. But the manner in which you weep – throughout the entirety of the meal, still managing not only to get the food in your mouth with squinted eyes and damp cheeks, but to chew and swallow it (all of it) – is something wholly new to us. We would be lying if we said that we did not find it disconcerting at first, even disgusting, but further hours of review saw a gradual shift in our mood. More and more, the sheer perseverance of the act revealed itself in its repetitive, messy grandeur, until it finally dawned on us that this great swell of emotion we were feeling was not disgust at all, but, in fact, inspiration. While we feel it will be quite some time before we can fully ascertain the nature of such inspiration, much less direct it toward the practical work of improving our business model, we do feel it would be untoward not to repay it to some degree. Enclosed you will find a card entitling you to 10% off all regular menu items, as well as a fine handkerchief emblazoned with our logo (we're calling it the Forever Napkin™).

## We Thaw Out the Iceman on Monday

On Tuesday, we begin speech lessons. Simple sounds (*Cuh, Bah, Leh, Soh*), then single words (*Bank, Helmet, Animal, Thermometer*). By Wednesday, he's constructing sentences. (*The house has three stories. A story has a beginning and end. The faucet makes water. Water houses fish.*) He spends all day Thursday writing – the first three chapters of a memoir, a short story about a disembodied voice and a boulder, a handful of poems. A sonnet titled “Sonnet” really shows some promise. We take him to meet the editor on Friday. He reads a few pages of his work aloud, mispronouncing only two words (*blood* and *magazine*). The editor slowly nods his approval and requests that he bring more work soon. On Saturday, we celebrate. We drink our weight at a bar called the Blue Bison. He wastes nearly five dollars worth of quarters on the jukebox, growing frustrated that none of the songs are actually about the scenes depicted on the album covers. We spend most of Sunday hungover, lying around watching tv. We turn on the news and see forests clouded with smoke, tubes protruding from the bodies of scrawny children, caskets carted across drizzled tarmacs. He grows teary and wonders aloud if his words are of any use in such a world. We assure him we will help him learn something useful on Monday. We'll flip a coin – heads: medical school, tails: piano lessons.

## Secret Handshake of the Virtuous

What I remember most are those summers in the Hamptons, the ocean rising to greet my bare feet, my young imagination transforming the family sailboat into a historic battleship, my father patiently explaining to me that modernist architecture could never reach the minimalist heights achieved by a solitary prison cell. When I missed the target and lodged an arrow in my archery instructor's thigh he just said, *You were close! And now you know what it feels like to shoot another human being.* And it did feel like something – a horse with more than four legs, forced jumping jacks in a downpour, perhaps a pile of fruit rotting out on the deck. I asked my watercolor instructor what he thought would happen if we only used water derived from melted mountaintop snow and he said, *If I knew the answer to that, I would be your philosophy instructor.* But my philosophy instructor was a different kind of man altogether, the only adult I had ever seen wear a bib while he dined or get down on his hands and knees to meticulously arrange the animals in a toy farm set. My father fired him after he overheard him telling me that all astronomers must eventually aim their telescopes directly at the sun. I suppose I really did learn most of what I know during those years. My mind was like a priceless vase that was finally filled with flowers, and like a vase full of flowers, I instantly made any room I entered more beautiful.

## Left Only With Optimism

I open wide the aperture to the rowers of the marsupial lifeboat firing their flare guns into the waves, pluck the ode from the heart of rodeo with surgical tweezers, gift it to those who sacrificed their teeth to the Saturday night crowd at the fair & expo center. Sleep deniers, string benders, autodidactic unemployables, bring it in here. My embrace is a temple, its lobby immune to pamphleteers, its restrooms freshly renovated. Look at the dust the parking lot makes of fluorescent bulbs, the way the fruit ferments twice as fast when God has the kids for the weekend. Why the rush to name this trebly new animal noise? Why the contest? *Ossifying Kaleidoscope?* *Ragtime Narcoleptic?* *Memory-Haunted Arena of the Ancients?* Inside each bird is a different cassette. Inside each sky is another sky. You offer this: all smoke is a signal, even if it says only *Below me lies fire*. Here's my newly minted theory: it's a seven billion-way tie for first.

## Hymn of Healing

Suddenly nostalgic for the year I subsisted solely on food provided to me by a charity whose primary purpose was bolstering the public image of its celebrity founder. I lost 25 pounds and developed a skin rash so beautiful a London fashion house paid me \$10,000 for the rights to develop a pattern based on it. The Scandinavians were all the talk, how they had their shit figured out in ways we never would. I spent a lot of time wandering around museums, feeling like a cargo ship carrying products whose creation involved an amount of suffering its recipients could never begin to fathom or appreciate. I saw a mastodon skeleton and wept for thirty minutes. I looked at a painting of a river in France and felt nothing. Someone in the lobby was playing Brahms on a Casio keyboard. It was all very spiritual, but not in too burdensome of a way. The perfume was said to capture the scent of the smoke wafting off the Library of Alexandria.

