When Can I Go Home?
A Dramatic Nonfiction *in* Three Acts

by

C. Charles Bley

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Neil Shea

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Virginia Craighill

ABSTRACT

An autobiography, presented in dramatic form, combining elements of stage play, audiovisual exhibit and stern lecture.

Disembodied, prerecorded character voices and video-based scenery and text are inbuilt, to enrich the experience of the story's themes in a theater setting, as well as to limit cast and venue size. As it appears in print, *When Can I Go Home?* is equal parts atypically structured nonfiction and augmented play script. These parts overlap most noticeably in, for example, the irregular use of stage directions.

The narration in this work is done through multiple incarnations of the main character at different ages, guided by their present-day self, identified as Bley. These characters interact with each other, with other characters, and, to an extent, with a hypothetical audience. Bley's presence remains essentially constant. The implication—of an ongoing and literal *dialogue with his past*, punctuated by inclusion in the scenery of a laptop computer on a desk behind which Bley is often sitting—is that he is combing through and writing his life story piece by piece, publicly, with assistance from and in the company of his predecessors. Together, they lay bare years of unsavory personal details; Reflection and self-examination are frequently involved.

When Can I Go Home? is not solipsistic, however. Its psychological and social themes are broadly applicable and, with the exception of the six-year-old version of Bley, each of the narrators understands this. As much as Bley appears to need the autobiographical task completed for his own peace of mind, he takes full advantage of his access to a captive audience—to force them to recognize the *Bleys* in their own lives. The frustration and disillusionment motivating he and his younger selves manifest most palpably in Act III, where the tone (especially in Bley's monologues) builds to downright accusatory, confrontational. Bley comes by it honestly, if he is to be believed. And, to offset his rancor, there is plenty of humor, especially that of a self-deprecating *it's perfectly okay to laugh at my pain* nature.

Chronologically, each of the story's three acts strikes a different balance between its underlying straight timeline and context-based forward and backward digressions. Each act also compresses its base timeline differently. Most of Act I takes place within a ten-day period. Act II covers ten *years*. While touching farther back in time than Acts I and II, Act III also fills in gaps pertaining to the thirteen years from Act II's end to the story's present day. The *present* here is the "stage", where all interaction between the narrators takes place. Per the stage directions, it is the living room of Bley's current residence, which itself is the setting of various stories in *When Can I Go Home?* Whether a set on the stage or a room on the page, this is the *where* and *when* of Bley's writing process.

Although his entire life is examined over the course of the three acts, the main timeline—from the Act I chapter "June 29, 2001" to the final present-tense scene near the end of Act III—begins with an inciting incident: the death of Bley's best friend and first love,

Sam. It is not made clear whether Sam appears in any active form other than as one of the disembodied voices, i.e., in Bley's imagination and memory. Her image is only necessarily denoted in mentions of still photos, or, the integration of such photos into supplemental video projections. Visitations and funeral services for Sam are the crux of Act I. Much of what follows in acts II and III purports to stem from Bley's experience with her death, fused with the other major themes in *When Can I Go Home?*: search for *place,* family dysfunction, substance abuse, and mental illness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

for Samantha Lynn and Greta Jane,
and Mom

WHEN CAN I GO HOME?

A Dramatic Nonfiction
in Three Acts

by C. Charles Bley

Cast Of Note:

Sam, *the girl who went home*
Greta, *angel of Bley's broken parts*
Mom, *who tried a long time to make lemonade*
Jab, *Father counterpart to the above Mom*
Brother *and* Sister
Tackett, *Tim, Tim, don't you remember me?*
Sheri, *mother of the girl who went home*
Pete, *who drove Sam to the station*
Atrain, *Sam's older brother*
Biggs, *Sam's cousin*
Meg *and* Karah, *great friends of Sam*
Ford, *Sam's father, and co-boss* Karl
Ptera, *a love*
Zak, *drummer of Turkey Fister*
Matt & Tess, *wherever they are*
Aurora, *a new friend from the past*
Lara, *an old friend indeed*
Mary, *after the rain*
Simeon
Erica
Toph, Johnny, Sugar
Grandpas Foster & Bley & Uncle Frank
Cousin, Godfather, Uncle, Aunt & Noni
Aunt Sunny & Uncle Friend
Sherm the Perm
Merv the Swerv
Sage & DJ Eric P
Bird
Funeral Person, *a person in the funeral business*
Manic State, *a wily, misleading personality*
Schizo State *and* Depressive State

Emmy, *a customizable yoga robot voice*
Therapist, *the first of two*
Law Enforcement, *various officials*
Squeaky, *a feline friend*
the Audience

and

Mx. C. Charles Bley, *narrator*
a.k.a. Christopher Charles (*b.—1997*);
Noka (*1997—2003)*;
CONFUSOR (*2003—2005*);
Chri$ Tycoon (*2005—2009);*
Chouchou *pron. shoeshoe* (*2009—2019*);
and Bley (*2019—2042 at the absolute latest*)

The Set:

Black box. Physical props are somewhat basic: a desk, laptop computer, and swivel chair; papers, folders, a beat-up cardboard file box or two; simple seats for any configuration stated or implied e.g. the inside of a vehicle, a session between patient and psychologist; guitar and upright piano; a smattering of smaller objects as indicated.

The single static element is a rear-projection screen, situated far up-center. A dedicated video artist, ostensibly a *VJ*, is therefore essential to production of *WCIGH?* for the stage. Although this text is intended as a work of literary nonfiction first, as a stage play, it begs for imaginative choice-making. Video and other projected visual content—triggered seamlessly in real-time with the acting and dialogue—make it possible to intimate potentially unlimited scenery and enact scene changes which would be otherwise *im*possible for a small production.

Projection can (and should) also be used to (literally) punctuate scenes, such as with text lifted directly from the script. One suggested application: to silently display the poetic epigraphs found in the stage

directions at the beginning of each act, as well as act and scene titles. Extrapolating this idea outward, consider overall the unconventional use of stage directions in *WCIGH?* Readers familiar with dramatic formatting will notice this immediately, but it's not recommended to get too hung up on it. For the stage, this treatment was designed around the possibilities of projection.

Audio—whether spoken from offstage or, as with visual projections, pre-recorded then triggered in real-time—will serve essentially the same technical and logistical purposes as video, necessitating that a comparable audio engineer be part of the crew. A number of characters appear very briefly, with only one or two lines and little to no action attributed to them. Given the manner of production outlined thus far, there are undoubtedly more interesting ways to represent said characters than merely sending another human actor onstage.

Artistically and thematically, however, this "disembodied" sound has two specific functions, especially when utilized for dialogue. It signifies the loneliness of memory bridging the chasm of time…and the intrusive, sometimes jarring interjection of unwanted voices and sounds in the mind of a sufferer of schizoaffective disorder or schizophrenia. The former is more broadly thematic for *WCIGH?*, while the latter relates to a finer plot point revealed in Act II.

By delegating so much of the production to video and audio, this play will always feel at home in small venues and theaters, and never require more than a skeleton crew—and a small cast, relative to its deceptively stacked *dramatis personae*.

The character of Bley is almost perpetually onstage. He is a ring-leader with no intent to lead, at least not in this arena. He doesn't seek to dominate or interrupt his latter four predecessors when they're telling his story from their place in time, and treats

his child-self with gentleness and comfort. He dresses somewhat casually, plainly. The color and flavor of this character are in his delivery, his multi-tonal voice, and his overactive hands and arms. Even through some of the darker or self-deprecating passages, he tends to be spirited if not downright comedic. Attention should be paid to markers of pacing (ellipsis, italics) throughout the play, but especially for Bley. Bley's predecessors, his *younger selves*, are all somewhat distinct from each other, so casting their actors with similar build and facial features might contribute to the sense that they are all one Bley but at different ages. Christopher Charles is a sensitive six-year-old wearing a set of pajamas. Noka is awkward, but lively in spurts, his hair burned with peroxide and dyed green or pink or blue. CONFUSOR has hair down past his shoulders, a beard past his collarbone with no moustache, and wears hound's tooth patterned chef's pants with a wife-beater undershirt. Chri$ Tycoon wears custom-hemmed highwater pants, a puffy vest, a string of fake pearls, and at least 2 hats at a time. Chouchou wears black skinny jeans and sunglasses, but not necessarily a shirt.

I. The Girl Who Went Home

Today I burned a letter / that was meant for someone special / It took ten minutes and still / I was holding this piece of paper / watching the little embers / eat at it very very slowly / until it finally burst into flame / And I let go what remained—onto the breeze and / into the Kalamazoo River

2001

The room is barely lit. Books, notebooks, photos, photo albums, folders, loose papers are fanned out across the floor. At the axis of this mess is a simple cross-brace platform-topped desk, behind which sits a shadow, slouching. Atop the desk, on either side of a powered-down laptop computer, a collection: bowie knife, cannabis pipe, whisky glass, ashtray, water glass, pens, more notebooks, sunglasses, small black and white photo of a young woman. A slip of paper from a fortune cookie is taped over the electronic eye above the laptop screen. It reads "You are capable, competent, creative, careful. Prove it."
The tired face of BLEY is revealed as the laptop turns on and its screen lights up. Silence and motionlessness, spare the drumming of his fingers on the desk. His body is amorphous in such scant light. It appears simultaneously big, strong, unchiseled, neglected.

BLEY

This needs to happen.

Feels like a good time to tap into the old *mania*.

MANIC STATE

Yesss. Go. Start talking. Get that rush. You feel it?…*Bubbling*? (*stifling a titillated cackle*) *Oooh*, what fun…Go…*Go…Go go gogogogo!*

BLEY

Whoa there. That was fast.

MANIC STATE

Can you get your hands on any Vivance or Adderall—

BLEY

—Uuugh.

MANIC STATE

Or some blow! Whatever you *need*, man!

BLEY

I shouldn't have called.

MANIC STATE

No, you *should* have called. *Months* ago.

BLEY

God damn it…(*exasperated sigh*) I am *not* comfortable with this.

MANIC STATE

Why *would* you be? What you have to do…it might as well be *grave robbing*. You'll be lucky if the dirt doesn't collapse in on you while you're down there—

MANIC STATE pauses, straightens up.
Looms in the dark.

—which, really, sounds like *best case*. You think you hate this *now?* You're going to *wish* you were buried, when it's over.

BLEY

Yeah…maybe…but I'm not taking *your* word for it. I'll chance it.

June 29, 2001

Friday evening is busy as usual at a suburban Little Caesar's in West Michigan. NOKA removes a steady flow of pizzas from the oven, cuts and prepares each one, boxes them, adds them to the collection of pickup orders under the heat lamps behind the front counter. And repeat. And repeat. And repeat. Monotony fit for thinking. He's thinking about *her*, about the odd, sweet kiss they shared when he left her earlier this afternoon—odd, because the two

aren't exactly a pair, right now. But, she is an amazing young woman any way he looks at her. He has come to understand—in spite of his relative immaturity—that her friendship alone is worth the pain of losing their partnership, whether or not it's for forever.
Piercing NOKA's cloud of thought, the sun comes. Light floods the glass storefront so utterly that, even from his truncated perspective, he has to squint. He does not look away. Without words or voice, something in the light is saying: *everything is going to be okay, for the two of you.* Right away he feels the same as when she gives him a long, warm bear-hug.

NOKA

(*to self)* Huh…maybe this *will* turn out alright.

Less than an hour later, one of the kids answering the phones leans around a partition to let NOKA know he's got a phone call.

NOKA

Hey, what's up, Freddy?

What?

…

…That's not fucking *funny,* Freddy!

MANAGER

Hey…there's customers in the lobby—

NOKA

(*over shoulder*) *—Shut the fuck up, Tom!*

(*on phone*) …Are you *sure?*

...

Oh, god…I don't…know what to do…

NOKA (*cont'd*)
Thank you for telling me.

NOKA hangs up the phone, head spinning, tears falling.

MANAGER
Uh…you can go home, if you need to.

NOKA is next in line to train as manager, but he will never return. Without a word, he clocks out. EXITS.

LIGHTS UP on NOKA, flat on his back on his bed. His eyes are hard-focused on nothing, somewhere beyond the ceiling. He is a vacuum struggling to draw—against the gravity of an incomprehensible obstruction—upon some great, unknown source of comprehension.

MOM
Jab…

JAB
…

MOM
Jab—

JAB
—What?

MOM
This is important!

From across the house, up a set of stairs, through his closed bedroom door, on the other side of the Kuiper Belt, NOKA can hear the exchange plainly. He lays very still for a few minutes, and then a pinch longer, before showing his face.

BLEY
It may seem premature for me say this, but I'm already tracking a trend here: an expanding load of things I don't quite remember. Old scrap pieces of greater things not

BLEY (*cont'd*)
thought about in years. I haven't *needed* them in *years*. Yet here I am, with shovel, pickaxe, dusting brush, excavating them. Pieces that were relics until I decided they were *not*…until I figured out how little of anything truly matters. Nothing necessarily has to *mean* anything. Burn it all. Bury the bits.

I got up…walked numbly but steadily downstairs…the floor was loud, so my parents knew I was coming…were already standing when I appeared.

I remember the looks on their faces. They looked entirely sorrowful.

Then they were both hugging me, and at some point we released, and somebody probably said something. All three of us were poised to cry, but nobody did. I turned away and went back upstairs and laid myself down and don't remember anything until

BLEY is flat on his back. His eyes are loosely closed. Comprehension comes if it comes. If it's all quiet, he's fine staring unfocused through his eyelids into the universe. If it's all noise, ride it out. Try and shoot for the gap.

EMMY
Just be heavy here.

BLEY
(*a very long inhale and exhale*)

EMMY
Begin to arrive, as you slowly deepen your breath, and soften your body into the floor.

BLEY
Okay…

Shove off from the shore…

EMMY
As you inhale, feel the air draw all the way down to the base of your ribs…and exhale, press it gently out your nose.

BLEY
Ahhh…

EMMY
Take a deep breath in…and a deep breath out…and a deep breath in…and a deep breath out.

BLEY

Find a new way.

EMMY

Keep going…

BLEY (*italics may rep. inner monologue)*

Find a new way around your troubles.

EMMY

The essential components are time…breath…and stillness.

BLEY

Good good.

EMMY

As we hold the poses today, keep the mind focused by bringing awareness back to your inhales…and exhales.

BLEY

So good.

EMMY

Slowly bend your knees, and plant the soles of the feet to the floor.

BLEY

Mmmm…

Here we go…

EMMY

Cross the left leg over the right. Bring the knees up towards your chest. Reach your hands out to take hold of your shins or ankles. Flex your feet.

BLEY

Ow.

EMMY

Gradually, bend at the elbows, and pull the legs closer to you.

BLEY

Owww. *Side pain. Already.*

EMMY

As you take a few breaths here, feel an opening in the outer left hip.

BLEY
I'm a hair away from "can't walk on my left leg tomorrow"...

EMMY
Just let the hands hang heavy on the legs, and let gravity do the work.

BLEY
Gravity is notorious for pulling big piles of shit to the floor, Emmy.

EMMY
Release the legs. Feet to the mat.

BLEY
Ohhh (*releases a large tensely-held breath*) thank *fuck* for that.

EMMY
Other side. Cross right leg over left. Draw the knees up. Take hold of your lower legs, and flex your feet.

BLEY
Don't fail me now, right hip.

EMMY
Now start to pull the legs closer to you.

BLEY
Mmmmph.

EMMY
Take some deep breaths here, and feel the outer right hip open.

BLEY
This is rough.

EMMY
Feel gravity's pull on your body taking you deeper into the stretch.

BLEY
Again, not a problem.

EMMY
Uncross the legs. Feet to the mat. Eeexhale.

BLEY
What in the hell am I going to do when I have to move out of this house?

EMMY
Lay your left leg long, and pull your right knee into your chest, then hug it in for a gentle stretch.

BLEY
Owww.

EMMY
Other side. Left knee to chest.

BLEY
Ow!

EMMY
Release the left leg, and place both feet flat on the mat.

BLEY
Why the hell is this moving so fast*?*

EMMY
Morning stretch. Both legs straight. Reach long through your fingers and toes.

BLEY
I know I set her on "slowest"…

If this is slow, I'd have a stroke on "fast"…

Alright, shush…flow back into the practice, you idiot…

EMMY
Inhale. Supine C Shape.

BLEY
C shape…that's me…some vague form of a human C. Bley—

EMMY
—Would you bloody concentrate?

BLEY
Emmy wouldn't really say that.

EMMY
Deepen the stretch, damn it!

BLEY
If only she was programmed to sense me backsliding—

EMMY

—Breeeathe into the side body.

BLEY

Eep…My back…I'm stuck…

…(*through clenched teeth) Like, if Emmy, in all in her robottery, living inside a yoga program, would spend a little of her free time going over my user data…*

(*exhales long and painfully*)*…Data which will clearly show how I've regressed to a point much farther back than where I started.*

(*breathlessly*) *My practices used to be forty-five minutes, somewhat fast-paced, and very active. Now, it's down to twenty or twenty-five minutes of mostly floor-level positions.*

(*gasping*) *I wish she'd say something. Instead of passive-aggressively ignoring my speed settings.*

EMMY

Deeepen the stretch…Eeexhale

BLEY

And if she could, through some biometric artificial intelligence, observe me with the device's built-in electronic eye…If she could determine algorithmically that my body—both visibly and in my ability to properly find the poses—appears to have given up on itself—

EMMY

—Take one last deep breath here…

BLEY

I ache practically all the time. This breathing *even hurts. A whole year committing myself to weekly practice. No discernable benefit to my structure. I've actually gotten* more *stiff,* lost *muscle definition. My back…lotta stress stored* there *already…It's as big a disaster as ever.*

It should go without saying, such frustration isn't great for meditation—

—PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, THIS POSE HAS TO END.

EMMY

Return to center…

BLEY

No central point to return to.

EMMY

(inaudible)

BLEY

And this mind…My mind.

EMMY

Take another deeep breath in…

BLEY draws breath until no more will fit.
Cringes with pain.

BLEY

So, where were we?

Oh, right…Long story short, I'm getting the distinct impression there's a lot going on here that yoga can't fix. The mind. The body.

The life…Some things I want to eeexhaaale…once and for all.

EMMY

Supine C, second side…

BLEY

Please not the second side…

EMMY

Stay here a while…

Feel the lower ribcage open as you extend further…

You're a pose behind, Bley!

BLEY

Yes, Drill Sergeant!

EMMY

Get off my yoga mat, Recruit!

BLEY

Sir! I haven't had Savasana yet, Sir!

…I'll skip every pose my body refuses, but I never skip out on a good Savasana.

EMMY

Draw both legs into your chest.

BLEY

A lot of those scraps I'm planning to dig for…turns out some of them end up in the Savasana…if I look into that black nothing for long enough, they start to appear.

He takes a final deep breath in, and out. Releases all limbs to the floor. Reaches for the nearby towel. In one motion rolls it lengthwise, wraps his head—creating a perfect pillow against the floor, blocking the light from his eyes.

BLEY

Old scrap pieces. Relics from a dead time. Soil-caked time capsules between stratified layers of filth. Disturbing, some of it. I didn't *want* to talk about it in the first place. I had to get *crazy* psyched up to even break ground on this because…well…the tools I have are the tools I have, and some of them are rusty. I can only dig so deep from the surface before I gotta climb down *into* the hole. I go at my own peril. How else could a person get a good, straight look at their *depths*? Anything less sounds half-ass to me. Never been my style.

That said, if anything…or any*one*…you hear or see here…leaves you wanting…I can't apologize, but I *can promise* you…I'm going to put my back into it, and I'm going to get dirty. Probably throw some dirt on you, too. Fair warning.

I turned away and went back upstairs and laid myself down and don't remember anything until

The cordless phone rings in NOKA's hand, slashing at the peace of the yard approaching dusk. He is sitting on the front porch bench, chain-smoking. Parliament Lights. This summer evening is sunny and not very hot.

CHRISTINE (*on phone*)

Is Noka there?

NOKA

It's me.

CHRISTINE

I can't get ahold of anyone. Do you know what's going on?

From his seat on the front porch bench, NOKA watches TACKETT's beater car pull into the driveway. The sun is setting.

TACKETT comes up the walk. NOKA stands. They share a long, tough hug.

TACKETT

Shit, man…

NOKA

Yeah.

They sit down on the bench and light cigarettes and say nothing. After a while, JAB appears from inside.

JAB

(*to TACKETT*) You gonna take care of him tonight?

TACKETT

Yep.

JAB

You guys shouldn't be smoking.

TACKETT and NOKA shrug. JAB stands there a moment, then turns slowly and closes the door. NOKA puts out his cigarette. He heads inside to gather a few things.

BLEY

Tackett drove me across town to his house for the night, the house his great-grandparents built in the nineteen-teens, the crazy old red house on the last block of Ira Avenue—the nearly empty house where I've been living for two years now.

This house has been a part of my life off and on for almost twenty years. It sits right about on the line where, currently, the third shittiest part of Kalamazoo goes from *hood* to "working class". The first time I came here was late in the spring of 2001, to help clean the place out. Tackett's dad hadn't owned it for very long at that point. Got it by buying out his brother's half of their mother's bequest—paying half of the appraised twenty-four thousand dollar value. The house was minimally habitable after years of abuse by Grandma Lucille's last tenant. Lucille grew up here, the daughter of Tackett's great-grands. Made her own home and family only a few blocks away, and took ownership of 553 Ira once her parents died. She spent the rest of her life as a landlady to this house.

Tackett's older brother had just started living there. Tackett and one of our mutual friends, both a year older than me, planned to share the smaller of the two bedrooms. *Anything for freedom,* is how he put it to me. When I showed up, the property was still far too gross for three people to live in. I remember finding an old baby playpen in the

BLEY (*cont'd*)
basement and cramming it so full of garbage that it would barely fold in half, then wrestling it up the insane old stairs, depositing it on the growing pile by the curb. That's pretty much how the whole nasty job went.

I wouldn't say that first round of cleanout ever actually got finished, though…that is, not until seventeen years later, when I moved in. Back in the day, weird conditions were an afterthought…because, all of a sudden, we four numbskulls ages eighteen to twenty found ourselves with round-the-clock-access to an enclosed structure. There was running water, and electricity, and a lack of supervision beyond our wildest dreams, all in the middle of a neighborhood where mostly nobody gave a shit what we did.

So, whether or not June 29th 2001 ended up one of the worst days of my life, odds are I'd have been right here by the end of the night, hanging out with Tackett and the boys, and whoever else came by. We would goof off, play music, eat the pizza I usually brought over after a Friday night shift at Little Caesar's. Then we'd get stoned and goof off even harder. I was fresh out of high school, less than two months away from moving out of my parent's house and into my first rental. Three weeks earlier, I took all my graduation money on a road trip to the east coast to party with the eighteen-year-old versions of friends I left behind in 8th grade, when Jab moved Mom and I to Michigan. Young Noka was gathering speed, doing what he wanted, where and when he wanted.

But no, besides this house and the job and the people, that Friday was *not* the usual. It was a special type of bad. Bad that's practically beautiful…*sublime* in the classical sense. When something horrific happens, but you haven't yet had a chance to sleep on it, the split in your consciousness can be disorienting. Everything you try to do feels like groping along the inside of an immense black silo, searching for a means of egress. Everything you say or hear in there becomes a thick, unintelligible echo.

I spent the night with my body thrown over a beanbag chair, a foot or two from where I'm sitting now. Nobody said much to me. Same as back in my bedroom earlier, I stared blankly upwards, with the addition of a dark, desperate dirge rolling over and over in my head:

> *Let me die. Replace me with her. Bring her back and kill me instead. Kill me. Don't take her. Kill me. Let me take her place. Let me die instead. Bring her back. Bring her back. Bring her back.*

I only remember snips from what little conversation went on.

ATRAIN (*on phone*)
…And Noka, they said it was instantaneous, okay?

ATRAIN (*on phone*)(*cont'd*)

She didn't suffer.

I love you.

NOKA

I love you.

BLEY

Sam's brother. He was in the car when it happened. Tracked me down by phone, calling from the hospital.

BECKY

It was Pete's fault, you know.

NOKA

…What?

BECKY

The whole accident…He missed a stop sign.

NOKA

Uh?

BLEY

Pete was the one driving the car. His accuser, Becky, was Tackett's girlfriend at the time. What she said…it was so damn *dumb*…my tired, fried brains immediately gave up on making a response. I was never angry at Pete during any of this.

At some point, I managed to fall asleep. The next day, Tackett and I went to WIDR studios, on the campus of Western Michigan University, to do our Saturday afternoon radio show.

"Skank Like You're on FIRE!" was a two-hour weekly engagement centered around, of all possible things, *ska music*. This was a couple years after ska's "third wave" had all but washed back into the sea, meaning, mass interest in the genre was down. We were the voice of ska for our city's remaining pockets of ska-punk-reggae weirdos.

A radio show stacked with predominantly upbeat ska music was *not* the best format for what I broadcast that afternoon.

COMMON RIDER

…Sun (shinin!) sun (shinin!) sun (shinin!) Shinin down / On a cloudy day. / I know those songs gonna last forever / That's what I say…

The last chorus of the show's chosen theme song wraps up as NOKA arms the host

microphones, engages the background music, and slides up the corresponding faders.

NOKA
Eighty-nine-point-one F M, W I D R, Kalamazoo. Starting out the show, as always, with Classics of Love…by Common Rider…

NOKA turns his head, looks silently at TACKETT. TACKETT stares at NOKA as if to say

TACKETT
Do what you gotta do, buddy.

NOKA
I have to tell you guys…Last night, my girlfriend Samantha…who some of you know—

BLEY
—technically, I should have said my *best* friend, although, Sam was so much more…the *soulmate* kind of friend. First love. Best *person* I knew, period, up to that point in my life. And we were in a holding pattern, doing circles over unknown topography following our recent breakup. Neither of us had a firm grasp on how *not* to be romantic with each other. Trying was not going too badly, but the *badly* of it entailed hurting each other's feelings by dabbling in the shallow end of other love interests.

NOKA
(*choking back tears*) She…died. In a car accident.

NOKA begins to sob loudly over the "bed music".

BLEY
Please, picture how ridiculous this is: a somewhat large, lumbering eighteen-year-old, flat-out break-down weeping on live FM radio, the signal easily reaching a hundred square miles of southwest Michigan…cheerful ska music skipping along in the background.

At some point, between sobs, I realized I wasn't actually *saying* anything, and I very much remember hearing the background music, immediately thinking

NOKA
This is probably super awkward…for pretty much every single person listening…how the hell do I get out of this?

BLEY

So, I let Tackett take over the rest of our two-hour time slot. One of the show's previous hosts had been listening. He showed up soon after and sat in for me.

NOKA wanders out of the on-air studio. Looks for distraction. Worn, dirty carpet underfoot. Posters and flyers up and down the hall between studios. A bin overflowing with deposit bottles and cans. The room directly across from on-air is filled with shelves, thousands upon thousands of vinyl records and compact discs, most of which will never be pulled out and looked at, let alone played. Next to that, a production studio. Shit everywhere, in there. Tangled cords and cables broken CD cases antiquated audio devices scraps of paper. Then the locked door of the transmitter room—great to stand next to and do nothing for x minutes.
Across from the transmitter room: the live performance booth. A few microphone stands, loose cables on the floor. In the corner, a plastic office swivel chair with stains on the padding. NOKA enters the booth, closes the door.
By now, the show is half over—the point at which NOKA and TACKETT spin a weekly "Tribute To Rock". This time, it's a double: "More Than A Feeling" by BOSTON, then "Just A Feeling" by RANCID. There are two soundproof windows between here and on-air; between the windows, the news studio. TACKETT might see NOKA if he looks, but at least he won't *hear* him.
When the first song starts, NOKA cranks the speakers in the performance studio to their absolute limit. His eyes well up as the band moves from verse, to chorus, to

BOSTON

…I closed my eyes and she slipped away…

BLEY

Corny, but it was enough for me. I lost it. I should have burst a blood vessel in my face, the way I cried.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

But then, it was time for the Rancid song. Hard fast upbeat gutter punk. So I screamed along, and stomped around…and smashed that piece of shit office chair on the ground and the wall until I knew it was useless forever.

RANCID

…On and on (just a feeling!) Don't seem right (just a feeling!) It don't seem right (just a feeling!) It don't seem right…Hurry up please I'm broken God (Whoa-oa-ohhh!) Well I don't know—

NOKA

I don't know about YOU! Yeah Yeah Yeah!

BLEY

If Tackett and I worked for a corporate radio station, management might have asked me to take a few shows off to get my shit together. Nobody at WIDR said anything. The June 30th 2001 broadcast was probably only our third ever—what an unlikely start to what ended up being a more than two-year position for Tackett and I.

Once we signed off that day, it was time for me to go be with Sheri, Sam's mom. It was time for one straight week of very awful days.

The black and white of it is: all I have forgotten, every in-between detail, inasmuch as forgetting is no good for telling the story, it has been a blessing to *me.* Digging…

Procession

NOKA reaches the front step. The inner door is open. Through the glass of the outer door, down the dark hall, at the back of the house, he sees a handful of familiar shapes gathered around the kitchen table. For over a year he's been welcomed here like it's his own home, but he knocks, because he doesn't know what else to do. Someone inside says *that must be NOKA.* SHERI appears almost immediately. They hold on to each other for a while, then adjourn to the empty front sitting-room.
SHERI is sensitive, with the power to give love in the middle of her own nightmare. In what she and NOKA discuss over the next hour, she is only instructive in one way, making her concern for NOKA explicit. She

asks for assurance he isn't having thoughts of hurting himself.
NOKA hadn't gotten that far in processing. Self-harm hasn't been on his mind since before SAM came into his world.
She tells NOKA about feeling SAM with her the night before, on the drive across the state to the hospital. Softly but matter-of-factly she describes sitting next to her daughter in the hospital room, holding her hand.
There isn't much of a plan, this first full day. A sort of coagulation is happening. News is spreading. SAM's house more and more feels like the center of the universe.
NOKA sits with his arm around SHERI, who breaks down while watching VHS tapes of SAM. To the inexperienced NOKA, watching SAM move around on a screen is stiflingly surreal.
NOKA sits cross-legged on SAM's bedroom floor while SHERI and ATRAIN choose an outfit in which to display the body. They settle on the black sweater and long dark-brown leather skirt she only got to wear once, a couple months earlier, as elected Junior class queen of the high school's Spring Formal dance.
Evidence of a life begins to be pulled out of every part of the house, piles of evidence slowly reaching critical mass, spilling into each other. Flower arrangements run out of places to be placed.

BLEY

Visitations and funerals for the young and much-loved can turn into a downright *event*…or, it seems to me, they all go more or less like Sam's did. I've seen plenty of supposedly real young people mourned and laid to rest on cheesedick investigative television shows. *20/20*…*Dateline NBC. Everybody* shows up for these kids. In some cases, judging by the footage, people treat the death like it's a *cause*…an issue about which something corrective can be done. T-shirts and homemade signs and vigils.

I hate thinking of the funeral of the other—less-celebrated—kid from Sam's grade who died that summer. Or the funerals of very elderly people who haven't left a lot of family or close friends behind. I hate thinking of what my mom's funeral, and her mother's, will be like. They've both been loved, but how many people are actually going to show up at

the end? I'm not even forty years old, and when I count the people I'm confident would attend if I died like…*this month*? *My own* funeral pull is already looking *weak.*

On the other hand, maybe the only place and time these thoughts matter are *on this world* and *in this life*. Maybe, upon death, nobody is *anywhere* anymore and, as such, nobody knows let alone gives a shit whether the living mourn them at all. I'm not saying that's what I *believe*, only that it sounds plausible. Certainly a trillion people across the millennia have considered the possibility before it ever occurred to me. I'm not blazing philosophical trails here.

But, if it was discovered scientifically verifiable and true…that a decedent's consciousness no longer exists in any form…that they are neither present nor watching nor listening nor caring…would humans eventually stop throwing these creepy parties, wherein the decorative focal point is someone's full-on dead body or a container of their ashen remains? In the American system, even a modest funeral can cost thousands of dollars. Then there's the last-minute coordination of travel, responsibilities put on hold, and maybe you didn't even *like* your great-Aunt-in-law…

I digress. Back to what's forgotten: I can't remember how late I stayed at Sheri's, whether I slept there, where I slept at all, what I ate, nothing The gap in my memory rolls all the way into the next evening—a few minutes before I saw the proof of Sam's death for myself.

On the first evening of visitation, NOKA arrives an hour early to the funeral home, as instructed.
Only a few people scattered here or there, in the various side-rooms of the place, almost entirely staff. NOKA is intercepted by someone just before he is able to turn the corner into the long, rectangular, windowless room where SAM is displayed. NOKA is close to the point of not being able to form sentences.

FUNERAL PERSON
Hello, can I help you?

NOKA
I…was told to come an hour early…

FUNERAL PERSON
Okay, and you are…?

NOKA

I'm…her…Sam's boyfriend.

Is she…

FUNERAL PERSON

Is sheee…

NOKA

…is she in there…like…

FUNERAL PERSON

…?

NOKA

Uncovered. Is it open?

FUNERAL PERSON

Oh, yes, the casket is open.

NOKA

…

FUNERAL PERSON

You know, we are open right now for close family only.

NOKA

(*straightening up*)…Yeah, that's why Sheri told me to get here around this time…?

FUNERAL PERSON

Oh. Yes, I see. Ahem.

NOKA

She wanted me to have a minute…before…before there's a lot of people.

FUNERAL PERSON

Okay…yes, you can view Samantha right through here…

BLEY

That is how another human being actually approached and managed what I imagine to be a routine-level situation in their line of work.

RULE 5.
Don't compound upon the disorientation of
clearly disoriented mourners.

RULE 7.
Be, *at minimum,* vaguely comforting first.
Ask questions later.

BLEY (*cont'd)*
Sure, a lot of bereavement-venue staff are known to be strange. It's *funeral* work…arguably one of the weirdest jobs around. But I've met others since then who are lighthearted and kind, and not very funeral-y at all. Oh well…I can see the positive side of it. What would this momentous life event have been, without a severely awkward interaction to match?

Stiffly, the funeral person backed off, held out an arm to gesture me by. I went. And right away I saw her, way down at the other end.

SAM is a centerpiece, surrounded by flowers, ferns, candles, photos, and the like. NOKA's eyes are trained on the moonsliver of pale face peeking above the side of SAM's box. With each of fifteen or twenty steps he gets a clearer look, finished wood steadily de-eclipsing his view of truth.
From the moment NOKA reaches the casket, life is delineated as everything *before*, or everything *after*. It doesn't matter which. One leads to a nature argument, the other, nurture. Both are always true.
While his tears spill and sobs choke him, NOKA *looks*. The scene is peppered with pieces of vital knowledge he knows he needs.
So much of *this* part of an open-casket funeral is about what the person looks like, and what seeing them reminds us of. NOKA thinks: he can't be friends with this version of her, can't give this SAM a hug. He can't say she is *beautiful* anymore. She *is*, it's just that the word itself doesn't make sense anymore.
Hesitantly, he touches her hand. She is wearing his ring. She was wearing it when she died. He brushes it with his fingers.
There is nothing good here. He goes straight outside to process.

Visitors arrive in a steady stream. NOKA knows most but not all of them. Their

murmuring builds to ubiquity throughout the building. They move from this room to that, one photo board to the next, receiving a hug and giving another. More flower arrangements, more people, more photos, more tears.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

That was only the first of three two-hour sessions. The evening wrapped up in whatever way it did. The next thing I remember is lying between blankets on Sheri's lawn, with Pete and Atrain. Both graduated high school with me barely a month earlier, at the beginning of June.

Pete broke a leg in the accident, and I think flying glass may have led to the big eye patch affixed to one side of his face. My memory tells me Atrain had a cast on one arm, but I could be confusing that with the following year, when we were snowboarding in Colorado together and he broke his arm on the halfpipe at Beaver Creek.

I understood the configuration to be that Sam was sitting behind Pete. Their side of the car got the worst part of a t-bone when Pete didn't judge oncoming traffic properly, pushing his family's goofy little Ford Fiesta off from a country-road stop sign onto a four-lane state road at rush hour.

Seconds before they were hit, Atrain told me, he looked back at Sam, who was gazing out the window, smiling. Her *happy place* was in view: an Episcopal Youth summer camp, of which all three passengers in the Fiesta were long-time attendees. They were a couple hundred yards from the entrance—

Atrain described how he had looked back again, this time shocked and confused, saw Sam now with her head down. Blood. Yelled to Sam to wake up. Fell into a daze.

Two nights later, there I was, under the stars with the two survivors.

Even though I was forty miles away at the moment of impact, I used to be dogged by my borrowed and imagined memories of it. When I'm thinking of Sam nowadays, and the crash comes to mind, one idea still absorbs me: *she experienced that.* For a fraction of a second, her mind recorded DISASTER. And then, what? This sweet being, who became one of the best things about *me,* found out what the *what* is. *She experienced that.* The first person I ever loved that way, who loved me that way, went somewhere, or nowhere. Did or did not know she was going. Whatever it was like, *she experienced that.* She went through the eye of the hook of the Great Question Mark. She didn't *choose* it, but for some reason, when I remember it, I always think of her as *brave.*

She came to me then, in blinding sun, as I cut pizzas and pondered *us.* There are only two unprovable things in the whole world I'll stand by. The first is: *Sam came to me* when she

BLEY (*cont'd*)
got released from her body. Whether or not there's any lasting afterlife, I'm far more certain about this than about any mysteriousness I've experienced before or since.

But like I said, I stand *by* it, not *with* it. What I described…well, it's sure as hell what *seemed* like happened.

ATRAIN
And then I was in the ambulance, and I asked a paramedic *what happened to my sister?* And he said *I'm sorry, your sister has passed away.* And then I just cried.

BLEY
And then, I figure, Pete called our friend Freddy, and Freddy brought me up on stage.

On the lawn, I made sure to tell Pete I didn't hold him responsible for Sam's death.

When it got late, Atrain, Pete and I shook out the blankets and brought them inside. We made a nest on the sitting room floor, next to the fireplace, and spent the night there together.

In her last few hours alive, before I left her to go to work, before our strange and sweet last kiss, Sam held onto my right hand and drew on the back of it with permanent marker. Concentric hearts, one small surrounded by one big. Simple lines pointing out in all directions from the perimeter, probably rays of love. By the time I woke up for the second day of visitations, her drawing was close to worn and washed away.

I found a Sharpie, and retraced it. I kept retracing it for at least a year.

The funeral home. People. Everyone from school. Cousins far and wide. *More* people. Throngs. *More* tables set up to accommodate *more* photo boards. *More* flowers.
The day is fully bright, sunny and warm, so NOKA mostly chain-smokes on the bench outside the front door. He would rather be anywhere else but wouldn't *actually be* anywhere else. On the cement below, sitting across from NOKA, is the purple wooden bear SAM painted for him. He is useless for conversation but, like somebody who doesn't know what else to do, plants himself in a spot where passersby will feel frequently and completely obligated to stop and talk to him.

BIGGS, SAM's older cousin—and one of SAM and NOKA's high school English teachers—arrives back in town on the earliest flight she could find, having been in Ireland when SAM died. Between the day's visitation and the evening's memorial service, SHERI finds NOKA to let him know BIGGS is on the way to the funeral home. SHERI asks him to come help receive BIGGS so they together can walk her up to the casket. They meet BIGGS at the door. They all embrace, and walk straight in. When she sees SAM's face, BIGGS is badly hurt, even pissed off, in a way. She stands before SAM the same way NOKA first did—taken aback by the complete fucked-up-edness of what she's seeing. Unfortunately, she barely has time to process. The biggest crowd yet is about to gather.
Shortly before the memorial service proceeds, NOKA, along with all of SAM's immediate family, stand in a line in front of where she lay. Dozens upon dozens of mourners line up to put their arms around each member of the group. When everyone is seated, the funeral director steps to the podium adjacent SAM. NOKA and the family occupy the first three rows.

BLEY (*cont'd*)
Aside from being overwhelmed and a bit detached, I felt surrounded by love that night. I sat next to Atrain. One by one, each of us got up to speak to the packed room.

I only hated when my turn came, though not at all out of anything like fear of being the focus of attention, and certainly nobody in the family was going to pressure me to speak. What I hated was knowing I didn't exactly *want* to but that I *would probably* get up and say something. It made sense for me to share my Sam with the room. But I really only wanted to listen to everyone else say their things. I couldn't imagine anything I had to say being *useful* to anyone. What the hell did I know about *any* of this?...And suddenly there I was at the podium, mumbling.

NOKA
…I always tried to save my best for her…

BLEY

I'll never forget saying that, because of how thoroughly lame and generic it was. *Immediately* after, I turned around and looked at Sam in silence, for a short yet uncomfortable amount of time, as if she had said something sarcastic and true that only I could hear.

SAM

…You *did* give me your best, except for the times you *didn't.*

NOKA

Okay, well, this isn't a great time to talk, I don't think.

BLEY

We had our moments. Nothing exceptional for a couple of teenagers figuring shit out.

After the ad-lib I read a poem Sam loved, one I had turned into a song and played for her on our Labor Day weekend trip up north with Sheri and Biggs the previous year. Its lyrics must be among what was lost years later, in a burning spree of Sam mementos, because it is *nowhere* in the extensive archive I keep of my writing. I know it started with

NOKA

Here in my dream, I am eternally with you…

BLEY

and at some point it makes the highly unrealistic statement

NOKA

You will…never die…

BLEY

I remember reading those four words deliberately, then scanning as many people's faces as I could before finishing the poem and sitting down. I hope I thanked everyone for their care, or something similar, but that memory is blank. All in all, it was an amateur presentation.

Did I forget I'm describing a memorial service? No. I know exactly what I'm saying.

What I should have talked about: how great Sam was. Full stop. Ninety seconds tops. Thank you for being here for us and for each other. Short, uncomplicated, grateful. The way I'd do it if it was happening tomorrow.

This time of year, daylight stays with
Michigan until well past nine in the evening.
SAM's memorial gathering lasts so long and
is so large, parts of it migrate out into the lot
and the surrounding grass under a warm,

comfortable dusk. Many stay past official visitation hours. Eventually, the staff has to ask people to exodus. Their weird, blasé truth: they can't begin staging tomorrow's memorial, for some entirely different decedent, with SAM and all her things and her people in the way,
NOKA knows this is the last time he will see her. He sits on the back of his Ford Focus, seeing friends off, waving to new acquaintances as they leave. When everyone has nearly gone, he goes inside. He waits until the room where SAM lies is completely empty. Approaches the casket. Reaches for SAM's hand, with none of the timidity or apprehension of the day before. He holds it, comprehends its stiffness. Turns his attention to her face. Beholds her.

NOKA
If this works, we'll trade places, and you'll get to be alive instead.

NOKA leans in, leaves a small kiss on SAM's lips. Nothing happens, obviously.

Okay. I love you.

He takes a final look at her. Lets go of her hand. And then, she is alone, only to have her lid closed and be wheeled into another room until the hearse arrives tomorrow.

BLEY
That night, back at Sam's house, I tried to sleep in her bed. Within about an hour, when I was almost asleep, something bizarre and frightening happened.

Those two *unprovable ideas* I mentioned earlier…the ones I stand by…this was the other one. *She was there.*

I slept downstairs on one of the couches instead.

An overcast midweek summer morning. Dozens of cars line up at the funeral home, waiting to join SAM's parade. TACKETT runs late, and is almost bumped as a pallbearer. NOKA is able to hold the process

up on his behalf. When TACKETT arrives, he and NOKA, along with four—or maybe six—others, roll SAM's box out to the waiting hearse, lift it, guide it in. Among the bearers is MEG, one of SAM's very best girlfriends. This is the first thing she and NOKA have ever done together.
Again NOKA is next to ATRAIN, this time in the back of SHERI's Honda, first car in line behind the one carrying SAM. There is no world going by outside, no landscape.
SAM is given the Catholic rite at St. Augustine's, where she attended elementary school and junior high. St. Augustine's Cathedral is classic, beautiful, with the most vaulted ceilings in town. Her funeral is as well-attended as all her previous events.
NOKA sits next to MEG.

AURORA (*text message)*
I remember singing Allelujah in the choir and having a hard time getting through it. And people having to stop singing bc we were crying.

BLEY
After rolling Sam up to the front and sitting down, I remember doing nothing except taking turns bawling with Meg the entire time. No memory of an Allelujah being sung. Was it the Leonard Cohen one that Jeff Buckley covered? Sam was super into that Buckley version.

At the end of the service, SAM is rolled back the way she came.

The strangest part was, nobody's face registered for me, when we took Sam out. The entire west side of the cathedral was in my range of vision the entire time, a few hundred people, almost every pew full. Usually, my mind records where people were in a space in time. But I was so distraught, sobbing uncontrollably, running my hand back and forth over the ceremonial cloth they had laid over the casket—not helping push whatsoever, mind you. Dozens of people I knew were looking me directly in the face. I couldn't say who a single one was. They processed as aliens, it felt like.

Outside, in the packed parking lot, next to a busy, loud four-lane downtown street, the bearers and Meg and I put Sam in her special car. Somebody closed the big back hatch. Meg sat down on the pavement and lost her shit. I just kind of stood there for a minute, staring out into whatever, eyes unfocused. I don't remember if the hearse drove away, or anything, and then my five best girlfriends were suddenly standing there. Each of them gave me a long, warm hug. Then, there was Aurora and her best friend. And then, my

parents, and my sister. None of these people said anything to me. I said nothing in return. They held me, and I held them.

Blanked out again. After a bit, I noticed Sam's uncle, from St. Louis, smoking a cigarette with his back against the outside of the church, his wife Aunt Sunny close by. I got introduced to them at a family gathering over a year earlier. Sam and I sat together and listened to Uncle Friend and Aunt Sunny play music and sing for half the night. Somewhere in the middle, I took the guitar and we sang them a song, "our" song. They loved it. They were excited about us.

I never felt more at home in my whole life than I did in that house, with that family, on nights like that one. When I walked up to Uncle Friend after the funeral, though, he practically didn't acknowledge me. The expression on his wife's face said *his head is so fucked up right now, he can't even speak to you.* Even to a young man experiencing grief and short bouts of time loss, her message was transparent.

Lunch was served. I didn't stay long. At some point, Sam's dad, Ford, sat down to talk with me. When I mentioned I didn't want to go back to my old job, he offered me one at his company.

A few days later, on a bright Saturday morning, he and I stood together at the burial of Sam's ashes. And there was Grandpa Ron and Grandma Harriet, Sheri, Atrain…More dead details…I'm *sure* Pete and Biggs were there. The dry sound of my shovel hitting calcified nothing. At least a handful more people came. Gun to my head, I could not tell you who they were.

In one hand I held a little quarter-sheet of paper my mother gave me that morning. It was a photocopy of a short poem, typed on a typewriter—an iteration of what Mary Elizabeth Frye originally scrawled on a paper bag for a grieving friend. You know the one.

> Do not stand at my grave and cry. / I am not
> there. I did not die.

Mom thought I could read it at the burial. I guess I thought I could, too, so it got thrown in the lineup. When the time came, I couldn't get past those first two lines. Sam's dad took over for me.

In Sam's personal effects, set aside before the cremation, was that ring. The ring I put on Sam's finger a year earlier, on her sixteenth birthday. Sheri had given it to me when we got to the cemetery. I clutched it in my fist throughout the ceremony, along with the matching one Sam put on *my* finger, on my eighteenth birthday.

The funeral person in attendance was carrying the open urn from person to person, giving us the opportunity to look and reckon, or place something inside, or simply say goodbye

BLEY (*cont'd*)
to what was left of Sam. When it got to me, I looked in the urn, saw the ashes, and thought about what Sheri told me about the cremation process.

SHERI
There could be fragments of bone up to a centimeter in diameter. That's as big as the pieces are allowed to be, by law. I wanted to let you know how it works. So you're ready for it.

BLEY
I saw there was nothing but fine ash, in the urn. And I looked at the rings in my hand. And without making eye contact with the funeral person I said

NOKA
Okay. Thank you.

BLEY
and pocketed both rings. Like a god damned double-Frodo Baggins. The urn moved on. Some superglue came out of nowhere. Funeral Person applied it around the rim of the urn, placed the top on. A few minutes later, everything was finished.

NOKA walks slowly in the sand along Lake Michigan's eastern shoreline. At first, the sky is overcast, and NOKA is head down, solemn, hands in pockets. As the following lines are delivered, a progression occurs:

As the days and weeks after Sam's funeral and burial went by, sad and slow-dragging as they were…well, all that pain, the shocking loss, facing a cold reality head-on for the first time…Sam's unnecessary tragedy…somehow the situation started to…not so much to make *sense,* exactly…it started to *fit in,* an ugly but natural thread connected to and connect*ing* a much larger tapestry.

A fat sunbeam breaks through the clouds. NOKA holds his head up, sees the world alive around him. He picks up the pace;

My mental processes had changed, for the stronger. I've never been able to explain it any clearer than that. I simply *lived* it. Couldn't see an option *but* to live it.

Cloud cover all but evaporates into invisibility. The scene is bathed in warm sunshine. NOKA's eyes light up. He breaks into a trot, down the shore, veering off into shallow water;

My family rallied around me, held me up until my legs worked again. I even found this weird enthusiasm for the office job Ford gave me—another new, mature feeling. My first semester at community college kicked off that September, and I quickly saw I could succeed there.

A large Great Lakes wave arrives. Dark green-grey engulfs NOKA, along with most of the light of day. Silence.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

About that last bit…I was completely, totally messing around. That was the *bi*polar opposite of how the rest of the summer of 2001 went, or how *anything* went, for years after.

Underwater gives way to a new landscape: unending silhouette of tall Eastern white pines down both sides of a rural Michigan state highway at dusk. Yellow dividing lines zip past, out of and back into forgotten-ness.

The rings I didn't bury…a few grams of sterling silver heavier than my whole body…I hung those on my neck by a string of repurposed rosary beads.

Yellow lines, pine silhouettes—a hypnotic stock memory. Then a flash. Sudden marks of specificity. This is NOKA's road home from Lake Michigan. The sun is down. He is halfway through a drive that rarely takes a full hour to make. Dashboard light makes SAM's face visible, but barely, in the one-by-two-inch handmade black and white print pinned to the headliner of NOKA's car—the same photo among the collection on BLEY's desk. Noticing the photo, NOKA almost doesn't notice a family of deer crossing in the dark. The squeal of tires skidding. The Ford Focus slides on a slight diagonal to within twenty feet of the animals. One adult female. Two fawns, who kick spastically at nothing and scatter. Mother freezes in place. Stares. Moves on.