## Cartographer's Songbook

In Plymouth, Minnesota the people gathered at the site of the burnt down dancehall and smeared ashes on their feet, and in Magnolia, Arkansas the people took their children to the park to nail Get Well cards to the trees. In Jamestown, North Dakota the people found it blasphemous the way the PA system buzzed and hummed through the pre-game moment of silence, and in Schuyler, Nebraska the people found it scandalous the way the painting of a river looked nothing like a river. In Bisbee, Arizona the people debated the ethicality of flash photography at funeral services, and the people in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania calculated the statistical probability that an asteroid would fall on the Wal-Mart. In Bartlett, Tennessee the people said, *Legalize rust*. In Decatur, Alabama the people said, *We paid to see a miracle, not this*. In Monticello, Louisiana the people elected the old mayor's body double as the new mayor, and in Luckenbach, Texas the people filled a time capsule with painkillers and buried it in a field. A woman in Youngstown, Ohio slowly whited out every instance of the letter I in a novel before returning it to the library. In Beckley, West Virginia a man felt the wind against his back and turned around and said, *What the fuck do you want?*

## *II. The Biography of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter*

There was this band at the grand opening of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter, four middle-aged guys in blue cowboy shirts and Ray-Bans that corporate had sent up. They called themselves the Wallies. They only played one original song – a fairly short number that started “There’s a place I like to go / to find the lowest prices I know” – but they were given instructions to perform it in a style appropriate to the region. For us that meant bluegrass. It sounded nothing like bluegrass, though – just a pop song that happened to have banjo in it. The guy on banjo even had one of those six-stringers that’s basically a guitar with banjo strings. They were from the city, though. They were on a stage. They even had a custom banner with their name in blue and gold letters. This, most people agreed, was the best bluegrass they’d ever heard. Turns out we’d been playing it wrong the whole time.



I read an interview with a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist who said he only respects authors who “deal with issues of life and death.” *Of course*, I nodded. I feel the same way. That’s why I’ve chosen for my subject nothing less than the very center of our solar system: the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter. I understand the potential legal repercussions of such a decision. It’s just so difficult to determine the worth of what you’re doing, to know whether you’re pushing a wheelbarrow of gold up the mountain to the gods or hunkering in a shed, gilding your own shit with metallic spray paint. I’ve given it some thought, and I think the only way I can be sure something is good is if I get sued over it.

There's no resisting the magnetic pull of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter. Customers bob up and down the aisles to the rhythm of starlings and finches hurling themselves against the cracked skylights. Outside, the flags are shredded by space debris, the acres of surrounding fields scorched and cratered with fallen satellites. Clouds slip into the orbit and circle like patrol cars. Parking lot traffic is held up by parades of approaching sleepwalkers. It's not difficult to picture the rapture, all the souls of Leitchfield floating heavenward only to be sucked back down into the Walmart vents.

Most local businesses closed early once news of the attacks started rolling in on September 11. I remember hearing my name called over the intercom and seeing the makeup streaks on the secretary's face as my mom signed me out of class. I was in the fourth grade. We weren't sure what was going to happen, just that we'd need groceries for whatever it was, so we headed to the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter. It was a popular idea. Traffic had spilled over into the lots of the nearby Tractor Supply and KFC. Trucks and SUVs had even started pulling over the curb and filling up the field behind the store. Once inside, there was hardly room to move around. Shoppers stood tired-eyed and talkative before barren clothing racks. Customers and cashiers wept and clung to one another over checkout counters. The food didn't last long. Even the bruised fruits were carried away like prizes. Still, no one wanted to leave empty-handed. It felt too much like an admission of defeat. That was the last thing we needed. Customers began grabbing anything they could get ahold of – birthday cards, bedside lamps, golf clubs, pellets guns. By six that night, every item in the store had been sold, surely a first in Walmart history. Once people got home with their things, though, they found they couldn't bring themselves to use them. Something about it just didn't feel right. So they held onto them, creating special places in their homes for them to sit, stewing in their history and emitting a strange sort of power. If you look on the mantle at my parents' house you'll see a can of Great Value corn my mom bought that day. She says she still touches it every time it storms.

A lot of people don't know about the documentary Sam Walton was working on when he died. The studio never released any of the footage. For weeks he zig-zagged the heartland in his private jet, interviewing couples who had met while working at Walmart. His crew would rent a nice home in the area for the day and there, at a table in the middle of the freshly decorated kitchen, Sam would ask the couples about their marketplace meet cute – stockers who'd first noticed the beauty of their significant other as they stretched to place a box of ramen packets on a high shelf, cashiers whose first dreamy gazes had been soundtracked by the beeping of barcodes. “When did you sense that spark?” he would ask. “Did you ever, as a child, dream that you would someday find love like this?” He would end each segment by playfully requesting that they promise him something: that they would name one of their children Sam (“Samuel if it's a boy, and Samantha if it's a little girl, of course”). He would then have a producer come in to surprise the couple with a gift, and there would be great laughter and thanks as they unwrapped a tiny blue vest.

The great bulb flashed, and when it did we knew: to stand before the camera lens in the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter portrait studio is to truly be seen for the first time.

I remember shopping for CDs on trips to the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter with my mother. They were all edited – no parental advisory stickers to be found in the place. It would seem certain words were incapable of existing in the rarefied Walmart air. They congregated in distant provinces, erecting duplexes of drugs, citadels of sex and violence. To visit such sites required one to make the arduous journey beyond the walls of the Walmart. “And why,” my mother asked, “would anyone want to do that?”

Between the glue in the school supplies aisle and all the spray paint back by sporting goods, Jeff told me, it's not all that difficult to get fucked up in a Walmart. It's not all that difficult, either, to find a blind spot over in home & garden to do it in, or some boxes to discard everything behind once you're finished. He said he liked to do it and then watch the display tvs all playing the same thing back in electronics. He had some really grand theories about who was controlling what was on them, and when he got to talking about it he always worked his way around to this fantasy he had of breaking in and playing his own home movies. "If I could see myself multiplied all over that wall," he said, "I don't know what I'd do."

I think I'd like to get into writing slogans. It seems so much easier than writing poems. Pays more, too. A few years ago the Leitchfield tourism board paid an agency five figures for these six words: *Filled with Fun, Surrounded by Adventure*. I can't imagine a scenario in which that takes more than a minute or two to think up. Three, tops. Or there was that kerfuffle a while back where people started a petition expressing their contempt for Rally's slogan: *You Gotta Eat*. It seems they didn't care for the way it hit them over the head with their animal obligations, leading them to question their own free will as they sat in the drive-thru waiting for their chicken bites or Big Buford. So they replaced it with this crayon drawing of a slogan: *Crazy Good Food*. I've always admired Walmart's slogan: *Always Low Prices*. I like the near-religious assurance of *Always*, the benevolent glow it casts over its surroundings. I like the honest humility of *Low*, its tacit acknowledgment of the valley we all must walk through at some point. Still, I think an entity as vast as Walmart deserves a slogan befitting its size. They can handle it; the gods have no need for subtlety. That's why I'm proposing my own – Walmart: *Though Plague May Overtake the Land and Violence Make of You a Creature Foreign Even to Yourself, We Will Always Be Your Mother*.



Who's left to even pronounce the ancient names carved into the bathroom stalls of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter? What trace elements still linger from the ceremonial daggers that immortalized them? It's all trapped in speculation now, faint daydreams forced into the charts and jargon of papers no one will ever read. Were the numbers truly dialed, the promised good times had? The recreations are ridiculous, a frenzy of fake denim and papyrus fonts. There is no place left for the Real. When they finally tunnel beneath the store and pry open the tomb of the prom king and queen, the gold will blind them.

Jeff said the greatest thing a million dollars could buy is the pleasure of burning a million dollar bills all in a giant pile. “Imagine the freedom,” he said, “the relief of seeing it with your own two eyes and truly knowing that this thing that rules our lives – this thing that people are willing to debase themselves for, to kill for, to even trade their own children for – is nothing. Just paper. Shit.” “That’s cool,” I said, “but if I had a million dollars, I think I would just buy everything in the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter.”

Grandma's death last June brought with it a dilemma: how best to go about scattering human remains in a Walmart? She did, after all, spend some portion of nearly every day of the last 20 years of her life at the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter, combing through last season's plastic trinkets in the sale section, examining the small floral patterns on various fabrics with a sleuth's eye, trading church gossip with old friends at the in-store McDonald's. Should we leave her in one of the hard-to-reach places behind a booth in there to minimize the danger of being swept up? Or would it be more natural to leave her in a potted plant in home & garden? Would it be possible to pry up a floor tile and deposit her under that without anyone noticing? This was our predicament. My cousin Ray had an idea, though. He said, if we were being honest with ourselves, there was no way she wouldn't get swept up eventually, so we may as well give her one last grand tour of the whole place, scattering a little in every aisle. If that meant finding her way to the mop bucket sooner, so be it. Would it really be so bad? Most people have their ashes scattered in the sea anyway. And at the end of the day, the way he saw it, all that water ends up in the same place eventually.

A channel 11 news story last winter told of a group of high schoolers who let a baby deer loose in the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter. The boys were able to use a backdoor by the automotive department to sneak the deer – a fawn from one of the boy’s family’s farm – into the store. Authorities agreed that, all things considered, the results of the prank weren’t nearly as catastrophic as they could have been; the deer had fumbled around a bit in the back of the store, knocking over some displays and briefly throwing customers into a panic, but an officer from animal control was able to subdue it before it did any real harm to itself or anyone else. When they interviewed him, he spoke like a man who’d just been woken up from a long nap. He said, “You can learn a lot about the world by watching a deer try to run on linoleum.”

What becomes of the unwanted babies left at the customer service desk of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter? Property of the Waltons, they are raised on the Great Value diet. They learn their nocturnal routine as they grow, taking their first doddering steps behind push brooms, building their strength restocking shelves. From the night crew they learn which combinations of words to laugh at, which ones not to say so loud. Sometimes they even manage to sneak out and join them in their cars on break, listening to nu-metal and smoking menthols. The air out there is different from the air inside, even in the breakroom. Gazing up through the sunroof, they imagine the moon covered in a billion fluorescent bulbs.

In a universe of stupid questions, *what can you get at Walmart?* surely ranks among the most asinine. *What can't you get at Walmart?* is the much more appropriate inquiry. I imagine Adam and Eve, before the fall, living in the paradise of the Leitchfield Walmart Supercenter, strolling among the lemongrass and ferns in home & garden, lunching on honeycrisps and clementines from plastic bins near the deli, making love atop pleather bean bags in the furniture aisle. One blessed morning Eve stands before a fish tank in the pet department, watching a betta glide through sickly green water, repeatedly darting in and out of a plastic replica of a shipwreck. She studies the glass walls of the tank, wonders if the view is as clear from the inside, considers their relation to the bricks surrounding her. When the time comes, she names the fish Sam.

### *III. The Levita Dispatches*

. . . whole township gathered in the gymnasium, pulling rubber knives from the back of the Great Argument of the World like feathers . . . small fortunes to be made in joke recycling, claims the incumbent . . . the biggest globe I've ever seen, rotating slow and deliberate in the airport bar, light exposing a cloud of handprints over the Atlantic . . . in the made-for-TV movie chronicling my childhood near-death experience and subsequent visitation of Heaven, something endearing in the obviousness of the mother's wig . . . the pilot, saddled with the wrong coordinates and married to orders, drops the rations directly into the brush . . . conspiratorial chatter in the bleachers of the annual softball game between Team Space Camp and Team Bible Camp . . . back of the mascot uniform dingy with the soil of Eden . . .