COUSIN

I'm not as good with words as you. I found this card to say everything I feel, because I don't know what to say. I know how special she was for you. I'm glad you shared the happiness of your relationship with me—

GODFATHER

—In the days since you were shocked by the news of Sam's death you probably have gone through a laundry list of emotions…disbelief, horror, anger, deep sorrow, etc. I have no idea where you are in the litany now, but I am sure you feel the whole situation is just not fair—

UNCLE

—I have spent a good part of my life trying to reconcile the contradictions of God, death, the good dying young and the bad living old. I have been able to make some sense of it in my mind, but I think everyone has to do that for themselves and I won't try and explain it here—

AUNT

—I know it's a hard time but remember I'm always here if you need me. If you need to get away for a few days you're always welcome—

NONI

—If possible, how about visiting your Aunt and I sometime?

BLEY

Every few years, when I'm reorganizing between moves or what have you, I end up going through a box I *honestly* no longer need to open at all.

AUDIENCE

Who are you trying to convince, huh? *Us* or *yourself*?

BLEY

Well, *you*, obviously. I'm not masturbating up here, I'm just trying to *convey* something.

This box…it gets uncovered in the process of moving *other* things, and then there it is…whispering…*nothing left on top of my lid…why not look?*

Every time, I open the box and take out those letters. They're never far from that little purple wooden bear. All are from relatives on Jab's side of my family, all Chicago-raised, most still Chicago-based—his brother and sister, my grandmother, his closest cousin my godfather, and my godfather's oldest daughter, one of my many third-cousins.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

I read my godfather's first. He's an attorney. His letter suits him. Plain white, thick paper stock, unlined, of some obscure near-letter size. Sometimes illegible but overall handsome handwriting. I always felt this man had my back. Never knew if he had a clue what life was like in Jab's house.

Then I read my cousin's card—the message that came with the card, and what she wrote in it. By the time I finish, I've already cried, guaranteed. She was always cool to me. When I visited her in Chicago on one of my high school spring breaks, and drank too much vodka, and projectile vomited across a wall of framed photos trying to reach her bathroom in time, she fixed everything, without a harsh word.

Then, my uncle's note. He was a little younger than his brother, Jab. Came of age as a hippie, went west, and more or less stayed there. Folded inside the notecard, which he had filled completely, was an odd little scrap of paper with an addendum: *Noka—call me if you want to talk. I'll listen if that's what you need, I'll talk if you ask me. There is a bond between us and you should never hesitate if there is something I can do.* Part of the bond he referred to, the unspoken part, is *this family is a bit square, but I smoked dope, and I* know *you do.*

Between Uncle and Aunt, though, I start to be reminded of the closest family I have, with whom I share a surname *and* blood. The Bleys. I think of how we *are*. How we *act.* And then my emotions do a little Lazy Susan. Grief turns to…let's call it *irritation*.

Between Aunt and Noni—who lived together for almost my Aunt's entire life, loving each other while also pecking at each other constantly—I feel Jab materializing in the background.

And then, I remember his best attempt at a contribution, the same week all of these condolences arrived in the mail. It was barely three weeks after Sam died.

A quiet afternoon, July 2001. NOKA is working on the family computer. The project: finishing cover art and design for a short album of songs NOKA and TACKETT are recording. SAM was supposed to be the lead vocalist; she and NOKA were working on these songs a few hours before she died. JAB walks in, holding an old spiral-bound notebook with a yellow cover. He stands next to NOKA and immediately

JAB

I started writing in this, like a journal, when Tracy died. I thought if you read it, it might help.

He sets the notebook to the side of the computer keyboard, immediately continues on to the next room.

NOKA

…Thanks, dad.

NOKA looks at the notebook. Doesn't know if there's anything else to say about it. He is overwhelmed, and furthermore, scared to think what he might read.

BLEY

Tracy was my first half-sibling. She died around 1970. She was in a car accident, too. If she had lived, I'd never have existed. I got almost all the experiences with Jab that she missed. And I'm thinking here of the *good* experiences.

…What? Were you starting to get the impression I came here just to talk shit? To deny…no, to straight up *omit*…the ways my dad was amazing? I didn't. I'm not *that* kind of asshole.

That said, the interaction *shouldn't* have gone in the direction it did, but there's no good, historical reason why it *wouldn't* have.

Not a minute later, As NOKA sits there, unmoving, full of thought bats swarming, JAB returns. Snatches the notebook off the desk.

JAB

(*yelling*) Obviously, you didn't deserve me giving you this! So f*orget* about it!

He exits, with his notebook, to wherever. NOKA, mouth agape, watches him go. Then—not out of shock or surprise but resignation and exhaustion—NOKA hangs his head, hides his face in his hands. BLEY replaces NOKA. Family computer desk returns, ostensibly, to BLEY's present-day writing desk. He lifts his head, shakes it free from the memory.

BLEY

The thing is, from some of my earliest memories all the way to my senior year of high school, I had been afraid of Jab. Thankfully, once I turned eighteen, he mostly ignored me. As he walked away with that notebook, I rather wished he'd *kept* ignoring me.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

Anything would have been better than this, because, in spite of everything I'd seen him do in my lifetime, every vile thing I heard him say, and scream…this was uniquely disturbing, if not necessarily a new low. How could I trust or rely on the man? How could I believe him capable of even some *approximation* of healthy parental love?

Three weeks. Three weeks since I lost my best friend. That's how long it took Jab's reservoir to run dry, tapped of whatever mutant kindness was holding him back from his usual—see: volatile, narcissistic.

One minute. I sat quietly for one minute and somehow, in Jab's mind, turned from a grief-stricken boy who needs help…into an insolent pissant, unworthy of learning from his decades-old pain. What I was supposed to have said, or done, I never knew. Nobody ever knew, with Jab.

I've spent so much of my life wondering…about a man so emotionally unhinged…seemingly living in defiance of healing or growth…incapable of empathy for the people closest to him. I've thought of him watching from a distance as his son went through tragedy. How he felt at Sam's memorial service. I know he and my mother were there together, but have no recollection of interacting with them.

Did he understand he was seeing me surrounded by people who, unlike him, loved me for who I was? Did he, even for a second, consider that their far-less-conditional love was why he'd never met most of them? I doubt it.

Similarly, when it came to Sam herself, I doubt Jab perceived how little a fan she was of him.

KARAH

Yeah, she used to say things like *I wish Chris's dad was nicer to him.*

BLEY

She had enough experience with her own dad to know a fucked up parent when she saw one.

From that day in July—the day of the notebook incident—I had six weeks until my first lease began, at a rental ten miles across town from my parent's house. On the rare occasion I was home at the same time as Jab, I kept my head down, waiting out the clock.

With what was left of summer, I synchronized-swam, albeit clumsily, to a routine of

Work. Work. Work. Cemetery. Work.
Therapist. Work. Radio show. Work. Work
Work Work Therapist Work Radio Show
Cemetery Work Work Work Work
TherapistWorkRadioShowWORKCEMETE

RYWORKWORKWORK*THERAPISTWOR*
*KRADIOSHOWCEMETERYWORK*WORK
WORK THERAPIST

Well, Noka, it sounds to me like you are in a *clinical depression*.

BLEY

He looked very much like Burl Ives. Biggs pointed it out, having availed herself of his services since a couple years before Sam died. After, Sheri started seeing him, and I soon followed. My insurance fully covered the first six visits. I went to five, and then it was the middle of September, and I never showed up for the sixth. Burl was alright, but…he was sort of like a lamp. The type of therapist who mostly listens, but doesn't really *offer* much. He didn't press. I needed—*wanted*—to be pressed. Squeezed 'til I popped. Get it all out.

I should credit my routine, its imperfect repetition, sometimes grinding and other times banal, for keeping me in motion for a while. Wherever I was that summer, I did more or less what was required of me, and then got the *hell* out of there. I was slipping bit by bit into a personality deserving no better name than *Mr. My Girlfriend Died.* I had no idea what to do with myself, besides to *be that*.

Already-defective switches in my head had been flipped, rewired, and flipped back off, and off was on. Some good switches shorted out and went bad. Flipped switches. Neurobiological conveyances, either conveying, or *not*…switches *inbuilt in our heads*. They are to an extent human-maintained machines but, unless you count procreation, not human-*made*. Nurture can flip Nature on and you never know what'll happen. Nature, in part, filters and channels responses to Nurture. And vice versa. *Both are always true*.

AUDIENCE

So…if nature or nurture isn't the right question, smart guy, what is this *about*?

A C. BLEY from each era appears onstage
just before their line is spoken.

CHOUCHOU

The one and only thing I care about here is making a piece of art. I genuinely don't give a shit how you end up interpreting it. Eat it or don't.

CONFUSOR

I do hope you eat it, though. I made it for you.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Maybe it's less concrete than being about *something*. Maybe it's about a *question*…

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES

(*furtive eye contact, says nothing*)

NOKA
I think it's about how much we loved a really great person. And how life was, after she died on us.

BLEY
After this is done, if anyone wants to know, I don't plan on thinking about any of it, ever again. If I can't help myself, if committing *this act* doesn't help, if I never see another sliver of true daylight in this life…well…

CHOUCHOU
…You'll have as much of the truth as it's possible to have. That's worth something.

CHRI$ TYCOON
So the question could be broad, like…*will he pull it off*?

CONFUSOR
And maybe that makes you reanalyze the situation like, *is he crazy for real*?

BLEY
Some people who go through things like I did, they make it through alright. I've met a few of them. They didn't stay so low for so long. They didn't fuck up as thoroughly as I have, either.

BLEY takes a long rip off the pipe, cracks his knuckles, sits back in his seat a few moments. Everything in the house is silent which might ordinarily make sound. He stands, strains to crack his aching back. Delivers the following lines while strolling the stage, from one C. BLEY to another.

For more than a decade after Sam died, I lived not always caring *that* I lived, yet…I welcomed professional intervention; lurched my way through a few landings at rock bottom; took most of the top-ten illegal substances; went to inpatient twice; wised up, got on some scripts—ones with my own name on them, I mean; got my heart broken a bunch more times, broke a few myself; learned from things; did some jobs; got my head far enough out of the hole to breathe fresh air…

…And after all of that, I *still* got tripped up once or twice, but more importantly, I reflected on my past with sincerity, studied it academically, attempted to reconcile it socially. I found my way around it, enough to pass myself off as moderately *neurotypical*…

…In short bursts, anyway. Fortunately for myself…and maybe for *everyone*…I'm alone an inordinate amount of the time…these Me's notwithstanding…which is an especially good thing right now…

…Because documenting this as I have so far has already started messing with my mind…and I only want to *a*ffect the outside world, not *in*fect. I only want you to know the truth, and I want you to trust me as *one* of your sources *of* the truth, ugly as it'll get.

See…in real life, afflictions like the ones I've come under are rarely as romantic as they're portrayed to be in works of fiction. Rarely so neat and tidy.

Imagine having the mental perspective to call cinematic scenes of suicide attempts and psychiatric commitments and substance abuse *neat and tidy*…Hi, I'm Bley. Strap in. I'm certainly not the first to bring this up. It's just…I can't see that you've *listened* yet.

The romanticizing of real-life *neurodivergence* doesn't help, either. It doesn't help anyone to *know* things. And so, now *you* know not to read any nostalgia into my telling of my worst life.

And if you're still ambivalent about what this is about…*good.* I hope it feels, at minimum, uncomfortable. *I'm with you*.

And I'm *me.*

All five C. BLEYs concur. *You are that.*

I *am* my mind. I *am* the tools. And now, I have to use *me* to excavate a *pit.*

Neurodivergence. My noodles. Asteroid belt floating in old radio static. Always-on-site stumbling block gummed motor silent tormenter except when it's not, black hallway…package stored improperly, kicked, dropped, shit spilled on it, seeped in from underneath. *Vile cabinet*. The purple bear isn't next to condolence letters in "OLD GRIEF". Omega has been duplicated, misfiled, triplicated, over and over. Garbage dump. Mildew. Rust. Nurture. Nurture. Nature. *Draw me a clock*

5
4
6
7
8
2 3
12 1 9
10
11

Evidence of family history. Evidence of inbuilt pathology. Evidence of *shit*.

Evidence of brain damage.
There is evidence of

There is evidence of
There is evidence of

Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. Both are always true.
Both are always true. FADE TO GREEN-GREY. FADE TO BLACK.

END ACT I

I ain't sat down with it yet / but there's a piano on the ward. O excuse / this. They call it The Unit. There's / a piano on the ward but we have not / yet met.

~~Ward.~~ There's / this beautiful girl on the ward it's just / I can't remember more than the curls in her / hair. But her Ghost is there. Her picture / at the window receives my pleas / before my prayers reach the lord.

The sky round the moon / turned deep dark blue. I really blew / it—should have just done it— / a few more cuts and voila! / Well, papers signed and I should be / home and not stay long enough to / stroke this piano on the ward.

2007

The room, the desk, the fanned-out evidence. Individual eras represented by BLEY's materials are now arranged chronologically from one side of the desk to the other, less disorganized than before, semi-tidy lines emanating like rays from the center. Each C. BLEY is seated, cross-legged, at the end of their designated paper trail, facing downstage, except for a six-year-old CHRISTOPHER CHARLES. He is small and balled up in BLEY's lap, behind the desk, head turned away from the audience, face buried in his own grown-up chest.

BLEY

By the end of this Act, if you came in with no respect for…understanding of…*belief* in…psychology, psychoanalysis, imbalances in brain chemistry, trauma, what-have-you…I'll bet you're going to want to blame all my problems on drugs, the whole drugs and nothing but the drugs.

NOKA

And I'm no tough guy…probably wouldn't say it to your face, but…if *that's* your big takeaway, I mean…*really?* You must have less of an education than *I* do. You're like a *kid*.

CHOUCHOU

Seconded…except I have *no* problem saying it to your face. You *definitely* have less of an education than me. That's on paper. But, like I suggested earlier, you can draw your own conclusions. I'm here to put on a show, not give a remedial psych lecture.

BLEY

Is there a third?

CONFUSOR

Aye.

BLEY

(*bangs his pipe on the desk*) Motion carries. I'm with these clowns—even if I *did* have the patience, I *don't* have all day to spend bringing everyone up to speed from zero. Life is a blink as it is.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Ironically, in early 2008 when I got busted, my probation intake officer *excluded* me from mandatory drug counseling…despite labeling me a *repeat substance abuser*. In our meeting, I had rattled off every drug I'd ever done, in what volumes and at what frequencies. Why? *I don't know!* Why would anyone *ever* share information like that with someone in law enforcement?

BLEY

Same as the answer to a *number* of other *why*'s in my behavior. You've heard it more than once from me already. Toward the end of the five craziest years of my life, but not for the first time *in* my life, *I did not know what else to do*. Went where the process took me. They asked, I answered. If it all happened today? As long as I wasn't legally forced to do so, I wouldn't say *shit* to *anyone*. I'm more confident, less easily intimidated.

CHRI$ TYCOON

And I *was* intimidated, by the *justice system*, without a doubt. The presence of police, the buildings you have to spend time in when you catch even the smallest case, all of it. It's a cold, nebulous, dehumanizing machine that screws a lot of people over, far worse than I got. It takes away *whole lives*, sometimes under false pretenses. I hated every second of it, and I didn't even spend a minute in jail.

BLEY

I'm still generally mistrustful of police, but that goes all the way back to formative experience. Back to when I was six, seven, eight years old. When my mom would call 9-1-1 on Jab for hitting my older brother. Police would show up, but…from my hiding spot, in a corner, in the shadow of the upright piano, I heard them say more or less the same thing, every time...

COPS

This is more a matter for *family court…*

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES stirs, burrows deeper. BLEY puts his arms around his younger self, rubs his back.

BLEY
…which for a very long time I did not at all understand. I have a better idea now. I *think* it has to do with white privilege.

NOKA
Or, maybe Jab was still in his Army uniform when he talked to the cops.

BLEY
Something I *do* understand, however—especially taking statutes of limitations into consideration—when I *wasn't* charged with additional substance use crimes based on the sole evidence of my admission to them, once I completed my six-month's probation, once the record was sealed as a first-offense 74-11 Discharge-eligible case, I became free to write about *all* of it, without fear.

CHOUCHOU
And here we are.

BLEY
We're going to go ahead and apply similar legal assertions to *everything* we admit to in Act II.

CHRI$ TYCOON
Anyway, the irony was that my probation intake experience revealed a rare upside, an unexpected benefit of mental illness. I was spared hours and hours of mind-numbing anti-drug classes *because*

INTERVIEWER
…given your experience in the mental health system, you already *know* you shouldn't be doing illegal drugs.

CONFUSOR
Whaaat? Nice.

CHOUCHOU
Sometimes it's the small victories.

CHRI$ TYCOON
I know! I said *okay, yes sir, understood.*

BLEY
When really, you were thinking, *awesome, I don't know what information you think I've been getting from that* other *system, but…whatever you say, dude.*

CHRI$ TYCOON

At the same time, though, if *this* person, as an actor for *this* system, is legally allowed to come to *this* conclusion…

BLEY

…then maybe, just maybe, psychology isn't total bullshit? Worth considering.

NOKA

I had enough of psych skepticism from Jab alone. It's not merely innocent ignorance. Sometimes it's *denial,* too…

BLEY

…Which is on par with *willful* ignorance. Very little tolerance here, for any of that.

CHRI$ TYCOON

I got charged with the most piddly marijuana crime on the books at the time: USE OF MARIHUANA. Mara-*HU*-wana. Note the square-as-a-crew-cut spelling. I wasn't found in possession. I was simply in a room where a haze still hung when the police showed up.

BLEY

In the state of Michigan—where most of my life happened *including* getting busted—grown adults are no longer charged with dumbass weed crimes like *use,* nor with *possession,* nor even *cultivation*. And that isn't even the whole story. Back in the 1970s in Ann Arbor—arguably the nicest city in the state—they decriminalized not only adult use of marijuana, but possession in small amounts as well.

Well, Ann Arbor didn't burn to the ground. It remained a relatively clean and peaceful place, home to a Big 10 school, destination of and home to students and professors from around the globe. And society took notice, and a whole lot of influential rectums started to unclench. Now, although federal marijuana law remains unchanged, cities and states across the nation have followed Ann Arbor's example.

CHRI$ TYCOON

The most logical conclusion to be drawn here: weed *was never* a big deal, and *is still not* a big deal. Compared to what I ended up getting into, weed was practically an *herbal supplement*.

NOKA

Pun intended.

CONFUSOR

And as far as getting busted goes, *I* could have got it *way* worse, *so many times.* It could have been *so much worse!*

NOKA

Same.

CHRI$ TYCOON
So forget about the easily pickings of what could've been worse.

BLEY
This Act is about things that *only* could have been worse if I was dead, in jail, or hooked on needle drugs. It gets around to that, anyway.

(to CONFUSOR) Take the kid out for me, yeah?

NOKA, CHRI$ TYCOON and CHOUCHOU exit as the previous lines are spoken. CHRISTOPHER CHARLES crawls out of BLEY's lap, takes CONFUSOR's hand, exits.

Dances With Drugs:
A Primer

BLEY
Before I knew Sam, I spent two years getting all *kinds* of fucked up. Sometimes it was strictly recreational; sometimes it was to distract me from life at home with Jab. Having fun…self-medicating…when I drank or got high on my own, it may not have been for fun at *first*…but it *got* fun.

Cigarettes were the easiest fix to get hold of. Not only did I know a number of eighteen and nineteen year olds who would buy for me, I could grow most of a full beard by age fifteen, which meant some shops…mostly the greasy bodegas…sold to me directly. If I was desperate, I stole a pack of Camels or Marlboros. These were times when you might still see a display rack of them right on the counter at a gas station. Ask the cashier some stupid question about batteries on the back wall. Snatch and pocket the cigarettes in the two seconds their head is turned. Go to the woods by Crane Park and smoke some dry brown Mexican brick weed out of a crushed soda can. Laugh for forty-five minutes straight.

Weed, booze, smokes. Usually that was the limit. *Usually*. Once in a while, I'd try somebody's prescription—anti-anxiety drugs, "study drugs" known colloquially as *legal meth*…my high school didn't police kids' prescriptions, and this was before the formula for drugs like Ritalin were changed to discourage abuse, so students with scripts laid out lines for they and their friends to snort—often in plain sight, like in the middle of homeroom, first thing in the morning.

I also drank my share of cough syrup. Hell, time to time, if I heard a rumor, like *eating a whole box of Pepto-Bismol chewables will make you hallucinate,* I'd give it a try. That specific example, I can report, did *not* work, at least not for me.

Speaking of hallucinations, I tried acid for the first time, at age sixteen. Loved it. And I say so even though the trip might've degenerated into a complete crisis. At some point around midnight, Jab called my friend Johnny's house, where I was supposed to be, found out we weren't there, and proceeded to call back repeatedly…one, two, three in the morning, he kept calling. We were out tripping our faces off while a sober friend drove us around Kalamazoo. When we finally got dropped off, and sneaked in through my friend's basement bedroom window, his mother emerged out of the dark to tell me Jab was trying to get ahold of me—being threatening and rude to her in the process—and that he would be there to pick me up first thing in the morning.

We lay down and, according to the mesmerizing, glowing red numbers on a nearby clock radio, for the next two to three hours I was kept awake by the craziest ringing in my head, like some bizarre ambulance was parked outside the house with the sirens on. I have no memory of actually *sleeping*, but that's acid. You really cannot will it away. You can only wait it out.

More notable is that I *also* have no memory of being worried what would happen the next day. I got picked up early, as promised. Less than an hour later, on a frigid winter Sunday morning, I stood in calf-deep snow in the middle of a field with Jab, on the land he owned, twenty miles west of town. No signs of civilization, excepting the fragmented sound of the occasional vehicle traveling on the main road a mile away. I know Jab was telling me *something*, in the specific, ominous, threatening way he would say things when he wasn't screaming them. Something about the punishment I'd be experiencing in retaliation for whatever it was I'd done wrong.

I was barely hearing him. I know a part of my brain worked in the background to keep my appearance attentive and contrite. I know this because Jab *didn't* backhand me in the face at any point. And anyway, everything important was happening invisibly, *behind* my face. A new part of me was taking its oath of office, out-of-doors. The sunrise was blowing my mind, and the air was preposterously fresh. The fear of Jab's power over me was unusually quiet. The acid *worked* and, in that moment, was still actively work*ing*.

A notable aspect of psychedelic drugs is that, sometimes, the benefits of one good dose can last *years*. I didn't take another trip of *any* kind until I was nineteen and ate psilocybin mushrooms for the first time. In those intervening years, I didn't itch to trip again. I didn't *not* want to, either…but somehow, I could tell that my noodles wouldn't need to be stirred again for a while.

My reputation throughout the first half of high school—mostly among faculty and the "good kids"—was shy of favorable. However, I didn't cause any serious trouble for anyone but myself. Freshman year, the year Sheri was my English teacher, Johnny and I got suspended and drug tested after I got caught in math class passing him note about growing weed. My small Catholic school rarely handed down this type of punishment. Not an ideal beginning to the four years I'd be spending around those people.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

Besides that, most of my bad behavior was, at worst, disruptive. If there was an associated criminal charge, they'd probably call it something like *Acting Out with Intent to Entertain*. This was nothing new, with the high school Noka. As far back as fifth grade, school administrators and teachers tried to convince Jab to get me treated for attention deficit disorder. They cited poor grades, hyperactivity, lack of any semblance of concentration, and a string of relatively minor behavioral incidents.

Jab didn't believe in ADD, or in the pharmaceuticals often prescribed *in case of*. To his thinking, the only logical solution was IPS…intimidation, punishment, screaming.

Needless to say, school remained far less scary than home, so I messed around as much as I could get away with. The only time *I* considered it a problem was when I risked the school contacting Jab. As long as I kept things in-house as opposed to at-home, I figured I'd be alright. So I never thought about how I came across to anyone within that world who wasn't part of my microcosm, my *target audience*.

Sam came into the picture with an already low opinion of me, one based as much on my reputation at school as the one I had with her family. It started with some fuckery I pulled at my Freshman Spring Formal dance. This was around the same time the school drug tested me. Atrain was supposed to be my date. I say *was supposed to* because I opted to skip half the dance and get a buzz on in some woods with Johnny. When we finally showed up, I didn't make a scene or get kicked out, but I know I was drunk. Acted like a butt towards Atrain. I might have caught hell if Biggs was around. This was the year before she moved to Kalamazoo and started working at our school. Sheri, though…Sheri *definitely* heard about my behavior, and I doubt she was thrilled with me, although I still passed her class. Even two years later—when Sam and I's worlds fully collided, in the form of a high-school production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, over the course of which we became a couple—Atrain told her to *be careful.* Sam herself told me so, and I was ashamed to hear it, not offended.

A quick aside…if you're confused that a Catholic school would allow two boys to go to a dance together…well, that's an entire other story I'm not sure is important to this one. Make something up for your own peace of mind, and let's move on.

Sam's approach was simple: she stayed away from people who did drugs and acted up. Didn't respect them. She *hated* weed, based largely on her dad's personality when he smoked it, when he *lied about* smoking it…poor weed never had a chance, with Sam. She once told me

SAM

Every time the smell of his pot smoke got down the hall to my room, I knew the next time he talked to me he was going to say some pathetic bullshit. I'd say things to him like *that's a nice pity-party you're having, would you like some tea?* Like, how's that for you? That harsh your buzz, Dad?