. . . another half-assed approximation of the checkout line small talk that filled Jesus's missing years . . . outside the Greyhound Station, two guys nearly coming to blows over a bottle of Pepsi . . . a figure known as the Last Game Show Host stares into his coffee in the hospital cafeteria, waiting for the numbers to appear . . . one of those classics so dull it inspires envy toward an era slow enough for it to pass as entertainment . . . heartwarming shot of the island's lone survivor cozied up to a CPR dummy in his sleeping bag . . . the year our detective work went from amateur to semi-professional . . . Pat Boone's ghost on the PA and tear stains on the Constitutional facsimile . . . framed embroidery hanging above the kitchen counter: *If the cosmic telephone rings, don't answer it!* . . . I just assume the pedestrians in their camouflage rain slickers outside the Valero are part of some pilgrimage . . . I leave the comment card blank, turn it over and draw the outline of a mountain . . . the following is a description of the wondrous things that appeared to me when I decided to look at the trees a second time, without glasses . . .

. . . from where we're sitting it looks like the children are performing CPR on the earth . . . one of those situations where you escape the back of one ambulance to immediately get hit by another . . . for those seven months in the wagon I didn't see a single mirror . . . the sacrifice demanded of us was so small it felt like a haircut . . . yes, all the sons of southern Ohio are sleeping under the porch tonight . . . specks on the lens make flies on the face of the lake . . . the receipts burn with the anesthetized quality of a rerun . . . Jacob hums "Tonight's the Night" as he hangs the old uniform on the line and dusts it with buckshot . . . Abby details pre-sleep exercises meant to guide one to exotic destinations in dreams, says she plans on seeing the pyramids for free . . . if we could learn to live with being cut in half then we can learn to live with being cut in fourths . . . I fold my resignation speech into a plane and pilot it into the afternoon with the clarity of a man who's endured multiple bankruptcies . . .

. . . back at the mansion party, the sound of throat singers warming up behind a velvet curtain . . . sun-shunned ambiance of a hospice for B-listers . . . a cake baked for a nobleman recently acquitted of vehicular manslaughter . . . the lab techs loosen up, mime doing shots of the blood samples . . . blessed are those who placed the obsolete things in trucks and hauled them away, who saw the formula for the perfect ass advertised in five languages . . . unsure of my ability to fake an illness convincingly, I pay a patient to cough in my mouth . . . one of the guests ashes his cigarette onto the globe our aunt brought back from Japan . . . the strobe lights slice real life into frames . . . the costumed refusers of death now inhaling our congratulations . . .

. . . after the deputy dies, we find a diary filled with scientifically misguided and wholly fascinating theories . . . a daytime television sit-down with two recently detached conjoined twins achieves a kind of poetry unseen since 18<sup>th</sup>-century England . . . small talk small enough to require a microscope . . . remembering those years we spent mired in the emotional equivalent of dawning a series of disguises in order to obtain enough free samples to add up to a whole meal . . . I worked out an equation to determine the precise monetary value of leisure time on a napkin and then the waiter accidentally threw it away . . . when asked whether the fakeness of my furs signaled poverty or ethicality, I said, “Both” . . .

. . . this is one of those stories involving a cigar box with a voice trapped inside it . . . in the gift shop, a pocket manual offers curses in all the minor languages of the world . . . as the branding iron touches the water, it sings a song about the pleasures of divorce . . . the doctor grows reflective, says he'd initially planned on specializing in the treatment of wrist injuries incurred while composing holy texts . . . "as for the sky above the burial mound, it owes us nothing" . . . the survey asks, if a sudden lava flow were to preserve me in the pose I'm in right now for the next thousand years, would I be fine with that . . . at the sight of a laminated press pass, the underworld opens up . . . I take the severed ear I found behind the technical college to the opera . . . it shivers and, in its way, seems to thank me . . .

. . . running expense reports through the shredder, he recalls a former life spent selling salvia to architecture students . . . the memoir opens, “I was forced to master the piano by threat of what I later learned was a plastic gun” . . . a comedy of mourning disguised as a musical revisionary history . . . the anthropomorphic ice cream bar in the commercial raises questions we aren’t prepared to answer . . . the students in the introductory photography course who only take pictures of cemeteries and lawn furniture grow up, revise their wardrobes, inherit the earth . . . preferring to leave the problem unsolved, the night manager paid those with solutions double to forget them . . .

. . . the pilgrims stand in the shadow of their great loss, drinking lukewarm coffee from styrofoam cups . . . an app allows a man in New Orleans to track his father's vital signs in Baltimore . . . a placard near the door encourages visitors to interact with the beds at the center of the exhibition . . . during his lecture, the painter perturbs us with a comment about "the stupidity contained within the cow's eye" . . . on the tourist map, a star denotes every cemetery containing the body of a former heavyweight champion . . . the way the metal band inserts fast motion footage of a decomposing fox in their video implies a knowledge of mortality and the scarcity of time that makes us appreciate the hours of practice obvious from their shredding even more . . . greatly shaken up by a photo essay depicting the famous last meals of death row inmates, I take a lap around the complex . . . finally, with confidence, declaring those years spent married to the piano instructor the worst of my life . . .

. . . at the great gas station in the sky, exchanging fish for scratch off tickets . . . there it is, left out on the porch overnight: the milk of kindness frozen in its pail . . . the prison speaker says it can be helpful to think of prayer in terms of sharing a Budweiser with God . . . the docile gorilla in our dreams pulls the dart from its neck and acquires speech . . . feasting on the rotten produce hurled at the stage, I develop a figure that influences American beauty standards for half a century . . . the destroyer of the new world appears skinny and awkward through the old world's glass . . . the mice in the walls of our intentions best our written music . . . the lake inside the animal holds animals of its own . . . no, a language spoken knowledgably and a language spoken convincingly are not the same thing . . .



. . . this next number's called "The Night We All Saw Each Other for What We Truly Are and Still Had to Wake Up the Next Morning" . . . half the front row in airbrushed memorial tees – *R.I.P. Bryce, Shelby, Whoever, So-and-So* . . . it's November, and the Civil War reenactors are refusing to take their uniforms off in the showers again . . . when it comes to role models, you can do worse than imitating the way old hardasses in the movies just chew up their pills by the handful . . . enough distance now to fondly recall the life lessons our alcoholic Jr. Pro coaches taught us without even meaning to . . . I've read a hundred news stories about meth addicts yanking copper wire out of abandoned houses, but not one of them has provided me with a precise figure for the monetary value of raw copper . . . I can feel it swelling like a Macy's Day parade balloon now, my envy toward those lotto winners who blow it all so quickly and destructively it becomes newsworthy . . . biography of an unemployed Ohioan-turned-folk hero after smashing the automated self-checkout at Wal-Mart with a baseball bat . . . the headlines says thousands of dead fish washed up in Norway and we say, *Why the fuck wouldn't they?* . . .

. . . every midterm vote was a write-in, a vast menagerie of unpronounceable pseudo-names . . .  
the rain pooled on the roof of the federal bank like speech stubbornly forced into the itchy suit of  
song . . . some soft-hearted patron tore down the sign forbidding sleeping in the hallway . . .  
through the night, they constructed a pack of paper mache wolves in the rented church basement  
. . .

. . . incapable of being comforted by someone who makes so much less than him, the CEO insists on tipping his therapist . . . post-war indecisiveness toward which animas to hunt and which to worship spoils homecoming . . . even as the better parts of me are cleaved off in convenient portions, into the stew of a more anointed class . . . my will specifies that the band playing my exit music be unionized . . .

. . . as we descended into the valley, our sunroof was pelted with batteries . . . a note at the end of the piece dictated that the orchestra abruptly lie down and play dead for exactly five and a half minutes . . . a fresh email from a friend I haven't spoken to in years contains instructions for boiling snow . . . "if only I could hear the songs you sing in that misshapen head of yours while working in the factory all night" . . . I knew as soon as I saw the painting that it should be attached to the ceiling . . .

. . . “it’s here in the New Testament that we see God get sober for the kids” . . . the television’s been left on and the home invader lingers a while, taking in an infomercial for the Dyson . . . the time comes when we finally allow ourselves to breathe the fresh air of duty abandoned . . . the concept of immortality finding expression in a homemade tattoo of a bald eagle . . . struggling to fit the Steinway through the door of the fallout shelter, the moving crew votes on a smoke break . . . it was a long winter, marked by the crude intermingling of seasonal affective disorder and nature documentary binges . . .

. . . he knew manning the isolated fruit stand all summer would either kill what was left of his imagination or enlarge it . . . he sang of living in a car for months on end, and for this we respected him . . . no, the new Earth Day was not like the old Earth Day . . . he imagined his hands folded into birds, imagined the birds copulating, imagined never stepping foot indoors again . . . each morning he Googled “This day in history” in order to find out the kinds of ghosts he’d be contending with . . . he constructed an impeccable mask of his younger face to wear when he got older . . . as the water filled the car he thought, I could live like this . . .

. . . we chose the creation myth that included a Save-A-Lot cart and a box of harmonicas . . . the ten year plan involved purchasing prime real estate in the fantasies of barbarians . . . “here’s to the days of entering a tiny gilded room as one thing and exiting as something else” . . . set list nothing but hits at the Pre-Extinction Tour . . . the marquee reading *Resuscitation of a Poor Tone-Deaf Bastard* . . . “the climate almost seems to necessitate the contemplation of inconsequential horseshit” . . . furiously switching between signing autographs and huffing the marker . . . the dream hobbling along, refusing a knee-brace . . .

. . . we came to recognize the possibility that something could be large enough and dead enough for a man to mistakenly begin building a house atop it . . . after the exorcism, we could hear the faint sound of Billy Joel leaking from the priest's ear buds as he smoked on the steps . . . if old friends weren't adopting belief systems that shunned photographic technology, they were having kids and making them learn to fish with their bare hands . . . buried in the nineteen hours of field recordings from the county fair was five seconds of the most truthful sound ever heard . . . the household items of the famous died-too-youngs dazzled beneath museum glass . . . though no one admitted it, we were all mildly impressed by the plague . . . until I heard it from the mouth of a life coach, I'd never considered the beauty of the phrase "prison wine" . . .



. . . the instructions said to choose a single word, write it on a piece of paper, and then tape it to your chest and walk around with it under your shirt like that all day . . . “do you approach the problems of the world with a sharpie or a white-out pen?” . . . I like to pretend I’m one of those people who can just pack up and go operate heavy machinery in Antarctica for a few years . . . my only request in this life is to have my face blurred out in post . . . these thoughts are like those trained animals they rent out to movie studios . . . to even get one sentence down feels like trying to comb the hair of a fidgeting child . . .