BLEY

We *all* acted up, my friends and I. We all happened to enjoy drugs. Some of us were Atrain's friends. Sam's only real character flaw was passing overly harsh judgement on people she didn't know well but who did things she didn't approve of. I'd say she came by it honestly, though—earned her skepticism, even if it wasn't always completely mature. The fact that she eventually fell in love with *me*, of all people…says more about who she *really* was, deep inside.

Somehow, intuitively, I understood this about her from the beginning, so I was not insulted or offended, but again ashamed, and embarrassed, after the *Joseph* musical was over, when she said

SAM

When they first posted the cast list, and it said you got the lead, me and my friends all figured you weren't even going to show up.

BLEY

It was good for me, as a young man, to be able to hear and accept truths like the ones Sam told me. She made a habit of it, but never a production. I never felt pressured to change. I *did* change, because she made me happy. Being with her was *infinitely* better than whatever various substances did for me. And it was *certainly* better than the nonsense and drama that sometimes came along with substance use.

Like I told my cousin, daughter of my Godfather—somewhat ironically, because a few hours later I would vomit on her wall:

NOKA

I haven't really felt like getting high since I met Sam. She *is* a drug.

COUSIN

Awww.

BLEY

Sam and I hadn't been together more than a month when that spring break came up. The road trip to see my cousin counted as a special occasion, and I went a little overboard. After that, I was over it. The next time I drank was six months later…with Sam. And we could tell quickly enough that it wasn't *our thing*. I don't think either of us finished one bottle of beer. Neither felt inclined toward doing it again any time soon. Seemed like something we would rather partake in later on, as adults.

A smattering of stifled laughs. One audience member snickers. Another fails to control a thick laugh-snort. Many adopt an expression translatable as *oh, really now…*

BLEY (*cont'd*)
Hey…*hey! You* weren't there. You can believe it or not, fuckers. That's how I, Noka, the teenaged C. Charles Bley, felt about getting intoxicated…

…For a period of about thirteen months.

And believe *this* or not, Sam smoked cigarettes. Not a lot, but she did. We did. The only buzz we caught together—

SAM
—besides the *best* buzz…loving each other—

BLEY
—*Can you please leave me be while I'm working on this? It helps less than you think, having you over my shoulder.*

The stage—the *house*—is once again oppressively silent. The lamp on BLEY's desk dims sharply, stays dim.

I can't do anything about the dreams, but Jesus. Right now I'm awake, and I'm tired…and…I'm all full up on sad reminders. Okay?

A few moments pass. The lamp, seemingly reluctant to capitulate, returns slowly to full brightness.

Thank you.

…The only *other* buzz we caught together was from nicotine. When I go to Sam's grave, I light an extra smoke for her. I set it gently in the grass over her ashes, and watch it burn while we talk.

And here I am, two decades later, still smoking those disgusting things. Shockingly, it is the only addiction I've ever formed.

From sometime around the beginning of rehearsals for *Joseph*, but before getting close to Sam, I gave up weed in addition to drink. Didn't smoke it again until an isolated incident the following January. The memory of this—of an occasion otherwise worthy of being forgotten—was made permanent, and remains crystal clear, because it involved almost losing the ring she gave me.

My three future housemates and I were downtown, signing our lease, for the first house I would ever live in without my family. It was a sunny, freezing winter day, the city blanketed in blindingly reflective snow. I was freshly eighteen years old. My fellow lessees were my friend Leah—who introduced Sam and I, and was approaching high

BLEY (*cont'd*)
school graduation same as me—and her older sister Colleen, a senior when we were freshmen—*and* a friend of Colleen's, also named Colleen. Once Leah and I parted ways with the Colleens, she talked me into stopping by another friend's place to hang out before I went to see Sam.

Leah never approved of my sobriety. Sometime in the preceding year, Tackett told me

TACKETT
I was talking to Leah…she was complaining about you, talking about *Noka changed…he's* changed *since he started seeing Sam…he's* changed *since he stopped smoking pot.*

BLEY
So maybe, in a way, I was about to make Leah…proud? Put her at ease? I don't know. We were both idiots. We cruised over to this house, parked in the back alley, and headed up to the top floor of the old garage. Our friend was there, and one of his older brothers, and two other people I knew but can't recall. They were getting ready to smoke some weed.

My state of mind about the situation was easygoing. I didn't make a big deal about it. At worst, if for some mutant reason Sam absolutely *had* to find out about it, she'd quietly but sternly vocalize her disapproval, and because we were approaching a year of trustworthiness together, she would get over it easily. I couldn't think of any pressing reason why I shouldn't take a puff or two. For myself. For the heck of it.

Of course, my tolerance being so low after such a long time, what did I do but immediately get way, *way* too high. Eventually I became convinced

NOKA
I need to go cash in the deposit bottles in my car, guys. I gotta do it…right now!

BLEY
My friends made me promise to come back, which I did…without the ring on my finger. As soon as I realized it, my high—which had diminished and become pleasant—was immediately saturated by guilt and paranoia. I loved that ring. Sam found one for me that matched hers. I only had it for a few weeks at that point. But, I was gaaked out of my melon, and I'd slipped the thing off to use the hand sanitizer dispenser at the bottle return, and then walked away. Luckily, a half-hour later when I made it back to the scene of the stupid, my ring was on a little ledge, right where I left it.

Following this, I *again* refrained from smoking weed…up until those iffy couple months before Sam died, when we weren't exactly capital-T *together* anymore. Which is when I started hanging out *here*, in this house. Great place to smoke. Still is.

But then, Sam was gone. *Gone* gone.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

So, drugs and I resumed our dance in earnest.

Houses Six Through Eight

Vine neighborhood, downtown Kalamazoo. Known to some as the *Student Ghetto*. Hundreds and hundreds of mostly Victorian houses, some beautiful, some beautif*ied*, others in poor condition. Some rearranged into as many as a half-dozen separate apartments. Great tall oaks, walnuts, birches, ash trees, in almost every yard and parkway, many nearly as old as the houses themselves, as old as Western Michigan University's first buildings, opened just after the turn of the 20th century. The original campus looms over Vine from upon a very high and steep hill. Seated at the very edge of the hill, the big face of East Hall—a broad set of steps (on which, incidentally, NOKA and SAM were sitting when they first kissed) leading up to six huge white pillars, which in turn guard the cupolaed central wing, with an additional symmetrical wing on each side, all red brick half covered in ivy, the whole structure as long as a football field, three stories high, full of big windows from end to end, all topped with a high roof—stares down or watches over the neighborhood, depending on your view. When the leaves are down, East Hall is visible, dead center, from anywhere down west Walnut Street.

CONFUSOR is standing in the intersection of Locust and Walnut, one block from the hill, East Hall grinning in the background. CONFUSOR spray-paints, backwards, on an invisible wall between himself and the *audience* or *camera*, so the message can be read from the other side: "CONFUSOR RUNS THIS".

BLEY
I lived in a lot of *houses* here. *Not* all of them were *homes.*

I lived *nowhere* here, too, once or twice. Moving from some couch back to my car, to some bedroom somebody wasn't using, to another city entirely, back to Kalamazoo.

This is where I set fires. This is where I made noise.

This is where I mourned Sam every single day, and didn't make her proud.

This is where I lived when more of my young friends began to die.

This world is the setting and scenery of much of my worst.

NOKA enters, wearing the Dreamcoat.
BLEY types while NOKA is narrating.

NOKA
At first, *we* were still *me.* Funk Noka. Leah and the Colleens and I moved into that first house, 601 Forest Street. The thick mess of peroxide-blonde hair I had at the beginning of summer— uncut since before my high school graduation—got to be long enough to tie back. It was the last head of hair Sam ever ran her hands through, so I decided to keep it indefinitely. By the time winter came, my beard, too, was set loose. No moustache, but a substantial chinstrap, ear to ear.

When I started meeting dozens of new people around the neighborhood, that's the Noka they told other people about: a tall-ish gnome with the beginnings of a promising beard, noticeably weirder and sadder to run into during the day, increasingly wilder and more entertaining at night. A lot of these people were contemporary young hippie-types, so although I hadn't planned it, I fit in immediately on looks alone.

My pièce de résistance…a shin-length full-sleeve *Technicolor Dreamcoat,* specially tailored for me as the lead actor in *Joseph,* bid on secretly by my maternal grandparents that year through my high school's annual charity auction, and given to me for Christmas. I doubt they expected me to wear it publicly…

BLEY
Well, between you and CONFUSOR and Chri$ Tycoon, it ended up worn *out,* period—until nothing was left of the shining gold lining but its black backing fibers.

NOKA
I wore it when I walked around the neighborhood, when I played music, when I hung out on porches, shopped at a bodega, passed out backwards on stairs at parties…

BLEY
CONFUSOR wore it to two *Bonnaroo* festivals in a row.

NOKA

Seemed like everyone in Vine knew the Dreamcoat, if not the person inside it. The garment was like a full-body version of the patchwork pants and dresses churned out by the harem of hippie seamstresses I counted among my rapidly expanding circle of acquaintances and friends. A disturbing number of people called it the *Jesus Coat,* exclusively, and called me…yes…*Jesus.*

Awesome coat, no doubt, and the beard kicked pretty hard as it grew longer, but I was *not* somebody to be mistaken for a god. I was more like a walking gravestone. Didn't stop tracing the concentric hearts Sam drew on my hand until a ways into my second lease, at 632 Summer Street—on the borderline of the adjacent *Stuart* and *Northside* areas, not in *Vine.* Continued wearing the rosary bead necklace, with the rings dangling from it, throughout that entire lease.

I explained the hearts or rings or both, to anyone who cared to ask, which was a lot of people, in those days. Almost nobody ever brought it up again. I know for a fact I weirded a few ladies out with it. Seemed people in general didn't want to be sucked into the grieving process of a near-stranger in the middle of flirting or otherwise having a good time. Who knew! Lessons like that, I could only learn by trial-and-error. Wasn't getting much constructive outside advice.

Generally though, once people knew the deal, they treated me with softness, kindness. My explanation didn't merely explain my accoutrements. It offered a reasonable explanation for *me,* my strangeness, and my sad.

BLEY

The hearts on my hand, their little love rays shooting out, might have been my first tattoo. I thought hard and decided against it, instead coming up with a design which included Sam's initials—SLP, Samantha Lynn Popkey—and the words "If You Miss Me", the title of "our" song. I got it done that first season on Forest Street. In hindsight, the tattoo itself is a mess. I stole the predominant image from an old Ravi Shankar poster. Thought it was Hindu lord Shiva—a force of creation and destruction, among other traits—dancing on that row of tabla drums. I played tablas, enjoyed Indian raga, plus Sam had been created and destroyed, so I figured *why not?*

A few years after I got the tattoo, somebody pointed out how my "Shiva" looked a lot more like Kali—one leg kicked out in a dance move, not to mention Kali tends to have more arms than Shiva. If Shiva was going to be pictured with Kali, he wouldn't likely be dancing. He'd be pinned to the ground under her foot. The two are husband and wife, meant to balance each other out.

NOKA

The saving grace, if you can call it that: Kali herself embodies feminine energy, creativity, fertility…arguably, albeit accidentally, a more appropriate image than Shiva with which to memorialize my girl.

The leaves of the little Eastern redbud at SAM's grave shade NOKA's face in patches. The tree has not yet entirely filled in, though its spring flowers are in full bloom. Ornaments, some handmade, random lengths of ribbon, and the like, hang from the branches. Everything waves together on a light, warm breeze.

On the ground around the grave marker, another menagerie: a circle of stones, some little flowering plants recently installed by other visitors, and a few other random trinkets. The marker is *not* a gravestone—it is the same "temporary" plaque from the funeral home, SAM's full name and *1984-2001* in movable metal characters, attached to a metal stake.

NOKA smokes a cigarette while one for SAM burns in the grass over where her ashes are buried. He talks to her a while, cries awhile, gathers himself, talks some more.

NOKA (*cont'd*)

The first time I was with somebody, after Sam, I felt horrible. Not as much because my mind wouldn't let my body work properly—which it *didn't*, quite—but because it felt too soon. I thought I betrayed her. I didn't go to her grave, though. I went to St. Luke's Episcopal Church and begged for forgiveness. From *Sam*, I mean…closest thing I had to a deity. Maybe it goes without saying that I held no specifically Christian beliefs. What I did have, even as a new adult—when a lot of people turn into the biggest know-it-all know-nothing assholes they'll ever be—was a respect and positivity for other people's beliefs, provided they were kind to others about everything. In my experience, when it comes to Christians, Episcopalians tend to fit that bill.

So, I went to St. Luke's. I knew it a special, spiritual place, for Sam. As soon as I pulled away from my house, it came to mind…drove straight across downtown, got out of the car, and immediately knelt in the church parking lot. I stared up at the highest stone spires on the building, the November sky clear and powder-blue in the background, and I told Sam how sorry I was.

BLEY

Hindsight…probably none of it was necessary. It was simply my way of dealing, at the time. Most of my thought processes were geared towards navigating this death, while at the same time, never one-hundred-percent accepting Sam was permanently dead. A part of me, powered by grief and built on sand, for a long time deceived me into the idea that I might…*might*…find the power to defeat permanence.

NOKA

…Like when I kissed her lips, as she lay in her box, that last night at the funeral home—magical thinking. Like the night of the day she died, as I lay on that beanbag chair, quietly bargaining my life for hers—a desperate appeal to some unknown and probably nonexistent mind-reading entity.

BLEY

I had no other or better tools, with my first life-changing death. Eighteen years on Earth prior, with a family full of elderly grandparents and great-grandparents, great-uncles and great-aunts, the only person I'd known well who died was my Grandpa Bley's brother, Uncle Frank. He was one of my favorite relatives to visit, but that happened once a year, at most.

NOKA

Christopher Charles was twelve years old, when Uncle Frank died.

BLEY

He was *sad*. He was *not*, like Noka, *obliterated.*

Can we leave Sam alone, for a while? Talk about pretty much *anything else*?

NOKA

Alright…alright…CONFUSOR'll come to the surface soon. It'll get nice and greasy.

Once Sam—

BLEY

God *damn* it, man.

NOKA

This isn't about *her*, it's about *Simeon*. I *know* you're not trying to skip over *Sim.*

…*Once Sam was gone for nearly a year*, I began to get back into playing music publicly. In high school, besides musicals and plays, it was what I was most liked for, and I never lost my broad love for the stage. Vine was a whole new market, if you can call it that—a network of basements where the party only ever stopped if the cops showed up. And, unlike in the legitimate venues I graduated to later, there was no minimum age requirement for getting shit-faced.

Most of the music I wrote from 2001 to 2003, especially the solo material, was sad-sack indie-rock and pretend-folk music. My lyrics tended to be either about Sam, or they expressed some type of dejection. Sometimes both. Near the end of my lease on Forest Street, Tackett and I formed a band called Space Lorax, who played music closely resembling a subgenre of—in the parlance of the time—*emo-rock*, more toward the *indie* side. Let's just say that I did my very best to rip off Modest Mouse's early style.

NOKA (*cont'd*)
Halfway through the project's run, our guitar player, Simeon, told me

SIMEON
I want to *also* play some music that's more…*upbeat.* Like, The Beatles upbeat. You know I love The Beatles, right?

BLEY
That I did *not* know, about Sim. Either way, I didn't want to be The Beatles, and even if I *had* wanted to, I certainly didn't give off the right *vibe* to be.

NOKA
So, I heard him, and acknowledged him, but found it hard to change course. Space Lorax made the most sense as a *sad band*. Everything made more sense sad.

BLEY
We stayed together a little less than a year. Simeon got married, moved to Detroit, and got an adult job…something to do with computers. In 2004, he choked to death on his own vomit. Had an asthma attack while waiting for his wife to get home with an inhaler refill. I don't believe he played in another band after ours, which means I had a hand in him never getting to do what he wanted to do, musically. He sacrificed his desires for my selfish needs.

CONFUSOR enters. He carries a 1973 Jim Beam collectable decanter, translucent blue glass, resembling a genie bottle, cheap red wine sloshing around inside.

I feel guilty about it to this day.

CONFUSOR
As soon as Sim died, Tackett and I jumped on the neglected, unfinished Space Lorax demo tape. I recorded the vocals and designed the cover art. Within three days, we had the fucker in compact disc format. At the end of the funeral, we gave copies to Simeon's parents, and to our drummer, Josh, one of Simeon's closest friends. He erupted in tears when I handed it to him.

BLEY
And Simeon's wife, Stevie…I put my arm around her, gave her the CD, and told her

CONFUSOR
When I lost my love, Sim helped me make music for her. So…the only thing I have of value to give you now is those songs.

BLEY

And she all but fell to the floor. I wasn't expecting it. A couple people had to rush over and hold her up.

Stevie and Simeon didn't even make it to twenty-five years old together.

I still think that's *bull*shit.

NOKA

Simeon had a tattoo of a medical caduceus. Tackett got a big beautiful one on his leg, years later, when he lived out in Cali.

CONFUSOR

Since I never had enough money for the good version of anything, I got a small prison-quality caduceus, a few millimeters below the ink I got for Sam.

The third tattoo. A caduceus, in simple green lines. The normally symmetrical design is, in this case, longer on one side than the other.

BLEY

Ridiculous, to think back and realize that, out of the four public performances by Space Lorax, *three* were an absolute mismatch for the occasion. A house party. A friend's college graduation party. Another friend's G.E.D. graduation party. I was still so far up my own ass with grief, always spreading it across the landscape like manure, I hadn't yet seen the problem: house parties, and any other high-spirited events, were not the right setting for such utterly *bummer* material.

A classic unfinished "Michigan basement" under a Victorian house: sloped foundation walls with a ledge most of the way around, good for setting a drink down if not necessarily sitting one's *self* on outright. Cement floors, always slightly damp. Dim lighting. Perhaps some string lights are laced around the joists and ductwork above. Keg of beer in a corner. A band is playing. Could be reggae, rock, funk, stoner jazz, live electronic, pure cacophony, or any combination thereof. Or, a DJ is spinning records. In any case, the music is about as loud as it can be. Exacerbating the effect of the volume is the amount of people in the space—far more than any fire code would allow. There is nowhere for the music to go

besides the few empty feet above everyone's heads.
The upstairs of the house is also so packed that, even over the music and people conversing at the top of their lungs, footsteps can be heard down in the basement, thundering upon the floor. If structural work has not been done on the house for decades, as is sometimes the case, the old floor may be cracking and bowing under the weight of the upstairs crowd.
In the basement, people are laughing, screaming, dancing, kissing, drinking. Somebody throws up foamy beer. A flattened cardboard box is simply thrown over top of the mess.
The atmosphere is nasty, mostly from cigarette and pot smoke. If it is winter, the cold seeping in from outside mixes with exhalations and body heat, creating condensation, even a light fog, with which the smoke also mixes. God help these people, if anyone should elect to fart down here.
The party goes until it doesn't—even if law enforcement shows up, if someone can run downstairs, stop the music, and convince everyone to shut up, those whose names are on the lease at this particular house have at least some chance of being spared the extremely common but dreaded *noise violation* ticket and applicable fines. However, the lessees may still have to kick everyone out.
In the morning, the basement is *strewn* with cans, bottles, *broken* bottles, other broken things, cigarette butts, items of trampled clothing…perhaps even a human being or two, whose walk home will undoubtedly be miserable.

NOKA

The *network of basements*…that's where I wanted to be. I needed a new energy, though.

NOKA (*cont'd*)
As part of my transformation, I kicked things up a notch. Drank forty-ounce bottles of Steel Reserve malt liquor, every weekend, eventually freebased cocaine almost as often, and smoked weed *any* time it was there, without exception.

CONFUSOR
That's how I came to be. Trans-*substance*-iation.

NOKA takes off the Dreamcoat, drapes it over CONFUSOR's shoulders.

NOKA
I started playing in a basement-exclusive band, called Six Shoes—with my boy Toph, and…surprise…Johnny. I didn't let Johnny come around at all, when I was with Sam. She knew him going back to grade school, years before I ever met him. He creeped her out. Johnny wormed his way back into my life once Sam was gone and I started living downtown.

CONFUSOR
Six Shoes thrashed out a brand of intoxicated, improvised speed-funk, with a touch of what I guess was blues music, fueled by coke and liquor and a rejection of decorum. We only advertised through phone calls. If you came over, you came over. We played for hours on end, whether it was the three of us or a full house.

NOKA
Life had to get a *little* more messed up first, though. For you to get born.

CONFUSOR
At the end of your time, for sure. How did you put it earlier…*greasy?* Yeah, you greased up the chute real good. Made it easy for me.

Like in January of 2003, when you left your job at Ford's company without notice, and dropped out of your fourth semester at community college. Spent your days mostly staring out your bedroom window on Summer Street, from what I remember.

NOKA
I went back to the office the month after. There was a blizzard going on, and I wasn't wearing shoes. Ford's van wasn't in the lot, so I walked straight back to my other boss' office. Timidly asked if I could have my last paycheck.

I *really* need it, Karl.

KARL
Of course…we aren't going to deny you your pay. Look, I can see you're a young man who's hurting, and you're hurting bad. What I care about, what I know Ford cares about most, is that you're able to figure it out.

CONFUSOR

And right around that time, you almost went to jail…for the dine-and-dash you and Johnny pulled at Steak ‘n Shake.

NOKA

Johnny said that’s what he felt like doing, and I said *alright, fuck it.* I was hungry, more than one type of high, I had no job, no money…and it was the middle of the night. Sounded awesome. After we ate, though, and walked out, the staff caught on immediately. By the time I turned the car on, our server was running towards us, across the parking lot. Johnny said

JOHNNY

Go! Go! Just go!

NOKA

So I went. Peeled out of the lot. Dropped Johnny off at his house and proceeded to mine. Fell asleep. Woke up a few hours later to the phone ringing. Six in the fucking morning, and suddenly there’s a cop in my ear. The server had taken down my license plate number, called it in. Also said I tried to hit her with my car—

CONFUSOR

—Which was *so* totally false. You were sobered up by then. Your belly was full. You knew what you were doing.

NOKA

My car was still in my mom’s name. This cop, using who knows what information, first called and woke up my *sister*. She gave him my parent’s number, and my dad gave him mine. Again, all of this happened during a dead-ass Michigan winter night.

COP (*on phone*)

You *could* go to jail for this. But for now, the restaurant said they’ll wait to decide on pressing charges if you show up today and pay your bill.

NOKA

As if I had any money to do *that*. The craziest part, though, was the next morning, when Jab broke into my house. I was in the upstairs bathroom and didn’t notice. First thing I heard was him screaming my name as he came up the stairs. I came out into the hall and man oh *man* did he ever have a face on him. But it was sort of like when he took me out to that field, the morning after my first acid trip. My brain didn’t record what he said. No use for his input. Except this time, I was at a breaking point.

Then, I had to go to Johnny—a human being raised without boundaries, who wasn’t implicated in the crime, who could only have cared less if I hadn’t been his friend—and ask him for the money. Johnny was reluctant, and pissed. Told me I had to pay him back. The cop knew I wasn’t *alone* in the dine-and-dash, but didn’t press me about my

NOKA (*cont'd*)
accomplice. To not give up one's—supposed—friend to the law…isn't that worth a couple burgers and some cheese fries?

In the end, the server and manager gave me a stern talking to, and I paid the bill. Never heard about it again.

CONFUSOR
And then, as spring came, *I* took over.

CONFUSOR hands NOKA the decanter. NOKA takes a long pull. Hands it back, slaps CONFUSOR and BLEY a couple high-fives. NOKA EXITS.

The clinical depression Burl diagnosed in NOKA was not the limit, as it so happened. I don't know how to say which direction it was moving…toward a higher limit, or a lower one? My new, percolating affliction went both ways—bipolar—until it worsened so much that it also went sideways.

BLEY
The distinction between bipolar I and II wasn't official then. Not that it's a *complex* distinction. The main difference lies in whether one's manic episodes are *full* or merely *hypo*manic—

CONFUSOR
—Which leads me to conclude, if *I* was diagnosed, in *my* time, but by current standards—

BLEY
—They'd probably have called it bipolar II. But you didn't seek professional help anyway.

CONFUSOR
Nooo...I let it *ripen.*

This was around the same time I went in for a colonoscopy and endoscopy. Found out my upper and lower GI tracts were close to shot. Up top, they found mostly healed stomach ulcers, and a herniated esophagus—wherein the esophageal lining has been destroyed by acid damage, prompting the stomach lining to crawl up in there to protect its buddy, to the detriment of the esophageal sphincter.

BLEY
Ever since, I've had to put in an effort to burp. If I can't get the gas out, it overinflates my stomach. Feels like I'm being stabbed from within. I hate the texture, taste *and* aftertaste of antacids, so, when in crisis, I chug milk…

BLEY (*cont'd*)
…unfortunately, as Swedish music artists The Knife sang, *we share our mother's health*—

CONFUSOR
—In my case meaning, *lactose intolerance*. A slug of cold milk to the gut loosens up a herniated esophagus, like magic—

BLEY
—But digesting it sows chaos in the *lower* GI.

AUDIENCE
Lactose-free milk!

BLEY
The taste of which I hate as much as that of antacids. I can be a picky, stubborn idiot. You don't have to tell me. I know.

CONFUSOR
What the doctors saw in the colonoscopy, they called *ulcerative colitis.* My mother, for the record, has full-on Crohn's.

BLEY
I take better care of myself, now. I drink water, eat a little better. I rarely drink…more out of a preference for marijuana, but also to avoid dehydration and stomach pain.

CONFUSOR
Noka had incapacitating migraines in high school, and Jab fucked with him so hard during the *Joseph* rehearsals, his appetite was dead for two months. Lack of food and abundance of stress only made the migraines worse, so he would eat Excedrine on an empty stomach every day. Talk about ulcers…

BLEY
That night mom was away on a trip, and he was screaming at me

JAB
You're nothing but a disappointment to me! I don't want you! Why don't you just get the hell out of here?

BLEY
You're nothing but a disappointment! Ridiculously cliché, but I promise you, he said it…then knocked me onto the ottoman, pinned me down and choked me. It was the only time I can say for sure he was *drunk*. I tried to run away. I disappeared for two days. He tracked me down.

CONFUSOR
Between me and Noka though…I mean, shit, besides being constantly worried and stressed out…there were the *countless* nights when we drank *and* threw up malt liquor, followed by drunk-driving to Taco Bell at three in the morning—a lot of times in a blizzard—coming home and passing out for eleven fucking hours, with that *garbage* in our body. Without brushing our teeth first.

BLEY
How I've stayed cavity-free since elementary school, I'll never understand.

CONFUSOR
Remember how sometimes Noka would take his Taco Bell to the WIDR studio?

BLEY
No live shows past midnight…probably not a soul in the entire Student Services building…

CONFUSOR
…Sitting in a darkened radio studio, eating a quesadilla at the mixing board, fading up the host microphone at random to mumble insane things in the background of the overnight playlist…

BLEY
…And meanwhile, the people across town he was hanging out with ninety minutes earlier have *no* idea where he is.

CONFUSOR
Extreme fan of the old "Irish Goodbye".

BLEY
It was my style for *years.*

He gestures for the decanter. CONFUSOR hands it off. BLEY takes a drink, kicks back in his seat.

Listen though, I'm going to stop helping you get sidetracked. Until further notice.

CONFUSOR
In the spring, I got a stupid job at a pizza place—a local restaurant, not Little Caesar's again—and in June I went to my first big music festival, the second-ever Bonnaroo.

BLEY
See, now *this* is what I call picking up the *pace.* One season per sentence. Love it.

Exactly a month after the festival, one of the friends I attended it with, Erica, got hit by a train while driving home with sandwiches from a Jimmy John's. After a couple days with no improvement, word got around that the machines were the only thing keeping her broken body alive.

Erica…another beautiful being, forcibly removed from this dog-shit world. She didn't even make it to twenty years old.

> The second tattoo. A Chinese kanji supposedly meaning *beautiful* or *graceful.* ERICA, a bit of a klutz, would have appreciated the joke. Her initials, EER, sit on a flyaway brush-stroke emanating from the left side of the kanji.

About eighty of us got the ink done, for Erica. Shut down a tattoo shop for almost two days. Her death, from what I remember, was the catalyst for the city of Kalamazoo to redesign the crossing where she was hit. It was long overdue. A *lot* of people died there in decades prior. A Jimmy John's parking lot on a college campus that lets out directly *onto* high-speed Amtrak rails? With *no gate to lower when a train was coming*? What the fuck exactly did this city think was going to happen?

My lease on Summer Street ended two weeks after Erica died. Tackett and I and another friend had our next house lined up at 814 Duffield Court, but that lease didn't start until the end of August. I moved into a friend's apartment for a few more weeks, making plans to get out of town for a while.

When the time came, I quit the pizza place—taking with me:

> 1 five-pound roast beef, fully cooked
> 1 gallon 2% milk
> 1 pound Colby cheese
> 1 pound Cheddar cheese
> 4 pounds cooked bacon
> X single bottles of beer
> 1 deep-dish pizza pan

…most of which I left in the fridge at the apartment where I was crashing, and then hit the road. I brought a trunk full of music instruments, a box full of CDs, some clothes, a new atlas. And, a tin full of weed and a little opium.

> Kalamazoo to Chicago. Chicago to St. Louis. A few days at Uncle Friend and Aunt Sunny's apartment, then south to Cape Girardeau to watch their band play. Straight

across the southwest to Los Angeles—nights
in truck stop parking lots in Oklahoma City,
Albuquerque, L.A. It's weird out here.
Often, in the course of staring through his
windshield at the unfamiliar landscape,
CONFUSOR unfolds and re-reads the little
note ERICA's mother gave him:

Bley
Don't worry about a thing,
Cause every little thing
gonna be alright.

L.A. to Sacramento.

CONFUSOR (*cont'd*)

Took my first "shower" since St. Louis, in a sink at the Sacramento airport. I was there to pick up my girl Stew—one of the five of my core from after Sam's funeral, and also, the first person I slept with after Sam. She too was mourning Erica and needed to get away. Originally, she planned to come with me from the get-go, but backed out the night before I left, then called me on my last day in Missouri to tell me she bought a plane ticket.

From the airport we drove straight to the coast, and spent the night just south of San Francisco, in the scenic coastal surf town of Pacifica. Saw California's ocean that night, both of us for the first time. Ran only ankle-deep into the bone-chilling water, under the moon, laughing. Slept sitting nearly straight up in the car, in the beach parking lot. The next day, we climbed the cliffs near the beach. Moved with care along great jagged black rocks, our clothes wetted by intermittent sea spray, which fell back below and receded with the waves, revealing the first wild starfish we had ever seen—dozens of them, big as your head, clinging to the rocks same as us. All of this felt like life.

San Francisco. A hotel room in Salinas—
and a bottle of Jack Daniel's Stew is able to
buy without being carded. The boardwalk
and beach at Santa Cruz. Yosemite National
Park—where, despite clear warnings about
mountain lions and bears, the pair strip
naked, go their separate ways off-trail.
CONFUSOR hikes up an old volcanic flow,
following the mountain stream snaking and
falling down its middle, finally discovering
a bathtub-shaped indentation full of cool
water. Submerges himself.
They sleep in the car at a campsite and head
to Oregon first thing in the morning. Two
days in Eugene, with a mutual friend of
CONFUSOR and SAM, then San Francisco

and Sacramento again. The airport. STEW EXITS.

CONFUSOR (*cont'd*)
Once I was alone again, having absolutely no plan and almost no money left, I figured I'd go back to Pacifica. It was familiar, and felt safe enough. There was a Taco Bell right on the beach, built into an old driftwood-paneled beach house.

In the daytime, for about a week, I drove into San Francisco, to play guitar around Fisherman's Wharf, with the grand scheme of making money for gas back to Eugene…and burritos, in the meantime.

Three weeks in Eugene. Two more friends, themselves on an entirely different trip, finally make it to town after being stranded in northern California with a dead car. Now numbering four, the group runs around town together for a couple nights. CONFUSOR and the two travelers begin a caravan back to Michigan. One night with CONFUSOR's uncle and cousins in Seattle. Bozeman, Montana. Wall Drug, South Dakota. No more full stops.

Somewhere in Wisconsin, I lost my friends. I was falling asleep and couldn't keep up. Pulled off for an hour. Later that day, I was back in the Vine.

BLEY
I clocked over ten-thousand miles on the odometer of that poor Ford Focus by the time I got back to Kalamazoo, without an oil change. I was gone almost all the way until my new lease began. Got another five-plus years out of the car—its last trip got me all the way to British Columbia in 2009.

Those five years would be the most colorful, and the most wretched, of my entire life, beginning with that year at

BUTT TOWN

CONFUSOR
814 Duffield Court sat back off of Locust Street, which made it an island of sorts, bordered by the backyards of Locust, Vine and Davis streets. We enjoyed the rare Vine neighborhood luxury of ample off-street parking, not to mention a quarter-acre meadow shaded by tall old trees. The basement was medium-sized but otherwise ideal for live music. From the first week our lease started, the house and property turned into a

CONFUSOR (*cont'd*)

veritable epicenter of debauchery and…*excess on a budget*. We got a noise violation during the very first party we threw. We named our kingdom Butt Town, after the Iggy Pop song. Life there was just that dirty.

Soon after I moved onto Duffield, I started working on a substitute basis for special education classrooms in the Kalamazoo public school system, while concurrently developing a hobby of burning upholstered furniture. I had the boys from Six Shoes cut off my beard and shave my long hair into a foot-high Mohawk. More cocaine. More acid. More cheap liquor. More Taco Bell. No silver lining. No bright future. Only moments followed by moments.

How appropriate, that Butt Town is where Ptera and I met and fell in love—near the bottom of her worst life as an alcohol abuser, while I, futilely, treaded water over my Mariana's Trench. How appropriate, that I'd begin stealing, selling and of course smoking the weed Tackett was supposed to be slinging, a little bit at time, until I graduated to skimming the money *he* was making, as well. The betrayal severed our friendship for almost three years.

BLEY

I found an exemplary, miserable memory, among the countless similar but blurrier memories I haven't been able to unearth and dislodge from the pit, despite my best efforts down here, hands blistered from pickaxe handle rub. If they're fossilized…if the DNA in those memories has degraded too far to be useful…I'd be wasting my time anyway. This one scene should do…

CONFUSOR

I know just what you're thinking of. It was the very end of spring, in the second half of my year at Butt Town. As I was wont to do, I'd been up all night doing nothing of social value. To this day, I don't know why or how so many people loved me or wanted to be around me.

Anyhow, around sunrise, Toph and Sugar showed up with a bunch of snow to blow and forty-ounces to drink. Sugar had a stack of raps he was working on. Sugar was a convicted, paroled murderer turned cocaine dealer, a couple years older than us. He loved Toph and I's improvised, uncomplicated style—bass lines and drums, and a little piano. We spent the first few hours of the morning backing up Sugar's raps.

When we were too fucked up to continue, the boys left. For no reason I can think of, I drove over to the Public Schools administration building—from whence I received calls for my substitute assignments, and also where my mother worked. Usually, she and her coworkers were happy to see me. I was always capable of pulling myself together to visit her. I know I looked my worst *that* day, though, because when she saw me come in, she shook her head at me and mouthed *no…no.* I know I had on a thigh-length but too-small-around-the-chest thrift store coat, tan hound's-tooth, unbuttoned, white wife-beater

CONFUSOR (*cont'd*)

underneath. My eyes were probably insane. We exchanged a few words. I hugged her, and left.

My poor mother. I should have killed myself for shaming her that way. Mom…the one member of my immediate family who supported me…no, who saved my *ass*, over and over again. She deserved better, in every regard. From me. From *life.*

BLEY

But, that's how far bad I already was. I could only instinctively gravitate toward safety. Mom. A stronger rock than any in the pit. Without her, I *would* be dead. Of that, I am confident.

CONFUSOR

Butt town ended with me alienated from Tackett and our third housemate. Ptera and I broke up—for the first time—earlier that summer. I had no money, no new house to move into. Magic Mike, a good friend who'd moved to New Orleans, put that city in my head as the place I *had* to be, but I was nowhere near able to get there. I crashed on a few couches, and in my car.

Somewhere in the middle of that specific period of transience, Toph found us a bunch of interior painting work. I banked over five-hundred dollars in a couple weeks. It was literally a fortune to me, so I immediately blew a quarter of it on one cocaine-fueled Michigan State football party weekend in East Lansing, at Stew's house.

Ptera was there, too, and that's when we got back together. I moved in with her the following week, on Lee Barton court, an unpaved side-lane off of Davis Street, at the bottom of the hill where East Hall sits. The other four housemates were, again, some of my closest girls. Two were in long-term relationships with the bass player and drummer of my new musical venture…

…*Turkey Fister.*

Chosen family. Piles of friends in blankets, as a beautiful Michigan autumn rolls in. Group dinners. Love. Hard partying. Leaves in every dying shade, falling on everything and everyone. October brings an extremely rare expression of *Aurora Borealis.* The boys and girls of the Lee Barton house lay bundled in blankets, in the middle of the Davis practice field, directly below East Hall, watching the shimmering sky until it returns to normal.

This is one such period where CONFUSOR's life *almost* feels like it could go in a positive direction.

CONFUSOR (*cont'd*)
Our band name could have been worse. No, really…For the first show we played, just before our guitar player joined, we called ourselves *Pirate Midget Fuckers.* As Turkey Fister, we would go on to perform every Devil's Night—October 30th—from 2004 to 2007. And Devil's Night always went down at Papa Pete's Taverna, where we played all but a couple of our bakers-dozen shows. Our girls, including Ptera, were like Vine royalty in those days. We *all* acted untouchable.

Ptera…the beautiful, funny, messed up girl who, our first time around, told our close friends

PTERA
CONFUSOR's the first guy I've ever been with who I can see staying with forever, having a family.

CONFUSOR
…Who on chilly fall nights sent me text messages, when she knew Turkey Fister rehearsal would be winding down, like

PTERA (*text message)*
I want you back here in my arms.

CONFUSOR
Just…Ptera.

Sadly, by the time the first Devil's Night show went down, I had moved myself downstairs to the couch. Soon after, the bass player from Turkey Fister, who spent most of his nights at Lee Barton, gave me the key to his house, on the corner of Walnut and Oak. I only knew his housemates as huge Turkey Fister fans, who welcomed me staying there despite the fact that I couldn't contribute much of anything to the bills. And of course, *also* despite the fact that I was a complete god damn mess.

I made up my mind to get to New Orleans, by whatever means necessary. Continued to substitute in special-ed a handful of times per month. Through that, I got tapped to work college admissions tests—

Incredulous, quiet chortles from the audience. A piano appears onstage.

BLEY
—Oh, *indeed it's true*. With no direct supervision, I administered SAT and ACT tests to teenagers on and off for almost a decade, beginning that fall. The first five years, I

BLEY (*cont'd*)

typically went in there on only an hour's sleep. At around a hundred dollars a pop, for five hours of "work", I was determined to do a perfect job, keep the lifeline open. Funny how I didn't even *take* the SATs.

CONFUSOR

The last Turkey Fister show before I left for New Orleans—at Papa Pete's, of course—was more of a *shit*show. I was about to turn twenty-two years old. We played farther past bar closing time than the management would have liked, but they also liked *me.* So, when the remaining crowd of around a hundred would not stop screaming for an encore, I ran to the head manager to ask if I could do one last song, solo. "Makin Love To A Dinosaur".

It's only fair and pertinent to mention that my parents were there. My older brother and sister, too. None of them had seen me play in years, but they came to see me off…sat together around a table off to the side of the stage, while the chaos of a world built by Turkey Fister and drugs and I swirled around them as obnoxiously as the permahaze of cigarette smoke was noxious.

CONFUSOR steps to the piano, cracks his knuckles.

I had a solid year of solo shows behind me by then, featuring mostly original songs on piano with lots of depressive yet cocaine-y lyrics. The song I played that night was definitely the number one fan and friend favorite:

Sooo,
Pull my teeth all out of your hair, and
Lay em together by the bedside table, don't
that
Feel a little better, baby?
Cuz it's been a long time, and it's been a
long year and I been
Waxing my ears, pressing them near to your
Bedroom door…
Where I heard you makin love to a dinosaur.

I've taken out a loan for the holes in my
nose, cuz I
Took em for granted. Now the holes in my
home are all
Filled with notes you wrote.
We all feel it bubblin in the back of our
throats, gettin
Larger and larger, like the Great White
Hope.

I drop the soap and get so surprised when
our heads collide.

Tell me, in Japanese, that I'm still what I
said I'd be…there's
People up here who still can't see they've
Barked me up a pointy tree. And I
Tried and I tried and I *tried,*
just to let you see-ee-ee-ee-EE-ee-*eeeyeah*.

BLEY
…the last verse, that's when everyone flipped out.

I found another note in the door of my car,
please,
Lay off my 'nis, bitch, *I took you down to*
Papa Pete's baaar…

A full minute of applause, screaming, and
crowd-jostling, before CONFUSOR is able
to finish the end of the song.

…And for some reason, you're thirsty again
already. Cuz the
Train only has a few seconds or more, and
I'll be
Closing my door, closing the store cuz I'm
Not doin any business down in New Mexico
this year, no I'm
Nooot doin any business down in New
Mexico this year, nooo I…
Tried so *god* damned *hard* but I'm sure as
shit not doing any business down in New
Mexic*ooo*-o-*ooo*-o-*ooohhh…*
This year.

DJ Eric P took my picture in the middle of the song, from onstage, facing the crowd. The good and the bad in the memory makes it impossible to know how to feel about it, so every time it comes up, when I'm done with it, I toss it back into the pile of *It Is What It Is*—the only platitude I have any respect for.

The camera captured ~~me shirtless, with a two-week beard, backwards neon baseball hat. A dried chicken foot on a leather cord, with which I replaced the rosary necklace carrying Sam and I's rings, is dangling down the middle of my chest. Mouth is wide open in song, fingers on the keys. The bass end of the piano is perpendicular with the foreground, so the whole instrument points into the center of the crowd. In fact, it's pointing directly at~~

BLEY (*cont'd*)

~~an old friend of mine, a foot away from the high keys. He's slow dancing with somebody who he could never identify. The other figures swaying around them are just as anonymous, but I know that I know many of them by name.~~

The camera captured a ghost in a dead life. Was it more good? More bad? Does it matter? It's all *gone,* isn't it?

CHRI$ TYCOON enters. BLEY passes him the decanter.

CONFUSOR

If I hadn't stopped for a few days in St. Louis on the way to Nola, this guy might not *exist*.

BLEY

I still sign my paintings CONFUSOR. All caps, all the time. That's about what's left of you, though.

CHRI$ TYCOON offers CONFUSOR a last drink. Accepted.

CHRI$ TYCOON

I'm more like Noka…I was *given* this name. CONFUSOR named *himself.* How weak is *that*?

CONFUSOR

Eat shit, Tycoon.

CONFUSOR hands the decanter back to CHRI$ TYCOON. Gives him a bear hug. BLEY stands up to get one as well. CONFUSOR pushes the piano offstage as he EXITS. CHRI$ TYCOON takes a big gulp, passes to BLEY, who also drinks.

BLEY

I love New Orleans with all my heart, but I lost it twice in my life. 2005 was just the first time.

DIRECTOR, see addendums *The Dog Parade That Inadvertently Saved Me From Hurricane Katrina (BLEY, 2013)* and *The Adulterer (BLEY, 2016).*

BLEY (*cont'd*)
Don't have it in me, to talk about it all over again. That one's not in the pit. It drowned in flood waters, got swept back into the Mississippi River and out to the Gulf. That loss alone was as good a proof of my *thesis* as anything else here…in this story, this *drama*, nothing works out. Everything and everyone good washes away.

CHRI$ TYCOON
It was Merv the Swerv—one of Uncle Friend's bandmates—who drunkenly but lovingly screamed my new name at me, repeatedly, across a packed open-mic night at Frederick's Music Lounge on the south side of St. Louis. I was between my two songs, so I took the opportunity to announce my birth to the crowd. *Thank you, folks…I'm Chri$ Tycoon, now.*

When I went broke in New Orleans I went straight back to St. Louis and lived in Uncle Friend's spare bedroom. He and Aunt Sunny were now divorced. I found some odd jobs—tuning the piano at Frederick's, landscaping with Sherm the Perm, Uncle Friend's bass player—but didn't receive a callback for any of the regular jobs to which I applied.

In the downtime, feeling the force of years of loss and failure, depression and madness, anger and crime, heartbreak and love, all dragging me forward artistically, I finished my solo piano album. It brought together songs I wrote in Kalamazoo, New Orleans and St. Louis. Sherm recorded me in his basement. Uncle Friend designed the cover art, by hand, and brilliantly, I might add. It centered around a photo of me on the porch at Lee Barton—a selfie before the term was coined, stolen with a disposable camera that happened to be sitting there. I look like a hairy greaseball, wearing a yellow and white striped maternity onesie one of my girls acquired for no reason related to pregnancy. "Makin Love To A Dinosaur" was the last track on the album. To be fair to CONFUSOR, since he wrote the Kalamazoo material, I titled the thing

Chri$ Tycoon Presents…
CONFUSOR

Would You Permit Me For Just One
Moment…

BLEY
The Dinosaur song was from before I met Ptera…still, a handful of the album's other songs were…*poetically explicit…*about our dysfunctional relationship. Too many of them, probably, which made it a pretty tasteless move to bring a stack of CDs back to Kalamazoo and sell them in front of her at the very next Turkey Fister show. It was a deep cut we didn't dress and heal until many years later.

CHRI$ TYCOON
My last week in St. Louis, Ptera and I started talking on the phone for the first time in months. I went straight to her house—the house on Lee Barton—when I got back.

CHRI$ TYCOON comes in through the kitchen door, passes through the dark dining room with the piano, rounds the corner into the softly lit living room. PTERA's sitting surrounded by a small group of people CHRI$ TYCOON mostly doesn't recognize. She has a very cute new haircut. He's never seen it so short, but it's working. As soon as she sees him, she smiles, leaves her conversation abruptly, cuts through the middle of the group, into his arms. The two share a small peck, and a big smile.
By morning, even though there is no direct cause, no clear reason, PTERA and CHRI$ TYCOON again go their separate ways.

CHRI$ TYCOON (*cont'd*)
My friend Levi gave me his key, and thusly his room, in the two-bedroom bottom half of a Victorian on the hill up Grant Street—the other occupant being our friend Bird. Another lucky break, another friend's lease to crash on.

By the time my presence normalized, around the house *and* around town, I was in the Advent of the Dirtiest Summer.

PEAKPEAKPEAKPEAK ABSORPTION

BLEY
The beautiful girl on the ward, that ghost…wasn't Sam.

Sam's the angel of the parts of me which are whole.

The ghost was Greta Jane…angel of my broken parts.

That's not the same as a demon, even though a lot of people treated her so.

CONFUSOR and GRETA enter, each with a couple blankets, which they spread out in a casual formation across the stage. They sit down side by side on any of the blankets, leaning back on their hands, facing the audience.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Just *look* at her. She fuckin *radiated*. Never in my *life* did a face make me feel so much peace inside.

BLEY

I didn't find out about this until probably a decade later, but I *may* have run into Greta back in the year 2000. She went to the same high school as Chadley, the guitar player in the punk band Tackett and I started when we were sixteen and seventeen years old. During one of Chadley's famous house parties—one which I attended—Greta supposedly went into his parents' room and stole some valuables, including gold Spanish Doubloons. *Hundreds of years old* Spanish Doubloons. She was one of those *troubled teen boot camp* kids. The reputation dogged her.

We didn't meet officially until June of 2003, in a Meijer parking lot, minutes before our six-car caravan left Kalamazoo on the way to Bonnaroo, an hour south of Nashville, Tennessee. Most of the caravaners were my closest girlfriends, including four of the five who had been there to help me land after Sam's funeral.

CHRI$ TYCOON

When my friends introduced Greta and I, the connection came on quickly, and silently; we literally did not speak, only smiled at each other in a way I hadn't known of previously. It was time to go, though, so I tucked the whole thing up under my ribcage. We pushed eighty miles per hour in tight formation all the way to Tennessee…Indianapolis, Louisville, Nashville…and arrived at sunrise, slowing to a standstill just shy of the exit ramp to Manchester, where Bonnaroo is still held. Traffic had backed up all the way from the nearest festival entrance to I-24, in both directions.

Greta and I held a loose orbit around each other all weekend, coming and going, speaking a little more every day.

Main stage, Sunday, final day of the festival. A giant field of trampled grass, thousands of attendees baking, and getting baked, in direct summer sunlight. The most famous act to perform this afternoon is James Brown. The crowd seems exhausted, taking stock of the weekend's aftermath, waiting for that night's big headliner, The Dead—current iteration of the Grateful Dead. Members of CONFUSOR's group fly away and return throughout the day, maintaining a chosen spot in the field with their sporadically reconfigured patchwork of blankets and bodies.
GRETA and CONFUSOR spend a lot of this time holding down the fort together. They

lay side by side looking at the sky, picking grass, rolling around, having talks, solidifying their new bond.

BLEY

I used to remember everything we talked about, those first hours, under the Tennessee sky. All I remember now is how it felt. The former was easier to forget, years later, when it became too painful to remember so much of Greta. A feeling isn't remembered the same way words are…perhaps to the detriment of healing.

The only existing pictures of us were taken that afternoon. In my photo album from the period, they're peppered in among the rest of Bonnaroo '03 like Easter eggs. Somebody or somebodies kept taking my camera, catching shots of Greta and I sitting or standing together.

CHRI$ TYCOON

My favorites are the ones we took together, on purpose. Greta is wearing a zebra-striped skirt, her skin tanned, hair pulled back from her precious, gorgeous face, a few errant curls around her hairline rebelling against captivity.

LIGHTS FADE to *evening magic hour.* GRETA and CONFUSOR gather their blankets up. They EXIT.

BLEY

And from then until the middle of 2005, our relationship was barely even cursory. We lived maybe a mile apart—at least, when I was living in Kalamazoo—but I never once saw her. Two messes passing in the night. We did talk on the phone a few times, though, and at one point I had something going on with a friend of hers. They once mutually invited me over to Greta's, but I had heard reliable intel that their dynamic at the time was to fist-fight over the last pinch of crack. Instead of alienating both of them, I pretended to not be able to find the address.

I recorded a song for Greta.

The lyrics say, *that was a good year, for us.*

2005…Top-two contender for the worst year of my life, but I stand by what I sang.

For us.