. . . Ronny explained to us how marrying someone you secretly find repulsive is the ultimate form of patriotism . . . he said, “You have to pity the prison guard too, you know” . . . we decided to name the band Shivering Animal . . . the text was like a collection of surgical tools laid out on a styrofoam plate . . . we watched a crew of volunteers dismantle the beached whale with an ax and carry the pieces back home to their families . . . a section of sky above the cathedral was auctioned off for charity that specialized in speech therapy . . . they were passing around a petition that called for the tearing off of certain panels, the ripping out of certain wires . . . the drink of the night was Vomit of the Sphinx . . . it wasn’t so uncommon, back then, to look out and see the neighbors in the floodlights, their ears pressed to the ground . . .

. . . practicing an embrace wide enough to accomodate both Heidegger and High Life . . . a glowing surge of accomplishment when someone describes how they hollowed out a copy of your magnum opus to hide psychedelics from their evangelical foster parents . . . no more noble task than repeatedly ripping a sheet of paper until it resembles a pile of snow on the floor . . . like entering a room where you pay to smash fragile objects with a sledgehammer and just sitting on a coffee table and crying into your safety goggles . . . like waking from a coma and the first thing you see is Law & Order: SVU playing on the miniature television . . . unfortunately there will always be someone with a tattoo of an optical illusion trying to wedge their acoustic guitar up your ass . . . reminiscing on all the retired jerseys hanging from the rafters of Hell . . . the truckstop we traveled through compelled us to stop and sketch so often we never made it back out . . .

. . . lately I've been carrying the conviction that we'll spend our last days on earth performing heavy-duty lawn maintenance at gunpoint around with me wherever I walk . . . a prayer beginning, *Dear Lord, Our gums are bleeding and our trucks are loud with borrowed money* blows through the sky above the vacant repair shop . . . new relief in the old admission: I had one job to do and I fucked it up . . . Leader allows himself store-bought milk and carpeting behind closed doors, explains, *From time to time you have to let disgust enter you like a drunk interior decorator* . . . the singer's doing that thing where he hides his voice behind his eyes and raises his trembling hands like lit sparklers . . . the gas station attendant recognizes the band name on my t-shirt and shares with me a story about his little brother who died in a car wreck . . . this next song's called "The Night We Bludgeoned the Air with Our Words Until the Air Grew Sick of It and Conjured a Wind to Pull the Tongues from Our Mouths and Carry Them Off Into Space and We Stood There In Silence and Watched Them Flap Away Like Migrating Birds of Paradise" . . .

. . . the doctor is still talking on the other end of the line, but his voice has turned to flute muzak .  
. . I woke up this morning with every intention of denting the arc of history . . . it felt as if  
someone had lined my insides with bumper stickers . . . platitude weather . . . something mildly  
religious about the nurses on their smoke break . . . the acupuncturist's memoir more touching  
than it has any right to be . . . we find ourselves nostalgic for the old laws . . . just off main street,  
the grand opening of one of those businesses where you pay to smash fragile objects with a bat . .  
. our plan isn't necessarily to eat, but to find a sight capable of making us lose our appetites . . .

. . . when winter came we confronted it with the preparedness of a man who's paid his funeral arrangements off a good decade before dying . . . a retired Elvis type tried convincing us of the more benevolent side of libertarianism . . . the witch quietly prepared for her second act in real estate . . . the imitation meat tasted too real . . . even the executioners were observing Bring Your Child to Work Day . . . as our dictator succumbed to morbid obesity, we grew to like him more, to find it charming . . . we were trying our best to get out of our habit of romanticizing nerve damage . . . we had faith that assigning a new name to our pain could relieve it . . .

. . . the graffiti on the side of the DQ reads *Jesus brought us yacht rock* . . . a special elixir for those who find comfort in watercolor depictions of horses . . . the nurse we hired to read grandpa the collected works of Proust leaves the apartment smelling like smoke again . . . a friend-of-a-friend relays a tale of attending a local wrestling event where a guy actually died . . . you're at your most beautiful when crafting something there's no market for . . . you're watching the veins in the protagonist's head bulge as he tries to uproot a small tree with his bare hands . . . tonight, my blood moves like elevator music . . . I'm shedding platitudes like loose fur all over the carpet in the living room again . . .

. . . in the desk from the flea market she found a cassette tape of cattle noises . . . that night she dreams of a giant eraser wiping away rows of houses in smooth, soundless motions . . . from the family album, a newspaper clipping about the man who ate his entire childhood home one piece at a time . . . garland wrapped around the heart monitor to make the room feel more festive . . . the rain spares a single, randomly selected suburb . . . the star retires, settles down, takes his place among the Amish . . . the youngest on all fours, attempting to eat the grass, and each of them with a well-considered reason for not stopping him . . .



. . . it seems like someone is selling a deer rifle out of their trunk in every parking lot we pull into now. . . an impassioned screed against blood donation dominates the op-ed pages . . . if these last few months have taught us anything, it's that it's impossible to truly know the life choices or aesthetic inclinations that lead someone to take seasonal work in a haunted corn maze . . . what we thought was a dead body in the community garden turned out to be a homeless man taking a nap . . .

. . . a sign by the highway alerted us to the fact that an astronaut had been born nearby, that feet that had touched the moon had also touched local soil . . . the evening anchor dazzled us with his plainness . . . one of those days even a task as simple as bringing someone a can of tea back from the gas station felt like an act of mercy worthy of tears . . . the film moved along with the dull competence of a retired president's philanthropic efforts . . . the end of the world will inevitably find a few people mere minutes from reaching their peaks . . . less than a year into the job, I'd already bought the liquor I intended to celebrate my retirement with . . .

. . . we had our asses handed to us by exceptionally articulate children . . . I was drunk my whole first summer there, then sober my second summer, then somewhere in between after that . . . a gloved hand dropped seeds through the holes in the ice . . . the starlings were struggling through the sky, tiredly bobbing with little gold bricks tied to their feet . . . we kept changing the names of the towns in our ghost stories, the originals too difficult to pronounce . . . they say for two or three minutes both sides stopped shooting at each other, that all you could hear was their breathing . . . they say that their breaths were breeding orchards of fruit trees between them . . .

. . . the formation of a complete thought briefly rocks the entire township . . . a stagehand is deflating the large blowup pig now, squeezing its sides to push the air out faster . . . the speaker catches his reflection in the spit pooled on the lectern . . . it feels like my maker is gently turning me over in his palm and filing off my serial number, like there's no door left inside me whose lock works properly . . . I try to think the one big thought, the one that will descend like snow on the lawn ornaments of all previous thoughts . . . the worst part of successfully predicting your own death is being too dead to accept any of the congratulations . . .

. . . the mural's titled "Heaven, Pt. 2," the degree to which its nudity is de-eroticized shocking even the artist . . . not a dry eye in the cheap seats as they mix the ashes of the entire team together in one urn down in the end zone . . . a decade later, all of the kids involved in the testing get together for a reunion picnic, playing Frisbee and speaking of their healing progress . . . the preacher coughs mid-eulogy and a hundred mourners say "Bless you" in unison . . . he tells of how small town murder mysteries are God's television . . . alas, the harvest is kaput . . . nothing sadder than a cloud frozen by a photograph . . . through it all, the feral pleasure of spitting from a great height persists . . .

*IV. Against the Confederate Living*

## Against the Confederate Living

When I was growing up in Kentucky, there was this small singing cult that lived in the same area as my family. Every evening they'd get dressed up in these outdated khaki suits and go caroling on people's lawns until they were offered a tip or waved away with a rifle. They had a young boy who played the mandolin sometimes, but mostly they just sang these a cappella numbers they'd written about people getting fucked by clouds of birds or the moon being pregnant with blood. They sang out of these hymnals that they'd crudely printed and stapled themselves, drawing crooked hands on the covers. Part of their beliefs involved leaving the hymnals in the woods for nature to have its way with when they weren't being used. They would skip over the sections that had been chewed up by animals and throw the rhythm completely off or make these wordless noises in places where the rain had smeared the ink. When the hymnals were finally beyond use, they took it as a sign that the songs were dead and wrote new ones. The group was one of the few interesting things in our small town, and their rituals were a constant source of speculation for people like my dad and his coworkers down at the cigarette factory. He said the hymnal thing was obviously spurred by the same philosophical impulses underlying Hans Arp's early experiments with chance collage, and though he believed Dadaism's vehement affront to traditional logic and bourgeoisie values had influenced tobacco country to a far greater degree than his buddies were willing to concede, he concluded that the cult's habits were admittedly just a bit too prissy for a town like ours. And I totally got that. I worked at the factory myself for a few summers, and we certainly weren't sitting around dreaming up new vowel combinations or gluing our trash together in stimulating ways. I basically stood by this conveyor belt all day, stuffing small boxes into slightly bigger boxes that tended to nick up my fingers. And yeah, it was pretty shitty, just goddamn degrading when you really got to thinking about it, and there was this light mounted in the corner that I often liked to unfocus my eyes and imagine was the headlamp of my car dying out in the murk of the Ohio River. But our supervisors would let us bring in our headphones and listen to music while we worked, and you really can't afford to ignore little kindnesses like that now can you?

## Rank and File

Some nights, when I'm feeling particularly nostalgic, I pull up the website for the local penitentiary and scan the recent bookings for faces from my childhood. Inevitably I find them there – homeroom spelling partners, fellow cub scouts, Jr. Pro teammates – stacked in a single continuous column, peering out from the white light of their squares. Their crimes vary – the usual possession, theft, assault. A story in the paper tells of how one even bludgeoned his own grandmother in a botched pill raid. They look changed, their expressions weighted, their skin weathered, in some cases even beginning to melt. One has a tattoo of a swastika on his forehead. Another's eye droops from its socket and down his cheek. One – Barry – is missing his head altogether. I know it's him from the write-up beneath the photo, and the capital B tattooed in gothic script on the stump of his neck. I remember how we used to play war on the playground in second grade, back when he still had a head thick with unruly red hair. How I'd kiss that head when assigned the role of medic, and how, when I was the general, I'd crack it with a stick.



## Legacy

I have this job where I'm constantly banging my head against things – solid oak conference tables, oil portraits of past community leaders, lightly rusted water fountains – just this slow, rhythmic banging, in between which I will offer my opinions on the effectiveness of meat-based economies, unpack the aesthetic legacy of the Stone Age, or approximate the luminosity of the sun with experimental pie charts and pharmaceutical metaphors. It's usually fine. I don't question it. This sort of thing used to be considered dignified, and I suppose it still is to a certain segment of the population. But sometimes the absurdity of it all reaches me, like a flasher who has managed to slip past the guards and throw open his trench coat to the appalled crowd, and I think, What the fuck am I doing with my life? To myself? And I think maybe I'll bang my head one final time, like a gavel adjourning it all, knock it against something sturdy enough to truly smash out all the floodlights. But then I remember my wife. What is she doing? She's sitting in the living room floor, fashioning a helmet for me out of pillows and duct tape. I could cry. And why shouldn't I? I have earned it. I have banged my head on things quite well. I have banged it until it glowed and all the room rotated around it.