CHRI$ TYCOON walks into Papa Pete's Taverna, easily his thousandth trip through this door. The weekday summer night is hot and quiet. He looks to the right, toward the pool tables. GRETA is there, talking to

PTERA of all people. Until now, CHRI$ TYCOON didn't know they were acquainted. Happy to find anywhere else in the world to be tonight than where PTERA is, he turns on his heel, heads directly back out, across the street, towards his car.
The bar door opens. Over his shoulder CHRI$ TYCOON sees GRETA coming out, so he makes another 180◦ turn, meets her on the yellow center line of the street.

GRETA

Was that your bad ex—

She cuts herself off. CHRI$ TYCOON doesn't respond out loud, but GRETA takes an affirmative response from something in his manner. Breeze-like, softly, she closes the gap between them, puts her arms around his neck, kisses him deeply on the mouth.

BLEY

When I think of that first kiss with Greta, I feel it the same as the last one with Sam. It was strangely similar, pure, and came as a surprise. All I could do was *have it,* and I do—another stored memory of feeling, perfectly preserved, but not cold as in cryostasis.

GRETA

Do you want to get out of here?

CHRI$ TYCOON

Yes…fuckin absolutely.

BLEY

She didn't go back inside, didn't say

GRETA

Hold on, I just want to say goodbye first.

GRETA and CHRI$ TYCOON hold hands, EXIT—if possible, up an aisle through the audience.

BLEY

No, she took me by the hand, and we walked straight to her apartment—which, at the time, happened to be across the street at the other end of the block. We stayed together a handful of nights that summer. Never did more than kiss and hold each other. It was

BLEY (*cont'd*)
comfort. Safety. And love. *And* we blew cocaine. And, we talked about poetry. I remember when the website Myspace launched the following year; she listed her occupation on there as *Poet*. To remember that, always makes me smile, and breaks my heart.

CHRI$ TYCOON reenters.

What was rotten about our time together, one of the saddest concepts in which I've ever been a component: The fact I never pressured her nor remotely *suggested* she have sex with me was so unusual to her, so opposite her experience, of being used by men, and having sex for drugs…it seemed to almost *irritate* her, or at the very least *confuse* her.

CHRI$ TYCOON
That was the life Greta got dished. She tried so hard to shake it.

Once that summer, after I couldn't find her for a few days, she called me from the inpatient psych unit at Borgess Hospital, on the east side of town.

GRETA (*on phone*)
Come up and visit me! I can't go home until next week…

CHRI$ TYCOON
Come up…to the *psych ward?*

GRETA
We can have a fashion show with the clothes in the donation box!

BLEY
I never went. Hated myself for it, but what I didn't tell her was that I was afraid of not being let out once I got in there. On Grant Street, I lived only a quick walk up the hill from the Kalamazoo Regional Psychiatric Hospital. One evening on our porch, I said to Bird

CHRI$ TYCOON
A lot of the time, I feel like I belong in the crazy house, up on the hill.

BIRD
…Why would you say that?

CHRI$ TYCOON
…You don't see it…*in* me?

BLEY
He said he didn't know what I was talking about, and I didn't feel welcome to further articulate my meaning.

CHRI$ TYCOON

That's one of the great gifts Greta gave me: the strength and a place to say out loud what before I only thought of. She also gave me social permission to embrace my true madness, and confidence that I *wasn't* wrong for thinking I might need institutionalization.

BLEY

A strange appropriation of the psychiatric care system, I think, looking back. It was okay to be crazy if I willingly balanced it out with professional intervention.

CHRI$ TYCOON

At least, I now knew, *somebody* understood.

BLEY

Because *nobody* else *ever* did.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Even Bird, founding member of our after-hours nude beach paradise at the place on Lake Michigan we called Larryland, who I'd eaten mushrooms with while stomping in knee-high mud to Primus in the middle of the night at my second Bonnaroo in 2004, wept with and kissed on the mouth when I left for New Orleans, a friend who I assumed could *see* me…*he didn't get it*.

BLEY

Even friends who were successfully passing college psychology classes, looking forward to graduate studies in counseling…if they saw the signs…they never said anything helpful about it.

CHRI$ TYCOON

But they *should* have. They should have seen I wasn't defensive and narcissistic like everybody else. I would have been *grateful* for their effort and care. I would have *tried.*

BLEY

And when I started realizing all of *that*, *another* lightbulb came on over my head, right next to the flickering one about the crazy house…

CHRI$ TYCOON

Maybe a lot of the people I love and trust are actually full of shit…

BLEY

Thus completes the fateful feedback loop of bipolar depression. Losing confidence in the people around me only isolated me more. Isolation makes for distance, distance affects confidence, and isolation, and distance…

Two things in fairness to my friends, though, in hindsight…

BLEY (*cont'd*)

First, it wasn't their fault I had almost zero support from my family, which is part of why I needed help in the first place…

Second, there's no doubt about it, the world *is* full of no-good bullshitters, but—and I shouldn't have to stop and footnote like this, except for the benefit of people with *shit* in their ears—*I take my share of the blame* for this goat rodeo I call a life. I take a *rightful, logical* share of it. A share I've spent a lot of years examining and reapportioning before I went running my mouth about it in front of everybody.

On that note, for kicking open the door to my first hospitalization, I largely blame…the massive dose of *Lysergic Acid Diethylamide* I was given that summer. I also blame myself for accepting it. I do *not* and never did blame the friends who supplied it. That may or may not sound like a given to some of you, depending on your perspective. All I can say is, many months later, when they expressed feeling some responsibility for me ending up in a psych unit, I told them the thought had never occurred to me.

Listen…drugs are not for *anyone, anytime.* They're just not. Some people shouldn't do them, period. If you're one borrowed bedroom away from living nowhere, you have no steady employment or income, you've been diagnosed with *any* mental disorder, you're smoking crack and huffing nitrous oxide on the regular, the people closest to you enable your ridiculous behavior, and you hate yourself…I would *not* recommend taking a boatload of LSD. That's as clear-cut an example as *I* can come up with, only because I lived exactly.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Other than that…*amazing* substance, acid.

Sidewalk outside the white stucco exterior of Papa Pete's Taverna, lit by various sources—off-white light over the door, glowing green from the neon borders in the windows, and a dirty orange streetlight. Near the curb, a well-worn wood utility pole, staple-gunned to which is a photocopied poster advertising one of CHRI$ TYCOON's bands:

FRIDAY JUNE 24

TURKEY FISTER

FLASHLIGHT PARTY

$3 AT THE DOOR
($2 IF YOU BRING A FLASHLIGHT)

MUSIC FROM 10PM-2AM
PAPA PETE'S

BLEY

We figured we would shut off as many lights in the venue as we could. Show-goers with flashlights would, in turn, provide the least synchronized light show in the history of music. Typical Turkey Fister. Nobody expected anything less weird, from a salsa-metal-alien-cowboy-disco-reggae-jam band.

CHRI$ TYCOON

So, I'm outside smoking, shooting the shit with people as they start showing up. Our resident DJ Eric P is inside, spinning hip hop, nice and loud. Treble hits are shooting out the open door, echoing off the abandoned police station across the street. A jam band from the Detroit side of the state is getting ready to play.

That's when Matt and Tess come up the sidewalk toward me. Their flashlights are *huge*. Huge like, I could see that's what they were carrying when they rounded the corner at the end of the block, by Greta's apartment. By comparison, I *couldn't* see the unlabeled plastic water bottle full of pink Kool-Aid under Matt's arm until they were standing a foot away.

TESS

Flashlight partyyy!

CHRI$ TYCOON

Hell. Yes. Yall's flashlights are fuckin *enormous.*

MATT

Yeah, so is this…

CHRI$ TYCOON

How do you mean?

TESS

More than meets the eye…

MATT

Want to drink it?

BLEY

He stared at me, wide smile, wide eyes, his pupils as big as the lens of his flashlight.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Well *alll*right.

MATT hands CHRI$ TYCOON the bottle. One gulp. MATT gestures *more*. Three gulps. *More.* CHRI$ TYCOON shrugs, tips back, drains the bottle.

BLEY

Whatever happened between then and closing time, *I have no memory whatsoever*. I don't remember playing, packing up, getting paid, or driving my car full of music gear to the after-party. Time picks up sometime after, when that initial large dose reached equilibrium with my mind. I was on Lee Barton. My same group of girls still lived here, in the second to last house on the court. The last house was full of mutant theater kids, with whom Turkey Fister were now well acquainted. Both houses were engaged full-throttle in a party, which also overflowed back and forth into the building at the entrance to the court, where Matt and Tess lived.

The very first thing I remember: sitting on the guardrail that separates the houses on Lee Barton from WMU property. I was in the middle of…not exactly a *conversation*…with a handful of complete strangers. They looked disturbed by whatever I was saying. Ten feet away, staring at me from the steps to her porch, was Ptera. She was in rare form that night, too. She had her wig on.

CHRI$ TYCOON

(*inner monologue*) She's *Sylvia* tonight.

Oh, shit.

Buckles.

Swash Buckle.

BLEY

Without saying another word, I stood up and walked straight to Matt and Tess'. In retrospect, it was a worse decision than if I had stayed, with my head already half-full of acid, watching Ptera try to pick up one of these guys right in front of me.

CHRI$ TYCOON

What did of in any order happen this?

A sheet of acid in MATT's hands. The corner is a foot away. Pointed at CHRI$ TYCOON's mouth. Leaning forward. Teeth apart. Then together. Paper on his tongue. Taste buds counting the damage. One hit, two hits, three hits, four, five six seven hits, eight nine ten eleven twelve and a couple more. Peak absorption soon. Again. THIRTEENFOURTEEN. Larry Says Do it.

Lucy in sheep's clothes. A Lucy's high binding affinity for -H%
for 5H1T
for 5-H%%
for 5-HT
shit!
5-HT receptors

The chemical structure of

resembles that of serrrrraaaatttooooonnniin

BREAKING NEWS MATT and TESS have lost the sheet. MATT and TESS are fighting over losing the sheet. The sheet is losing the fight over CHRI$ TYCOON teeth. BREAKING NEWS the losing of the sheet is an hour long CHRI$is. Larryland.

cigaretttttttttt (
)
(

BREAKING NEWS TESS and GRETA are leaving to find heroin. GRETA is here? *GRETA was here?* NEWS MATT found the sheet.
Porch across Davis street. Another corner for the face. *Chomp.* Nine hits ten hits more. Wooooooof.

CHRI$ TYCOON (*cont'd*)
How many dya think that is, Matty…?

MATT
Two corners and a bottle.

CHRI$ TYCOON
How much is that in science numbers, Maaatty…?

MATT
One Mindbender.

CHRI$ TYCOON

PPFFFFFFFFffffff….

MATT

It’s a Dead song, you never heard it?

CHRI$ TYCOON

Never.

MATT

It’s from way back. Like ’65.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Matty…who are these other people sitting with us?

MATT

Oh, you haven’t met these guys?

CHRI$ TYCOON

Okay so…they’re *real*?

STRANGERS

(*sound of jello wiggling*)

CHRI$ TYCOON

Hmmm…

TESS and GRETA stuffing themselves into the back seat *the piano’s back there watch the piano piano piano* TURKEY FISTER ZAK riding shotgun. GRETA’s back. TESS and GRETA. Ford Focus. Heroin.

Isn’t the train station closed for renovations?

TESS

We’re going to Chicago.

GRETA

We need to get the first train!

CHRI$ TYCOON

Hmmm…

Zak, be my eyes.

Left on Davis…Left on Lovell…Right on Oakland…keep on…Right, Straight, Left, Left. GRETA and TESS tumble from the ear of Ford Focus. Pulling out onto Kzooavenoo headinnnnnnnnng

CHRI$ TYCOON (*cont'd*)
HOW IS THE SUN RISING IN MY FACE WHEN WE ARE DRIVING WEST.

IT'S SO BRIGHT IT'S EVERYTHING.

ZAK
That train station was definitely closed.

CHRI$ TYCOON
WHY IS THE SUN SETTING AT SIX IN THE MORNING.

ZAK
I'm also pretty sure there was just heroin in your car.

CHRI$ TYCOON bursts into the house on Lee Barton. Eight in the morning? Nine? Did he park the car? He veers towards the dining room, with the piano. ZAK appears, coming from the kitchen. Tall, lanky ZAK is actually a cartoon cat wearing an old-timey bathing suit. The cartoon cat wearing an old-timey bathing suit is ZAK.

CHRI$ TYCOON
You're a…cat in a…

ZAK
You're still here?...Okay…Alright…come upstairs and smoke a bowl with me and Shirah.

The bottom of the steep hundred-step cement stairway up the northeast corner of East Campus hill. Parasitic worms crawling through the sky. Holds his big bass drum over him for protection FEELING VERY EXPOSED RIGHT NOW IT'S BROAD ASS DAYLIGHT OUT HERE WHY AM I DRESSED LIKE A PIRATE FROM A

SLUM IN THE DISTANT FUTURE
WHAT 2 2 22 2 2 2 2 2 2 DO
(*From the perspective the tenant of a different apartment in MATT and TESS's building, sitting at their dining table, eating breakfast with the ground-level window open)* Somebody is running around the outside of the house. He's passed the window a number of times. Finally, he stops within view, whips around, exclaims

CHRI$ TYCOON

You got me!

like it's the Hide-And-Seek, Solo Edition. Now he's just standing there. He's looking right at me.

There's somebody in that apartment eating breakfast.

Where did everyone go?

Oh my god…

I'm the only one here.

It must be…nine in the morning by now.

STRIKE A POSE. YOU NEED TO LOOK LIKE ANYTHING ELSE. RIGHT NOW.
BE A STRING TANGLE &&&&&
&&&&&&&&&&&&&&
&&&&
BE A
SWASHBUCKLE

I gotta get out of here.

His car is just on the other side of this building. Suddenly he is sitting in it. Ignition. He pulls cautiously into the street and turns towards home and EEEEEEE
EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

slop of colors that make up everything else he sees. He probably never goes over ten miles per hour for the entire four block trip home.

BLEY

That was the first twelve hours.

Touching the ivory keys of his upright piano, in the creepy garage behind the house on Grant Street; Trying to escape the garage he has somehow become locked inside; In bed with the sheets pulled up to his neck; Bugs buzzing around outside sound like alien hovercraft, and startlingly loud; BIRD comes in, they stare at each other; GRETA calls to say there was no train and TESS ran off with the heroin; GRETA quickly realizes CHRI$ TYCOON is tripping his brains out, says some soothing things, and puts on "Three Little Birds"…

Don't worry about a thing,
Cause every little thing
gonna be alright;

He can't process, holds the phone a foot away from his face, stares at it; There's that song again, tinny and faraway, like he can hear the distance it's traveling up to the satellite and back; Erica? Gretica…; He doesn't remember the phone call ending; A knock at the front door sets him off, turns him into a ninja; He cracks the bedroom door, peers out; Greta is outside, wearing the zebra-striped skirt from Bonnaroo two years earlier; He whips around, throws himself to his knees on the floor in front of the trunk at the end of the bed; Rotates a spindle of photos until he sees a picture of Greta wearing the skirt; Mind blown; Back in bed, covers to the neck; Holding…

The next thing I remember, it was dark outside. Twelve hours had passed since I escaped from the garage. I got up slowly, took stock. Remembered I'd been paid for the show the night before. Found the money and drove it straight to the nearest grocery store for a package of Oreos and a gallon of milk. Came home. Ate cookies and drank milk and laid in bed until sleep finally came.

CHRI$ TYCOON

The rest of the summer of '05, in a nutshell…I signed up for a trucker school in South Bend, Indiana—left almost immediately, not only because I didn't know what in the living fuck I was doing or what was going on, but also, about half of everybody in my first class were advertising White Supremacists. I mean *blatant*. Tattoos, t-shirts…I didn't have to ask. The school was putting us all up in the same hotel for the duration of the two-week training course, and I wasn't going to stick around and say the wrong thing to one of these psychopaths and end up bleeding out in a dumpster.

Not long after I got back, Bird told me he was having someone take my room who could pay rent and bills. I went back to hopping couches and living in my car. Resorted to stealing deposit bottles and liquor from Papa Pete's. Drove drunk to Taco Bell one night, with a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label I made off with, and I remember parking because the drive-thru was backed up, and suddenly I woke up in my running car, windows down, in a punishing daylight.

Word must have spread, once it got *that* bad, because my friend Sage called up one day and told me I needed to get my shit together and come stay at he and his wife's house. That year, Sage and I performed semi-regularly with DJ Eric P in a live electronic trio called Legends of Legends Lounge. I met him right before Sam died. Now, he had three kids. I slept on their basement floor on some foam and blankets. I even watched the kids a few times.

Near the end of August, I watched on television as Hurricane Katrina fucked New Orleans, and lost almost all of the grip I had left. I monitored my situation until I felt I couldn't trust myself anymore.

Not knowing what else to do, I called Burl. Burl called around to the local inpatient psychiatric units until he found an open bed. I drove myself to Allegan General Hospital the next day and checked in. Told the admitting nurse I was going to kill myself. The first day inside, I wandered around, wrote poetry, and didn't feel any safer. I told the staff I wanted to leave. So they put me on something that knocked me out for two days—which was convenient for everybody, I guess, because the standard terms of a voluntary commitment dictate that, once you're in, if you ask to leave, they have to keep you for forty-eight more hours. *I* didn't want to deal with me any more than *they* probably did.

BLEY

I don't particularly want to use the other patients in the unit at Allegan to tell my story…except to say, I knew from meeting them that I was in the wrong place. There was a psychotic mother, maybe thirty years old, who if I had to guess would probably never have custody of her children again…and two elderly people with dementia—a Vietnam vet who constantly asked me if I was ever in the service, and a grandmother who was clearly only in there because her family couldn't find her a room in a proper memory care facility. I was a very young adult whose brain got burned a few too many times.

When my two-days hold was up, the doctors gave me starter packs of Lexapro, an antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication, and Abilify, trail-rated for those afflictions plus bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and autistic irritability. *Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors…*as a sufferer of bipolar disorder, when in a depressive cycle, my serotonin receptors act like a warehouse that's actually a front for the mob. The hours of operation on the sign outside say they're *supposed* to be open, but the bay doors are all closed. My brain drives away with the merchandise, unless *convinced* by the Don to do otherwise. On SSRI medications, the shipment gets dumped outside the loading dock, so it's there for Vinnie and Knuckles to scoop up the next time they come out for a smoke.

CHRI$ TYCOON

I finished the medications as directed, but never followed through on new scripts, never scheduled any sessions with a therapist. For the time being, I was more *scared straight*. I now knew, if I *actually* ended up in the Kalamazoo Regional Psychiatric Hospital, it'd be a thousand times worse.

So, I got a dishwashing job at Kalamazoo College, the liberal arts school in town. Got money for a deposit and first month's rent on a new place to live, thanks to my maternal grandparents. Moved into 1004 ½ Davis Street, a half-basement apartment in one of the few non-Victorians in Vine. It was a beautiful, good sized place, essentially true to its original 1940s form, paneled in real, solid dark wood. It fit me, and yet, I was lucky to have it.

I went back to community college. Passed a few classes. Pulled back on the drugs about seventy-five percent. Started working in the kitchen at the restaurant side of Papa Pete's—Blue Dolphin. I performed all kinds of music, on my own and with a few different groups, and especially with Tackett, who moved back from Cali and buried the hatchet with me. I don't remember it being a big deal, after what seemed like forever had passed. We were old homies.

BLEY

I *so* very badly want to be mischievous again, and say, *this is where my life turned around*. Except, it was starting to look like the damage was more fundamental, even after I changed so much in my environment. As I later learned, going through all I went through caused *actual* brain damage. And the symptoms crept up, a bit at a time.

BLEY (*cont'd*)
They crept, in part, into my dreams. Dreams about Sam came and went, ever since she died. It was almost always the same—she's alive again, it makes no sense, but she's here and she loves me and I'm just going to *go with it.* Waking up sucked, but I learned to handle it.

CHRI$ TYCOON
My new dreams were different. They were nightmarish, antagonistic, where the antagonist took one of two forms, never both in the same dream: a feral cat…or Jab, my relationship with whom remained neither peaceful nor respectful.

The feral cat would attack me physically, wouldn't stop attacking me, pouncing, biting, scratching. To make it stop, I'd have to kick it away as hard as I could, and when that didn't work, I'd tear the animal limb from limb.

Jab would attack me verbally, the way he did in real life when he seemed to feel *especially* unaccountable, spewing an amalgamation of foul things he'd actually said to me, or to my mother. To make it stop, I'd have to beat him mercilessly, and when that didn't work, I'd tear Jab limb from limb.

BLEY
I barely have an aggressive bone in my body, let alone a violent one. The brutality in either version of this dream felt sickening. What distinguishes them from each other is the balance of empathy versus satisfaction. The only satisfaction I felt in fending off the relentless attack of an animal was that I was out of danger. Animals aren't culpable.

CHRI$ TYCOON
Over the course of a year, the dreams came more and more regularly—from few times a month at first, to a few times a *week.* As the dreams increased in frequency, I also developed a moderate case of—what was later diagnosed as—schizoaffective disorder.

SCHIZO STATE
Do it……do it……do it do it do it…do it…

DOITDOITDOITDOITDOITDOITDOIT*DOIT*!

BLEY
Like my brain was writing an acapella version of a Missy Elliot club track.

CHRI$ TYCOON
I didn't have to decipher what it meant. *Do it* meant *kill yourself.*

BLEY
The message was *understood.* The words didn't have a *voice*. I could "hear" them, but…

CHRI$ TYCOON

…It's hard to explain how it worked.

SCHIZO STATE

Dooo itttt…doitdoitdoit. It's overrr.

CHRI$ TYCOON

And even if, at first, I *had* been puzzled—

BLEY

—The message got helpfully more specific.

SCHIZO STATE

Yes. Fucking. Kill. Yourself. Your life is worth NOTHING.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Auditory command hallucination, it's called.

BLEY

What a pleasure. Remember when they got so loud you couldn't sleep?

CHRI$ TYCOON

Remember how loudly they screamed when I packed that briefcase with every knife and blade and sharp object in the apartment?

SCHIZO STATE

FUCK YOU! FUCK! YOU! NOBODY WANTS YOU! YOU'RE GOING TO END IT!

BLEY

I made Tackett come pick it up the briefcase and hide it at his house…At the apex of the horror show in my head, I was recording a new album, a split-LP with another musician from our circle, and Tackett was our recording engineer. One of the tracks, "Swingin Shadow", was essentially a detailed plan for hanging myself in the back woods on Jab's property, in the country out west of town.

CHRI$ TYCOON is handed an electric guitar from offstage. A few moments of silence. Lights fade nearly to BLACK as the first chords build.

All that's quaint holds secrets…
And I am shouldering a terrible burden…
And I am shouldering a terrible burden…
And I am shouldering a terrible burden…
And I am shouldering a terrible burden…

Aint too long,
before that shadow gets to swingin.
Aint too long,
before that shadow gets to swingin.
Aint too long,
before that shadow gets to swingin.
Aint too long,
before that shadow gets to swingin.

And I swear to God, one of these days they're gonna find ya, hangin / Leave a deep impression in the branch where the rope was / A kind word aint gonna be enough to save ya / Lucky if this'll be strong enough to hold up / Maybe if the burden weren't heavy as it was, / You're a big one, with a brick sittin in his gut / And the people that you love'll reach their branches to the sky / And the people that you love might…*God* you hope they might / Keep hoping that they make due, *God* I hope they might.
I tried to have dreams and grow, oh, but they were stolen / So I closed my eyes and dreamed of things that are boring might / Slow up just a bit thinkin of rugs layin flat or hone in on un / Interesting expulsions of *everyday breath*, and swore to God one day simple pleasures / *Wouldn't* be enough and dreams about dust just / *Wouldn't* be enough and dreams about a roach trap / *Wouldn't* be enough, *Wouldn't* be enough / Let's take a long walk back…
And I swear now, one of these days we'll take a long walk back / To the back of these woods where the swamp creeps in / Creeps in, creepin up where no one else would. / You been breathin in a space that's so messed up that the sun wouldn't shine down if you *tore the roof off*. / AND I'M SORRY, OLD FRIEND, I'M GONNA HAVE TO LEAVE YOU OUT HERE.
…Nothin but a swingin shadow on the Paw Paw River.

BLEY

…You alright?

CHRI$ TYCOON

Ooof!

BLEY

Catch your breath, bud.

CHRI$ TYCOON EXITS with the guitar.

In the end, I didn't follow through on *any* of my various death plans, and that album was the last music Chri$ Tycoon ever recorded.

CHRI$ TYCOON returns.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Gone too soon…

BLEY

You had two *very* rough years. You took *both* the hospitalizations for us, man.

CHRI$ TYCOON

It was…*different*…than Noka and CONFUSOR's lives.

BLEY

Started *and* finished at rock bottom.

CHRI$ TYCOON

And then, Greta beat me to it, and hanged herself to death.

The fourth tattoo. *Greta Jane* next to a little black heart.

BLEY

June 1st, 2007. She was only twenty-three years old.

At the visitation, I waited silently in line, but in my head I was *screaming*. When I finally got to the casket, I looked at Greta's sleeping face for such a short time that I remember almost nothing about the scene… except that her skin looked really dark, and I'm not positive whether I imagined that, or what. But I *ran* out of there. The next day, after the funeral mass, I went straight to my old high school, to Sheri's classroom. I surprised her sometimes, at the end of the school day. This wasn't one of those visits. She knew it as soon as she saw me.

SHERI

Are you okay? What's going on?

CHRI$ TYCOON

I just came from a funeral…she…my friend Greta…killed herself…

She was the *only one* who *understood*…

SHERI

Oh, Chri$...I am so sorry…

CHRI$ TYCOON

I…I don't know what to *do*, anymore.