## Our Anniversary

For our anniversary, I buy my wife gold spray paint. I stop in aisle three of Bishopman's Hardware and slap an entire row of cans into the basket. When the sales assistant approaches in his red vest and peeling nametag, I say, *You're an answered prayer, Larry. Got any more of this Valspar in the back?* I don't bother wrapping them; the plastic shopping bags are already so lovely, like great ghostly jellyfish washed in by the tide of commerce. My wife says, *It's perfect.* She takes a can in each hand, shakes them with a violent rattle and goes to work on the bedroom. She sprays the top of every bedpost until the paint races down each leg in thin lines and then splatters the sheets. She double-coats framed photos of downtown Chicago, an orchard trip with her sister, a family reunion at Nolin Lake, along with the nightstand they're resting on. I join in, pulling books from the shelf, giving Melville and Mayakovsky the Fort Knox treatment. I shoot the television as it plays. She spreads her camera equipment out on the floor and gilds every lens and flash. I open the nozzle on the guitars, and then the banjo and the chord organ. Glasses, shoes, passports, diplomas, Neil Young records, empty wine bottles, porcelain terrier figurines, an owl lamp, the carpet, the walls, the ceiling... All of this can finally be seen for the great treasure we always knew it to be. We strip off our clothes, close our eyes, take turns smothering each other in the metallic mist. We sail the fumes to El Dorado. Every expedition fails to reach us. We are beyond recovery.

## Poem

Sometimes I'll just think of something so beautiful that it brings me to tears. Like yesterday, when I was standing in line at the grocery store, getting ready to pay for my magazines and multivitamins. I imagined a gang of astronauts who'd just gotten off work, freed from their cumbersome spacesuits and intergalactic stresses, standing around on a launch pad in blue jeans and t-shirts, talking about tackle football and drinking beer out of cans. I began to weep quietly to myself, and even though I tried my best to cover it up by pulling the front of my shirt over my face, the lady in front of me noticed and asked what was wrong. I knew that if I shared my beautiful thought with her and just released it into the dirty supermarket air like that it would cease to be so beautiful, so I lied that it was the second anniversary of the day my one true love was taken from me forever by a horrific hotel fire. She sat her eggs and orange juice down and hugged me for a long while, and it was actually sort of beautiful, but not as beautiful as my thought about the astronauts with their blue jeans and canned beer. Last week a similar thing happened, except that time I was thinking about a farmer stepping over an electric fence in the rain and zapping his private parts, but not really caring because he was so excited to walk across the field and pet his favorite cow. I'm not sure why I've been given this ability to conjure such beautiful thoughts. I've even thought of seeing a doctor about it, but that's probably a bad idea. What if he snaked one of those long tube cameras into my head and saw what was in there? And what if it was like space, bursting with stars and colorful gases and other radiant sources of overpowering beauty? And what if he realized that nothing he'd ever see again would compare to that? And what if that made him really sad?

## My Tour of the Quiet Continent

I stand before a conference hall full of insurance salesmen. Maroon and gold stripes on the carpet, plants in every corner. They sit in their folding chairs with their hands in their laps. The mic clipped to my collar crackles when adjusted. I raise my right hand, instruct them to close their eyes. I tell them to imagine their living rooms just as they left them. *Except now, I say, there is a thin layer of ice coating every object.*

## The Other People

Some folks come to the executions just for the refreshments, ignoring the gallows altogether while stuffing their mouths with soft pretzels or guzzling lemon shakeups they swear just can't be copied at home. Others indulge in the spectacle for a little while, chucking a rock at the condemned or joining a group chant of *Enough with this crap, open up the trap*, but they still reach for a funnel cake or basket of chicken fingers when the tension gets to be too much. Some, however, come just for the hanging, ignoring my concession stand altogether. They watch the body jerk while hardly blinking. They watch the noose tighten on an empty stomach. I point these people out to my son (I've been training him on the deep fryer). I say, *See them? We don't talk to them.*

## Everybody Knows This is Nowhere

So I must face the junior firing squad? I must stare into the bared teeth of Death until I see the scraps of meat caught in its braces? Fine. But may I at least choose the location? I choose the beer cave, the one in the gas station down the street from my apartment. Surely, I think, the cold air will slow my blood. Surely it will slow my dying. I tear open a box, pull out the cheapest beer they have. No use in changing my ways now. The poor clerk in his too-tight red polo and patchy beard peers nervously through the window. I salute him. My crime? My heart was much too big. I kept smuggling circuses in it. Whales kept getting beached. The marksman rub their hands together to keep warm. They keep shaking their heads and saying *Godammit*. I offer them a drink. *It's fine*, I say, *You will have to pay for it afterward, but really, it's fine.*

## I Have Been Fired from the County Fair

This afternoon I will bury all my possessions. I have decided the earth is a fitter mother than I. I leave a single chair aboveground, its upholstery tufted, patterned with the kind of flowers you could see someone laying on the grave of a rodeo clown. This is the chair I sit in when I stare directly at the sky, halfway expecting a great door to open and a crowd of people to come pouring out of it in single file. At the end of my left wrist I am watching my hand wave goodbye. It's like a soiled napkin the wind has taught to dance.

## Leitchfield by Lamplight

Everything is a church now. The old auto dealership out by the exit has been turned into a church that just happens to also sell cars. That cash advance place near the hospital is now a church offering payday loans on the side. When I'm driving my old Corolla through town, I feel as if I'm guiding some noble, nameless donkey through the streets of Jerusalem. I think about the people sitting in the church that used to be the chicken shack, eating their blessings from around the bone. I think about the people sitting in the church that used to be the fashion outlet, trying on their blessings one leg at a time. Somewhere in the forest of my soul, someone is crushing a beer can and pressing their ear against the head of an ax as if it's about to tell them the most incredible story.



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