SHERI puts her arms around CHRI$ TYCOON, holds him like a mother would. When she lets go, she goes to the phone on her desk, dials a family friend.

SHERI (*on phone*)

Maura?

Hey, it's Sheri.

Hi, real quick, what's the name of that psychologist you liked?

Great (*writing on a notepad*)…Do you have her number?

Okay…no problem…

No, I'm asking for somebody else, actually.

Yes…absolutely…I'll talk to you soon.

SHERI hangs up the phone, pulls her checkbook out of her purse. She writes a check to CHRI$ TYCOON for 100$ and brings it over to him, along with the psychologist's contact information.

As soon as you leave here, I want you to call this woman, tell her what's going on, and make an appointment. I want you to take this money and pay her for the earliest session she can give you. And I want you to tell me what happens, when you know.

…And call your mom, too. Do you understand?

BLEY

Sheri always told me she thought of me as her son.

CHRI$ TYCOON

With all the good-son I could muster, I did what my mom told me.

My new therapist was a short-haired Caucasian American woman, slightly past middle age, gentle in tone and demeanor, helpful, interactive, involved…and a *Sufi*, of all things. She told me she did whirling dervishes—the mystical Muslim practice of physically spinning one's body in pursuit of a trance-like state.

Immediately after our first session, she called to say she found me a bed. I was to report to Borgess, for hospitalization in the unit known as 1 North. Greta's place. My mother picked me up and drove me there. Waited with me in the examination room and cried, until two orderlies came to escort me up.

BLEY

Same as with Allegan General Hospital, I hesitate to say much about the other patients in 1 North. There were more of them—maybe a dozen in my section, where the suicidal and severely depressed people stayed. There was also the *other* section, where the lights were kept dim. I could see into it, but just barely, by looking through the two panes of reinforced glass between which the staff's central post was sandwiched. I didn't even notice there *was* another section, when I first arrived. A disturbance over there alerted me to it. Screaming. Something smashed. Staff rushing in. A violent *thud*. A standoff…After that, I'd look twice when I passed by the glass. Sometimes I'd see a big hulking figure, imposing upon the dark, standing no further back from the glass on their side as I was on mine. Their face was never distinguishable, but their crazy energy was palpable.

CHRI$ TYCOON

That section was where they kept the borderline-criminally-mentally-ill, the cognitively haywire, full-on schizophrenics, extreme EDP cases…*emotionally disturbed persons.*

BLEY

When I realized how physically close I was to them, it struck me…only a few feet away from a shadowy, sparsely furnished hole full of people living wide awake in their individual nightmares, through a couple walls and some glass, here *we* all were, going about our committed days in what was—comparatively—a *spa*, enjoying three hot and frankly pretty good meals every day, cigarette breaks, relatively calm group therapy sessions, good lighting…even comfort and care from our fellow patients, as well as coherent conversations. I had relative privacy, too. No bunkmate in my room until my last day there.

CHRI$ TYCOON

How lucky was I, to only be ill enough for *that* side of the unit?

A piano appears onstage.

CHRI$ TYCOON (*cont'd*)
And then, there was the day they unlocked the therapy room so I could play the piano. I wasn't in there for more than a song or two before a handful of patients came in and sat down to listen as I played and sang.

CHRI$ TYCOON steps to the piano, to play the introduction of another song from the same album on which "Swingin Shadow" appears.

Oh, *when can I go home*?
Like believing in a place no one can know.
She found me drowning, face first, in my cereal.
Where's an angry fighter sposed to cast defensive blows? My defense rests.
Sunglasses on my head, and my mattress…is a tanning bed.

BLEY
When the staff came in to let me know my time was up, my cohort gathered closer around me. One of them became very emotional, hugging me tightly.

PATIENT
(*sobbing*) I hope whatever your demons are…the sickness in you…I hope it leaves you so you can share your beautiful light with the world again.

CHRI$ TYCOON
If someone so drained of life could muster such heartfelt encouragement for a stranger…what business did *I* have, giving up?

BLEY
I was ready to start over. Having spent three days and nights in that place, I put in my request for release. Two days later, I gathered my shit together, signed my forms, hugged my peers goodbye, popped my earbuds in, and walked…to *here*…553 Ira Avenue…where it seems so many of my roads lead.

END ACT II

III. When Can I Go Home?

I perceive a passage my
stars
straight
point to home
and he do not recognize him
now
but it could cold thinking
this is what
not is he calling at the far
tips of my hairs
point to Lyra a lighthouse
can guide you
home or turn away a
wink
remembering the way back
my wind
merely whispers of house
of his
and less and
less

2013

The yoga room. BLEY, having retained not a single productive thought from deep in the green-grey of his meditation, is jarred back toward Earth consciousness by EMMY's final instruction.

EMMY

Start to return to your body…Become aware of your breath.

BLEY

Ughhh.

EMMY

Namaste.

Prone and still, BLEY works his way out the cognitive backside of his Savasana. In one hand, he feels the face of Squeaky, his cat, who at some point laid down here, resting her little head in his open palm. She receives chin scratches, as they both stretch.

BLEY opens his eyes to the muted light behind his towel head wrap. Carefully sits himself up, navigating a volley of responses from his pain centers.
Towel falls to his shoulders. He leans back on his arms and looks to one side. The practically empty room where yoga has been taking place is revealed to be a conjoined twin of the room with the desk in the middle. Materials on the floor are in their least organized state yet—more of a psychotic collage, a pile hastily tossed down to keep the blood off the rug.
CHRI$ TYCOON sits in BLEY's seat, casually, smoking a blunt.
BLEY stares the mess down, and himself.
CHRI$ TYCOON stares back, winks and smiles.

BLEY
You're still here?

CHRI$ TYCOON
Last time somebody asked me that—

BLEY
—they were a six-foot-tall cartoon cat in an old-timey bathing suit, I know.

CHRI$ TYCOON launches a chestfull of smoke at BLEY as he delivers his next line:

CHRI$ TYCOON
Well, *weren't they*?

BLEY
Hm.

Makes me think about how we *know* what's true or not, even from moment to moment. Makes me think about *acceptance*…as a stage of grief…as a state of *mind*.

I think the idea gets misinterpreted and misused. I think pushing acceptance is just a sly way for emotionally shallow, selfish, ignorant people to stifle and marginalize the rich emotions we're capable of as human beings—to replace true introspection, healing and wisdom with mantras, platitudes and, more contemporarily, *#hashtags*. To value the illusory safety of denial…over the freedom and clarity of honesty.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Acceptance is a forked path. Down one way, we concede to objective reality, and down the other, we find the forest fire which previously blocked the *first* path, at which point we are supposed to…at least, this is the impression I got, from society at large as well as in my personal life…supposed to fight it, put out the fire.

BLEY

I know the feeling of being frustrated…even infuriated…with someone who won't or can't accept reality. My younger selves are guilty of *not* accepting. For the better part of a decade after Sam died, something in their minds stayed clenched around the idea that—as in dreams—she might simply *come back.* Or, just as *accept*able an outcome, they might fall ass-backwards onto a way to *bring* her back.

I kept this *magical thinking* to myself. But, of course, it *presented*…*seeped out*…elsewhere…a single ingredient, after all, in a greater poison. No one I came in contact with got reprieve from my weirdness simply by virtue of not being able to read my crazy-ass mind.

The concept of acceptance, as applied to the grief of great personal loss, is the basis of the *last* of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *five* stages of grieving. The preceding stages, in order, are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression. I spent the first half of my adult life running all four concurrently.

NOKA enters, stands by CHRI$ TYCOON.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Imagine a manual-transmission pickup truck—like the one Noka learned to drive in, out on Jab's property, when we were fifteen.

NOKA

This is one of my favorite things Jab did for me. A few times a month we would cruise out to survey the land and woods, look for morel mushrooms if they were in season, water trees we had planted, pick what must've been a million postglacial stones out of the fallow central cornfield and toss them into the driving path along its north edge. This was a while before he and my mother built a house there.

Usually, when we finished our work, Jab liked to take a long walk back into his twenty-five acres of woods. Sometimes, he went without me, leaving me alone to burn out a series of clutches, off-roading in his dark blue 1993 Ford Ranger.

BLEY

Great way to learn how to drive.

CHOUCHOU enters, stands opposite NOKA from CHRI$ TYCOON.

CHOUCHOU

Now, imagine if I rode that old Ranger in third gear, four wheel drive engaged, back out to the nearest rural highway and, never shifting up, maintained the fifty-five miles per hour speed limit until I hit Lake Michigan, a half hour to the west.

The engine sounds like a tornado. The truck feels like it is barely moving forward. The transmission overheats. The driveshaft binds up.

It'd be a miracle, if that truck reached the shore. Well, *here I be*, so…you can call my survival a *miracle* if you have to. Call it whatever you want. My tires hit yielding sand and the truck rolled to a stop—head gasket blown, radiator cracked, the view ahead totally obscured by white smoke billowing from under the hood. But when the air cleared, that beach looked prettier than I'd ever seen it.

CHRI$ TYCOON

I went into the hospital for the second time, and I came back out, and slowly but surely turned into *this* guy. Better, wiser, more capable of happiness, but also…*bitterer*? Anyone know if that's a real word?

CHOUCHOU

Don't *you* start white-washing things, now. Only a weak person would call me *bitter*. I'm a *realist*. It's not a fucking dirty word.

When I finally reached acceptance, I accepted *all* true things, and *all* unknowns, from micro-my-life to macro-the-world. No spin, no denial, no fear. I didn't try to extract peace of mind or a personal sense of relief from it. I didn't attach it to a subjective philosophical framework or a belief system about which I could spout off on social media.

…Speaking of smoke billowing…*What* is *happening* right now, Tycoon? *Pass* that shit.

CHRI$ TYCOON passes CHOUCHOU the blunt. Big rips.

BLEY

All these *metaphors*, though! Forked paths…Mechanical limitations…Leave it to weed smokers, to puff-puff-pass every conversation into a cloud of shitty poetry.

NOKA

The literal version, then? You found reconciliation, in regards to what our Uncle, Jab's brother, brought up back in 2001…about the good dying young, and the bad living old.

CHOUCHOU

There you go…now *hit this*.

CHOUCHOU passes the blunt to NOKA. NOKA hits it hard, erupts into a fit of coughing and sputtering. The C. BLEYs all crack up laughing, including CONFUSOR, who plucks the blunt out of NOKA's hand as he enters. He hits it, exhales, and in the haze finds the through-line.

CONFUSOR

But the *first* metaphor, remember, had *two* paths. True, there's little chance of anything resembling healing happening, until we walk the talk of acceptance, reconcile with the past, and adopt positive change as an imperative to survival…what do we do, though, if we don't also take our new tools, double back, head down the *other* path, and make sure the *fire* is actually put out?

CHOUCHOU

Because…what if that fire is part and parcel with our *passion*, our *artistry*, our *lust for life*, that which distinguishes us, and we don't rightly want it *all* put out?

BLEY

And what if we live in a world which *does* want to dull our flame, even sometimes while simultaneously pretending to *celebrate* it? That's when people like me, like *all* the me's here, become a problem…to the average Facebook philosopher, the ignorant family member, the weak confidante.

NOKA

That's when they bring out their platter of platitudes.

AUDIENCE

You have to try and move on, and *accept it*. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. One day at a time!

CHOUCHOU

And when they say shit like that, to emotionally damaged persons in desperate need of help, for whom it was probably difficult to open up to anyone in the first place, what they're *really* saying is

CHRI$ TYCOON

I prefer not to have this conversation at all. Your emotions are inconvenient to me. They make me uncomfortable. They're too complicated for my level of emotional intelligence and strain my limited attention span. They get in the way of the simple illusions by which I live my life.

NOKA

Platitudes aren't only *unhelpful*. Most of the time they're straight up *inaccurate*…not to mention *inapplicable*.

CONFUSOR

Wildly *inefficient*, for the purpose of addressing complex, individualized situations.

BLEY

So, the next time you tell a grieving, depressed or otherwise downtrodden human being

AUDIENCE

Everything happens for a reason, you know?

CHOUCHOU

…I'll track you down and backhand you unconscious.

BLEY

And me and Chouchou, we aren't that different, so you might get a double dose.

CHRI$ TYCOON

Naw, naw. Yall know nobody's hitting anything.

CONFUSOR

Except this *Swisher*.

CONFUSOR passes the blunt to BLEY, who hits it repeatedly, rapid-fire, eyes wide. A slow, bass-heavy rhythm track plays. The C. BLEYs cheer BLEY on, laughing and hooting. A cloud forms. FADE TO BLACK.

LIGHTS UP on BLEY, now alone onstage, sitting behind the desk. Day has become night.

BLEY

Couldn't help myself.

…*What*? You really thought that's *all* I had to say on the subject? After spending my *life* dealing with this nonsense? Come on. We're in Act III. You *should* know me better by now.

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES shuffles onstage, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He stands by BLEY, who puts his arm around CHRISTOPHER CHARLES' shoulders.

BLEY

What's happening, little dude?

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES

I woke myself up. I had a bad dream.

BLEY

(*to audience*) This guy had his own messed up dreams.

(*to Christopher Charles*) Like the ones about the Devil, right?

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES

(*nods*) I would be playing in a sunny field and when I said a bad word the ground cracked open and the Devil would come out with fire all over and grab me and drag me down to hell.

BLEY

One-hundred-percent, I blame the Catholic upbringing Jab started me on when I was in Kindergarten. It scared me to death. I'd wake up from dreams like these and run into my parents' bedroom in the middle of the night, sobbing, saying *I don't want to live with the Devilll!*

By the time I reached the classical *age of reason*, I *hated* going to church. I knew there was something fundamentally wrong with what I was being told there. Since Jab made me participate until I was almost seventeen, I received—with utter reluctance—various sacraments… Confession…Confirmation Holy Communion…Holy moly. Not a fan.

The exact nature of the *other* dreams I had, as a child, is as hard to describe as the schizo voice that awoke in Chri$ Tycoon's head. Devil-dreams didn't bother me for too long—a year at most. But, for five years after, something darker came on, usually in my first hour of sleep. There were no images, only blackness, and what felt like waves of energy periodically battering my head and body. And, there was a presence in the blackness, from which the energy seemed to emanate.

Usually, I clawed and fought my way out of the dark, forced myself awake. I remember being brave once, though, asking *who are you?* The reply: *Dante.* I asked, *Who is Dante?* No reply. I never asked it another question, when it came. Just rode it out, and woke up if I was able.

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES

It smells weird in here.

It smells like that dirty plastic tube thing I found that one time, in the woods by the creek, next to the pictures of the naked girls.

BLEY

(*whispering to audience*) *It was a bong. He found a bong and some torn-out pages of porno mags.*

(*to Christopher Charles*) I know it does, buddy. I know. You gotta go back to bed, though. What if youuu…go lay down…and close your eyes…and think about *alll the other smells* you can *possibly* think of?

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES

What *kind* of smells?

BLEY

Weird ones, good ones, whatever you want.

BLEY gives CHRISTOPHER CHARLES' neck a gentle squeeze. The child EXITS.

Atta boy. Sleep good.

Jab

BLEY

Forget the ADD or ADHD Christopher Charles' teachers tried to address. Think of Asperger's, anxiety disorders, childhood depression. He should have been evaluated on the autism spectrum, too. I don't make the suggestion lightly, ignorantly, or dramatically. Dare I come off as that asshole who thinks he knows a little something because he *studied* it…my undergrad minor was in psychology, including but not limited to courses on child psych *and* abnormal child psych, as well as an entire course about the biological science of mental illness as it relates to psych meds and substance abuse. Chouchou got all this "outsider" psych education between 2011 and 2013. By then, he'd lived almost five years as a…former?..."insider". Ample time to reflect on the aftermath of Chri$ Tycoon, in addition to the couple of decades' reflection on Christopher Charles.

Chouchou studied *himself* in college.

And, you may remember, I worked directly with special-needs children as far back as CONFUSOR—most recently in 2014, at a special education magnet school. The kids in my junior high-age classroom alone, between them carried the weight of just about every childhood emotional and intellectual impairment yet identified, from Down's syndrome to extreme emotional disturbance. In the verbal, higher-functioning children, those enrolled at the school due to emotional instability and generally being *on the spectrum*, I saw pieces of myself, every day.

In the most disheartening way, I was let go at the end of my three month probationary period. Trouble started a little more than halfway through my employment, when a school administrator witnessed me attempting to deal with a student in the lunch room who was muttering about killing me, calling me a bitch, and whatnot. Normally, this kid was everyone's buddy. Something had agitated him and he was being defiant. He didn't know what he was saying, and I knew him well enough to know the following: not only would he quickly forget whatever set him off, but he might even apologize later—at the very least, he'd act ashamed, knowing in some capacity that he had acted like a little asshole.

In the meantime, my best guess was that I should stand next to his seat, be quiet yet stern, and continue issuing the directive that he get up. Lunch had been over for some time. Other staff from my classroom had already come back twice…to scold *me,* for not having brought the student to class yet. This was a tone my job took on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. It didn't deter me. We're talking about Chouchou here, after all.

At the end of that day, I was called in to the administrator's office, where I was spoken to more like I was a dumbfuck punk than a hard-working grown adult. It was a lot of *we do* not *do that. That is* not *how we work here.* I stopped the administrator in her tracks, though only briefly, when I pointed out how they had repeatedly postponed the off-site training session every new employee was supposed to have. To date, my training was postponed three or four times. The reason I was given each time? The atmosphere at the school had been consistently too chaotic to sacrifice a body, even for one day.

Excoriating me for failing to meet exacting standards I hadn't yet been made aware of—and then expecting me to assume blame, strictly based on my place in the hierarchy—was an insult to my intelligence, certainly. Not long after, when the head teacher in my classroom pulled me aside for an entirely different conversation, I got to experience a type of insult entirely new to me. An ironic *slap in the face.*

Faces are a tricky thing, as are tones of voice, and not only in special education. From the inabilities of the innocent autistic to the self-serving delusions of a narcissist or psychopath, accurate interpretation of facial expressions and social cues, particular sensitivities to tone, et al…these assume a myriad of forms in human beings of all ages. Even the neurotypical misinterpret from time to time, simply because they don't *have* time, for instance, to offer their undivided attention.

…*Or*, sometimes, because they don't know what they're talking about.

During a group lesson, the head teacher had observed me as I attempted to comfort and soothe a student who was showing signs of an impending outburst. At this stage, I understood procedure to be to get down below him, kneeling on the floor in front of his chair, rub his arms, focus on his face, and softly say things like *you're okay…all done…aaalll done.* The problem? The teacher told me I *looked too angry,* and that was hurtful to the student.

The person in my classroom supposedly most qualified to understand facial expressions, as they pertain to the emotionally and intellectually impaired, and as they conform to social norms, or don't…was misinterpreting *my* expression. I told them, the way my facial muscles responded to the situation, as far as my subconscious knew, was with caring concern for and complete focus on the student. And, I reminded them, *the student calmed down*. That didn't change the teacher's trajectory.

Admittedly, I learned something useful—if also anxiety-inducing and depressing—from this ridiculous catch-22. For the first time, I began to be self-conscious about my face.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

The situation and subsequent revelation explained a lot about how I'd come off in the past, to other humans. How they'd reacted to me. And, of course, it further illuminated concepts I'd studied in college. I began tuning in to what I looked like to others when I became intense in some way, such as during a conflict, or simply in the course of an impassioned discussion over a serious topic. I'd return mentally to the moment in question, later on, after the fact, and focus on the way my muscles felt, hold on to it, and find a mirror.

Scary. My "mad face" looked a lot like Jab's.

But, I don't think Jab ever got fired from a job RE: fix your face.

It is relevant that the administrator in question stopped working at the school within a couple years of my dismissal. Turns out, they and their policing were not appreciated. But, as many organizations go, when I questioned some disastrous policy they instituted, the teacher in my classroom would admit that, yes, it *was* going to be a disaster, and that we had nonetheless to do what admin said. So much for the school's constant refrain: *Kids First.*

The experience there was one of oh-so-many deep disappointments in Chouchou's life. I loved those kids. Special needs kids have had a place in my heart since I was six years old. Some friends of my parents had a daughter my age with severe cerebral palsy. Some mornings when we were little, for whatever reason, it was more convenient for her school bus to pick her up at my house, so she'd be dropped off there to wait. She was awesome. Once, she got a new wheelchair that was black and yellow, and kept calling it a bee. While my mother looked on from the kitchen, my special friend hung out on the dining room floor making buzzing sounds, cracking us both up while I wheeled her chair around her in circles. And she never forgot me. Called my name every time we saw each other, no matter how many years had passed.

ADMIN

Now, certainly nobody is questioning your *care* for the kids…

BLEY

Yeah. No *shit* I care for them. I agreed to work for that extremely well-funded school for under ten dollars an hour—and zero benefits, health care being the one I very much needed, and still do—despite having a college degree and plenty of previous experience as a *para-professional*, the title given to teacher's assistants in contexts such as special education. At that time, McDonald's was already beginning to *start* employees *at* ten an hour *with* some benefits. I guess I might as well have worked there? I actually had to talk the school *up* to nine dollars and fifty-four cents an hour. I was just looking out for myself, as someone with bills and student loans to pay. But, once I started the job, none of that mattered as much to me as making those children feel like they had a place in the world. I approached it this way in spite of the knowledge that, for some of them, it would make practically no long-term difference.

Over and over, some entity or another kept trying to put out my fire. Even after I *got better*, life never let up, taking away almost every good thing I came into, for one stupid, unfair reason after another.

And we'd be here 'til sunrise, if I got started on the string of loves lost through some preposterous twist or another…even those suffered by Chouchou alone.

So let's *not*. Let's look at the cumulative end-result, instead: socially, at thirty-seven years old, I struggle to maintain even short or medium-term connections with anybody. The awkward dynamic of high school gained me a couple lifelong friends, as did the adult years of Noka, CONFUSOR, and Chri$ Tycoon. On the other hand, I have little or no contact with the couple *thousand* other friends and acquaintances I met and knew across that same period.

Jab, my one and only father, seems this way, too…smart and interesting and talented enough to attract a *lot* of people, but apparently, too emotionally and socially discombobulated to hold on to most relationships, especially close-up.

I gather, in ways our own and ways we share, that we are both *too hard to deal with*.

Nature and nurture. I was my father's son, born with half of Jab's wiring in my head, and then, *raised* by him. Although…I didn't consciously begin to *know* him until I was close to four years old. When I was two—in part because, prior to my earliest memories, and, according to my sister, before I was even born, my parent's marriage was *already* messed up—Jab re-enlisted in the Armed Forces. His earlier service record in the Navy and Air Force had been honorable, and afterwards, he earned a doctorate in veterinary medicine. So, the Army gladly accepted him as a veterinarian and infectious disease researcher. He immediately took a long-term assignment in the Sinai Desert. Food inspections, livestock health, pathology, immunology, research and development.

A whole ocean and a continent apart, my first impressions of my dad were the inspirational one-panel cartoons he drew for me, starring *Desert Daddy*, which arrived periodically in the mail. *Desert Daddy says…Always check your boots for spiders! Desert Daddy says…Salute the Flag! Desert Daddy says…I really miss my buddy.* Desert Daddy looked *just like* my dad. He wore the same military beret and uniform shirt he had on in photos from that time, but also, the tiny little rememberin' kid I was, I actually recognized his face in the simple pencil-sketches.

While he was gone, I didn't talk much. Apparently, for a time, I would only bark or meow—even during the rare conversations we had, given his limited access to the satellite phone. I failed to properly toilet train until well past the age of three. Foggy, embarrassing memories associated with that. Clearer is my imprint of the second time Jab left for Egypt. It's another one of my very *first* memories.

BLEY (*cont'd*)

I knew what was happening. I remember knowing. He took my mother, brother and I to a Chuck-e-Cheese. He was in his uniform. Desert Daddy. He was leaving again. I threw a crying fit. He dragged me out to his old blue two-door Silverado Blazer. Put me in the back seat.

JAB

You *stay out here*…until you learn how to *behave*.

BLEY

And then he left me there.

I remember other times I failed to keep it together, when I was very young. Preschool graduation. My class performed a song for which we were dressed up like different animals, and had individual cues. I was a grasshopper, wearing these green arms somebody built with sandpaper attached to the inside forearms. When my big moment in the song came, I was supposed to rub my wrists together, cricket style.

The other kids were having a fine time, but, as my teachers attempted to prompt me, I took one look at the few dozen people watching me and had a complete meltdown. I can't say if my mom came and got me or if they even finished the song. Funny to think that now, in spite of *decades* of growth on my part, on any given day, I'd much rather be on a stage performing publicly than doing anything else involving more than a half-dozen human beings. Jab got me started in that direction—classical Spanish and Portuguese guitar lessons from age seven to fourteen, alto saxophone in my school band from age eight to twelve.

And I thank him, for that. Music turned out to be an immense talent, outlet, and source of happiness for me—one which I've been able to offer in *substitute* for my social deficiencies. Jab's also largely responsible for how literate I am. I thank him for teaching me the importance of nature, of recycling, of kindness to animals. I thank him for regularly getting me out of the city where I grew up, taking me hiking at the crack of dawn on weekend mornings on some beautiful mountain. I thank him for raising me on the knowledge of his travels around the world, giving me the important, lasting perspective that no matter what I go through, whatever *my* life might lack, life for a couple *billion* other people is quantifiably harder. There's no doubt that lesson is what helped me see the bright side when I was locked up in 1 North.

We had some good times, me and my dad, and for those too, I thank him.

Unfortunately, he also got me started in the *other* direction. He was the same father who, my whole life, screamed so loud that I could hear every rotten word of the verbal abuse he leveled at my mother, no matter where I hid in or around the house…the same father who went into screaming fits at *me* as far back as my memory goes, creating in my psyche a traumatized copy of myself which, when activated, went neither into fight nor flight but a semi-catatonic state—because Jab rarely hurt me physically, but conditioned

BLEY (*cont'd*)
me to know it could happen *any* time, as long as no one was looking, and reinforced that training *every* time he lorded his raised fist over me while I literally cowered below him, frozen, bracing for pain, holding my arm up in a useless attempt at self-defense…

…The same father who hit my brother so many times, our mother sent him to finish high school with *his* biological father, in Florida. She told me she was sure Jab would kill him if she didn't send him away.

In 2017, the night our maternal Grandpa died, my brother and I got pretty drunk, and he broke down in tears, choking out between sobs how sorry he was that

BROTHER
I left you alone, with Jab. I should have protected you!

BLEY
And that's part of the biggest wedge between my brother and I. Why I haven't talked to him in almost five years. He's holding onto trauma Jab caused him a lifetime ago, whereas I simply don't *care*…that is, I don't care any more than is required to tell this story truthfully. As he shook and cried, I leaned over and gave him a friendly smack on his back, myself markedly less emotional in contrast. I was more surprised than anything. I wasn't sure how we got on the topic in the first place. We got together to have a toast to our Grandpa. I told him

CHOUCHOU
Hey…hey man…it's *totally* fine. I never thought you abandoned me!

BLEY
The abandonment/guilt thing only came up once, but, every single time we hung out for a drink and a smoke in the past decade, my brother *always*, eventually, came around to his greatest hit:

BROTHER
Jab never respected me until I went to war.

BLEY
I'm sure there's truth to it. However, after hearing him say so dozens of times with no apparent progress, I thought, *why do you care* what Jab thinks? My brother is seven years older than me. He joined the Navy before he even turned eighteen—once admitting he used the opportunity in part to become tough and buff, so that nobody could ever again knock him around, like Jab had when he was young and scrawny. He now has four biological children with three different women, and two stepdaughters. A somewhat stable career in automotive sales and service. He owns a *house*…What in the *hell* did he still need his stepfather's approval for?

BLEY (*cont'd*)
And did I have to remind him for the umpteenth time that Jab never technically saw combat in his service across three different branches of the military? So who was he to judge anyone on those merits?

In the sense of rebuilding after a troubled, crazy life, though, my brother's not vastly different than me. I compare Chri$ Tycoon's years to when my brother was on the ass-end of that same age…twenty-five years old…living in Orlando post-Navy with his first son and wife. He stayed legit at first but after a couple years began cavorting with strippers, selling ecstasy and coke. You know, not being an A-plus father *or* husband. In one incident, he was run off the highway by rival dealers. His wife took their son back to Japan where she's from, and told him to make a choice. He chose his family, tentatively, and they all moved to Kalamazoo—five years after Jab, my mother, and I did.

He, a couple years after me, also became suicidal. The experience of serving in the Army Reserve in Iraq in the mid-2000s got him come close to blowing his head off back at home. We discussed it at some point, agreeing that we were both complete pieces of shit for putting our poor mother in a position to lose a child, vowing to try *really hard* to wait until she was gone if we were going to do it. But once, he said

BROTHER
If you do it, I'm gonna do it.

BLEY
And I said

CHOUCHOU
Dude…you have like…*six kids* relying on you. You don't have the *option* anymore.

BLEY
What made me start to completely ignore him, though, was when he tried to make me feel guilty about Jab.

BROTHER
He feels *really* bad about how things all ended up.

BLEY
Or, he'd say

BROTHER
You *know* I regret not being in contact with *my* dad, towards the end of *his* life.

BLEY
But he was just trying to justify and rationalize his own activities…like taking all his kids out to Grandpa Jab's, the house my mother helped build, her place now occupied by

BLEY (*cont'd*)
a fifty-something-year-old lady I've never met, who used to be one of my dad's nursing students at the local community college. They're married. Third wife.

What my brother *should* do—and I've told him as much—is teach his kids to love and respect their Grandma, who is often *far* more alone than I can sometimes bear to think of…instead of letting Jab *buy* their love with all the fun things he affords, like the six-wheel amphibious vehicle I had to hear so much about. Our *mother* needs to feel loved. She doesn't deserve to be undercut like that.

What *else* my brother should do, is forget about being any kind of role model or counselor to me whatsoever.

My brother and I share a mother. My sister and I share Jab as a father. None of us really, totally grew up together, and I don't know how important it is to mention, but they *both* voted for Donald Trump, and I did *not.* It's not the most important thing in the world. It doesn't help, either. There's always been a fair-sized rift between each of us, is all I'm saying.

My sister…thirteen years older than me. *She* moved to Kalamazoo, too, before my brother and his family. I was almost fifteen. Before she found her own place, she first stayed in a spare room across the hall from me. The long and short of it is, her living with us helped initiate one of my parents' many near-divorces.

Our bond is a little stronger now than it was at any other time since then. She vehemently disapproved of Jab's new wife and marriage, and at the time that all went down, I already hadn't spoken to my father in a year or so. A negative thing to bond over, really. Outside of Jab, though, I can tell she either doesn't understand or won't let herself think about why we're not closer, let alone any of the long-standing reasons why the whole *family* is fractured. I certainly don't feel comfortable bringing up most of it with her. She tends to either blow up or slam shut.

SISTER
—

BLEY
We all ended up in the same city, after so much time apart, and had a go of it for a while. Now, there are *no occasions* where we're all in the same place at the same time.

My sister, like my brother and I, has deep darkness in her past, and I know she would hate for me to mention any of it. I've hoped, though, and maybe still do, that our pain might bond us…

Instead, Noka, CONFUSOR, Chri$ Tycoon and even Chouchou all found their siblings too programmed and closed off to admit how fucked up it was to live under Jab's roof. Even after I lost Sam, when their baby brother needed their love and support the most,

BLEY (*cont'd*)
they both told me, in no uncertain terms, that they went through *much* worse. That I didn't have any *real* problems.

The common denominator. Jab. This is a man who, on and off since the early 1970s, was partially responsible for raising *four* children to adulthood. Not one of us has led a consistent, stable life, whether in our heads or out in the world. The oldest of us, Frank, well…most of the time none of us are even sure where he *lives.* In fairness to Jab, Frank came pre-broken, scooped up out of a nightmare of a childhood, adopted by Jab and his first wife. The only way Frank would have stood a chance was if he got taken in by the gentlest family of hippies in North America. Placing him in Jab's house, the adoption agency set Frank up for a neutral outcome, at best.

The saddest, broadest stroke of the way I relate to my dad now? Most any time he comes up, I refer to him in the past tense, reflexively. I realize it as soon as the words leave my mouth: he *was*…my dad *was*... Sometimes, I correct myself right away, or at the very least, I switch to present tense. Only sometimes.

I know him. I'm aware of his…misunderstandings…of me. I'm sure he would be surprised I have anything positive to say about him. So here's some more, though I've alluded to some of these bullet points already:

He's a brilliant scientist—one with an exceptional writing talent, uncommon in scientists. A former triathlete. A three-branch military officer, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Army before retiring. A man who—even though he terrorized the people closest to him—traveled to the far reaches of the Earth, sometimes on his own dime, to help rural, uneducated peoples take better care of their livestock. Loved nature. Deeply moved by art and music.

I'm sure he'd be surprised to hear me admit, as I did earlier, that there were good times, or, to find out I appreciate and celebrate the better strings which connect us…especially the few I know of that connect both of us to his dad, Grandpa Bley, who died shortly after I was born. One such connection, which my dad made fun of, is psoriasis.

JAB
My old man, I used to feel so bad for him, the poor guy…he'd get up from a chair and it looked like *snow* had fallen!

BLEY
From what I understand, Grandpa didn't have the best diet—a major factor contributing to his somewhat early death. Germanic sausages, pungent cheeses, cigarettes…Jesus, even *I* take better care of myself than that…My dry skin and scalp, as it went, mostly cleared up at the end of my twenties, when my diet improved and I started drinking water regularly.

My favorite connection, from me to Jab to Grandpa Bley? Our legacy as practical jokers.

JAB

See, Grandpa and Uncle Frank were *miserable* to each other, for a lot of their lives. But they went totally persona non grata after great-Grandpa Bley died. There was a big fight in the family over how to take care of great-Grandma…or *who* would take care of her…you know, great-Grandpa left her without a pot to piss in. I was just three or four, maybe five years old, but I remember standing outside the screen door that night, listening to everybody scream at each other.

BLEY

What is it with the *screaming*? There's something inherently wrong with my people.

JAB

Even when Uncle Frank and my old man were *both* milkmen in the same neighborhood in Chicago…all the time, they'd be sitting in their trucks, taking a break at either end of the *same alley,* and they wouldn't even *wave* to each other. This went on for *years.*

From the night of that fight, I didn't see Uncle Frank again 'til I was in vet school, and he was in the hospital recovering from some surgical procedure.

BLEY

This wasn't his hip replacement. Bleys have defective hip joints that wear out early. I need at *least* one hip replaced, and Jab has had one done. The old Bley brothers actually reconciled in part because of Uncle Frank's new hip. He had reached out to Grandpa to convince him

UNCLE FRANK

You *gotta* get this surgery. I *know* what it's like, when it's hell just to take a step or two. This will change your *life.*

BLEY

Unfortunately it *killed* Grandpa Bley.

JAB

…Went in for his new hip, eventually, but wasn't healthy enough to live through the surgery…

Anyway, so Uncle Frank is in recovery, and Grandpa calls me up and says

GRANDPA BLEY

Hey, I'm gonna go see your Uncle in the hospital tomorrow. I want you to help me out with something…Bring a lab coat and your farm doctor bag. Show up around the end of visiting hours. Pretend to be a doc…*have a little fun with him*!

JAB

So the next day, I walk into Uncle Frank's hospital room…lab coat, stethoscope, large veterinary carry-case. He and my dad had such a sour relationship for so long, Frank didn't know me from Adam. He had *no idea* I was his nephew.

I say…*Alright Mr. Bley, I checked your chart and it looks like you're due for an injection.* And I pull out this *giant horse syringe*!—

JAB almost crumbles into laughter, reliving the pure magic of the moment.

—*And he takes one look* (*chortles*) at this *syringe*…and he *faints!*

Three generations of powder-keg laughter explode from within the four BLEY men, whether represented on screen, onstage, or via sound. JAB continues while dabbing his tears.

When he came to, a few seconds later, he…he looks around all bewildered, looks at me and Grandpa…

UNCLE FRANK

…Did I get a shot? Wha…what happened…?

JAB

And your Grandpa (*chortles*) just looks at him and says

GRANDPA BLEY

*Nah…*this aint your doctor, it's your *nephew.*

Another round of uproarious laughter. The BLEYs satisfaction at hearing it is more than learned. It is also deeply innate.

BLEY

I…*love…*messing with people this way. Never seen a clearer-cut case of nature and nurture working perfectly together. And toward a positive aim, no less. Jab was my first *instructor* on how to mess with people. Up until I was a teenager, I *knew* there was a disease called *sparfolosis.* Jab tossed it into conversations many times…

JAB

Sounds to me like a case of *sparfolosis…*

You know what *that's* a symptom of, don't you? *Sparfolosis.*

BLEY

I knew my dad to be an informed source of scientific information, regardless of whatever else I thought of him. I never questioned sparfolosis. I never thought to myself, how can this disease have so many different *symptoms*? It's *everywhere*! Why is this not on the *news*?

In 1989, when I was six years old, my brother taught me to ride this old grey and blue bicycle Jab moved with his families from state to state since the late 1970s. The following year, on Christmas day, I noticed the bike was missing from our back porch. I went to Jab timidly and told him I thought it had been stolen.

JAB

Well…I'm pissed you didn't lock your bike up. If it *did* get stolen, though, we have to call the police and make a report.

BLEY

Keep in mind, at this age, I was *already* wary of police.

JAB

So, why don't you show me where you left it, so we can get our story straight?

BLEY

Little Christopher Charles nodded, and led Jab to the back porch.

JAB

This is where you last saw it?

BLEY

I nodded again.

JAB

Are you *sure* you didn't park it in the shed, maybe?

BLEY

Of *course* I wasn't sure. This was freaking me out.

JAB

Well, we should probably check anyway.

BLEY

We went outside to the shed. I fumbled the combination lock open. Slid the doors aside. In the spot where our lawnmower usually sat…was a brand new black dirtbike.

JAB

I was just messin with ya. I donated your old bike to charity.

BLEY

Messing with me…Yea, he *messed* with me alright. But, I came to consider Jab's psych-out prank lessons a great gift. It's a crucial part of why I have so much admiration and appreciation for the art of comedy. Every ridiculous story comedians tell about their upbringing…every time they purposefully push an audience's buttons…I *feel* them, in my *bones.*

My *own* ridiculous upbringing primed me for the frigid night in New Brunswick, Canada, when my maternal Grandpa—an old Hollywood man, who wrote on the first few seasons of The Beverly Hillbillies, and more—took me to my first live stand-up comedy performance.

Greta hadn't been gone half a year. I'd been hospitalized. I was on three different medications, but the cocktail wasn't yet right. Recovery was a bit crunchy. I had an anxiety attack in the car on the way to the airport, almost made my mom go on the trip without me. It was American Thanksgiving weekend, 2007.

The night of the show, at a beautiful, warm old theater in Moncton, as we waited in line, I thanked my Grandpa for getting us the tickets. Without making a big to-do, he turned to me, and, in his dry, hard-to-place English accent, said

GRANDPA FOSTER

I just thought a fellow in your condition could use a *laugh.*

BLEY

What a…calm, thoughtful, reasonable way to deal with…*a fellow in my condition.* Not entirely a surprise, though. Both my mother's parents were all about music, the performing arts, visual art…Grandma was a dancer when she met Grandpa. They nurtured and supported me in every artistic pursuit, my entire life. But—just as relevant to my situation at *that particular* moment—they'd also known personally and otherwise dealt with a *lot* of famous performing celebrities. Grandpa watched old friends like Judy Garland fall into addiction, others into their own madnesses…scrutiny and judgment and shaming never did any of them any good.

My grandparents' perspective was utterly different from that of Jab, or my brother, or my sister. Unfortunately, these few supportive members of my family lived across an international border, and so far east, they were in Atlantic Time. Whenever I was living in Kalamazoo, Jab and the rest were always within fifteen miles of me.

My mother finally divorced Jab the following year, and moved into a condo in the Kalamazoo suburbs. Before too long, though, they started…I guess you'd call it *dating*…and she would spend most of her weekends out at the house in the country, west of town. They went on trips together, and to see the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra regularly. The whole situation never ceased feeling tenuous to me, but, it brought the whole lot of us together for a dozen more holidays.

My mother used to try to convince me that Jab was mellowing in his older age, but then, I'd be out at the house, and go into the garage, and see, for example, the bedroom door she locked herself behind and he subsequently punched through. He attempted to patch it up. It was…a sad attempt, one of the most pathetic things I've ever seen, in fact. Here, the evidence of his rage could only be hidden by buying a new door.

Jab took it a step further, and got a new *wife*. Started sneaking her in when my mother wasn't around, that is, until the two began to overlap. So, he passed off the phone calls, the unexpected headlights in the driveway, as the work of a former student—which the woman was—stalking him—which she was *not.* My mother figured it out eventually, and in early 2014, cut Jab off entirely.

What went on next was pretty weird. About a week into what was supposed to be three months doing veterinary mission work in Mongolia, Jab had what I can confidently call a *psychotic break.* He flew straight back to Michigan, and began leaving insane letters on my mother's doorstep, proclaiming his rebirth in Christ, accusing she and I of having an "unnatural relationship"—a mutation of his long-running disgust with her, not only for helping me survive financially and emotionally through the misery of my twenties, but for trying to shield me from him my entire life. He continued to torment her this way for months. She lost countless nights of sleep, broken as much by being thoroughly and suddenly replaced as she was by the seeming endlessness of Jab's thirty-five years of abuse. She started taking medications for anxiety and depression. I still wouldn't say she's recovered.

I looked everywhere, digitally and in boxes, for the wildly delusional letter he sent me a year later, on my thirty-second birthday…along with a check for five-hundred dollars. It was his last attempt at communication with me to date. I'm starting to think I may have burned the letter, though I most definitely deposited the check.

What I did find was a comparable email he sent my mother, at the end of that same year.

> On Sun, Dec 6, 2015 at 9:22 PM
> <xxxxx@x.com> wrote:
> C - I'm forwarding this so you can see it and hopefully respond to your father. Please. He needs to hear from you - he has things so wrong. He got an anonymous text, which he thought came from me, about seeing him at the Chenery last night with his "new family"…he thought I sent it. No clue why he would think that because he knows I saw him there. He saw me too. I did not send it. Whole thing very weird. Anyhow it elicited this email from your father....

-----Original Message-----
From: yyyyy@y.com
To: xxxxx@x.com
Sent: Sun, Dec 6, 2015 5:41 pm
Subject: FAMILY

I will respond to your text msg here.

As usual, you have it mostly wrong. I do consider Aden family, plus I was with an old friend last nite. That friend was dumped" for family as I was recovering from the accident that wasn't an accident. I told her that family came first when I was physically hurting and addled by painkillers, and she understood, but she did not deserve the way I handled that. Regardless, family does come first, but our family is such a mess that it does not even qualify for the explanation in the opening of Anna Karenina.

You do not understand that there is no way that we could ever enjoy a family gathering again as long as C does not care whether I am alive or dead. The thought finally sunk in just last week as I wrestled as always with him treating me as if I had committed some heinous crime against him, against the family, against humanity perhaps. There is no excuse that you can raise for him whether you say he was too busy that day he delivered flowers to my hospital room, or he was nervous, or he did not know what to say (you used all three of those on his behalf when I raised the issue with you): he would be content if I was dead. There is no doubt in my mind about that. I bit a big bullet and attempted to reconcile with him, but that, too, has fallen flat. He has made himself clear, and I will NEVER again listen to any excuse from you for any of his misbehavior again. He is as you so often say his own person, but you have been his constant facilitator, and there is no doubt in my mind that his attitude toward me has been encouraged by you. I am not alone in that

> assessment. You can even blame it on "bipolar" disorder, but if it were truly that, then he at least would be functioning half of the time....
>
> So now I have lost two children, and the Lord only knows why. Two huge holes in what is left of my spirit. So you keep praying as you wrote in your anonymous text message, but do not do what has always been your best, the best that you do, and lay a guilt trip on me about a new 2016 family. Those evil-eyed looks that you sent my way in Chenery last nite say it all. No thanks. I may love you as I have proclaimed I do, and I will always love you, and for a while I even thought that the accident was so that we could get back together again, the Lord working in mysterious ways, but we have not changed. You cannot call me an egomaniac and still think that I will ever believe that you respect me. You respect your own idea of me, and if I do not meet that ideal, you are back disrespecting me. No more toxicity, no more evil, no more dysfunction, no more hate filled rants on my part and wretchedness on yours, no more us. No more.
>
> Jab

BLEY (*cont'd*)

Let's not pick through the *entire* bag of garbage. Let me reiterate, though, that this man, my father, was…is…a *highly educated scientist, a professor to hundreds of first-year nursing students, a former research and development leader for the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology…*

…And was still so ignorant of his own son's condition that he believed bipolar disorder meant being functional half the time. I was afflicted with it for *years.* Did he not even look it up once? Bipolar is neurotransmitters. It's chemistry. It shouldn't have been such an un-bridgeable chasm for a man with his knowledge.

And to blame me, the youngest person in the family, after I tried so hard even in my most hellish years to be some semblance of a family member…to blame *me* for the impossibility of the family getting back together…*after he already started another family…which included his new wife's twenty-year-old severely bipolar son.*

BLEY (*cont'd*)

No, seriously.

Lastly, the *accident that wasn't an accident…*in the middle of 2015, my father, past his triathlon days but still an avid cyclist, was t-boned by a box truck after blindly turning perpendicular onto that rural state highway nearest his property. Broke half his bones, I assume ruptured some organs. He nearly died. At the time, I was delivering for the city's oldest florist and greenhouse. One day, there on the delivery counter, was a potted sage bush addressed to Jab at Borgess Hospital. I didn't know the sender.

My company normally had two drivers working. I could have had the other guy do the hospital deliveries. I *chose* to take it.

Maybe, if I had told the attendees at the hospital that he was my dad, especially since I was working during visiting hours, I could have talked my way up to his room. What I think he *didn't* understand is that flower delivery drivers never get anywhere near the patient's rooms, instead leaving what they brought in a *flower room* close to one of the exits. So that's what I did.

But, what was he *really* saying? That he tried to *kill* himself? That he tried to get himself horribly injured so everyone would come back to him out of pity? Jesus Lord of *Lords*.

Alright, maybe we *did* pick through the whole bag after all.

In response to his email, I again did what my mother—this time, my birth mother—told me. My electronic reply to Jab, a nice thick chunk of precisely-worded rebuke, told him to stop fucking with my mother's head, and to blame nobody but himself for our lack of a relationship. The email ended *See you in Hell.* Cold? Ice cold. I'd already had enough ten years earlier when—as he dropped me off at the house on Walnut and Oak, after a lift home that he twisted around into an abuse-laden rant—I screamed at him

CONFUSOR

Will you ever *stop fucking with my head?*

Twenty years *of this shit!*

BLEY

Fundamental flaws. The Bleys. Nature.

But, since *both are always true both are always true both are always true*, hear me when I say this, and believe it if you want to: not a single thought of Jab's malevolence passes through my head without me *forgiving him* based solely on the obvious, irreparable damage he suffered when his first daughter Tracy died. He was as young a man then as I was at the heights of my madness. Nurture.

BLEY (*cont'd*)
A young mind, *any* mind, can only take so much. I developed zero-tolerance in order to survive, to have the remote chance at a peaceful life. I began to withdraw from anyone who didn't live up to that standard, including family, and definitely including Jab. And please believe me when I say, *I have been made acutely aware* that my stance on this is hard for a lot of people to accept.

AUDIENCE
But…but…*family is everything*! *Blood is thicker than water*!

BLEY
Like I said…*acutely aware…*

…And that, in conjunction with Jab's spot-on Anna Karenina reference, brings me back to the reason why me and the other C. Bley's started on this tear in the first place.

Here, Jab and I are on the same page, even if it's two different alternate-universe *versions* of the same page. For those unfamiliar, the quote he refers to here is

TOLSTOY
Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

BLEY
Today's oversimplified—see, *socially retarded*—translation? Oh, it's a real *gem* of a platitude.

AUDIENCE
Every family has their problems.

BLEY
To which I *must* ask: exactly how many families like mine do any of you even *associate* with? How many people like *me* are your close friends?

AUDIENCE shifts uncomfortably in their seats. Somebody clears their throat.

That's what I thought.

Statistically speaking, sure, there probably *are* one or two of you in the audience who *do* come from a family this broken. And so, on their behalf, I'm *telling* the rest of you, not asking: *stop equalizing*. It doesn't help anyone figure *anything* out, period. If every family's problems were *this* serious, then society…well, there *might be* a society. No guarantees, though.

By that virtue, if everybody was like *me*, the suicide rate would be about ninety-seven percent. There wouldn't be enough psychotherapists and pills and interventions in the *world*. *I* would be the norm.

We don't live in that world, thank your lucky stars. Unfortunately, in *this* world, the often facile populace gives people like myself two choices: put on an exhausting act to keep the normies comfortable—to match the tidy tightly-wrapped television-show construct they call life—or get out of the way. *#hashtag bestigmafree*! They already know everything they need to know, from that pretty white Latuda commercial during the break, and can't handle how grimy and messy the real version can get.

Even the *outcome* of my experience feels stigmatized. Forget what I was like in the depths of mental illness, struggling in the green-grey of underwater, desperate for a breath of healing, of salvation. I'm constantly on the precipice of alienating people—in the present day as much as did Chouchou, Chri$ Tycoon, and the rest of us—by telling a truth about my life I *thought* I'd been asked for.

Uh oh…I'm losing them…Do I switch to the act? Or do I set fools straight?

I'm getting too old for this shit. I'm gonna set fools straight.

Let me explain something very important to you. The exhaustion, of putting on the act—it *compounds* the fatigue suffered by a troubled mind, sometimes resulting in the *elevation* of suicide as an option…more so when the effort proves fruitless, which it often does. That's a first-hand account. It happened to me. It *happens* to me. Still convinced your bumper-sticker approach is helping?

And you know what else? After spending what will be—as of the year 2021—two decades on this planet without Sam, I'm *still* pissed off she's gone. I'm not "over it". If I knew the other side of death was oblivion, I'd trade places with her in a *second*, giving her back the sunshine she burned off when she flooded that *fucking* front window at Little Caesar's with it and flew away forever. The world doesn't deserve her, but it *needs* people like her, and *she* deserved a longer life. This world doesn't need *me.*

But, I *accept* there's no chance Sam can come back, because nobody ever does…*and*…Erica, Simeon and Greta were amazing people who died terrible deaths, while complete wastes of carbon continue to walk the earth and run…ruin…the world…*and*…causes are never to be conflated with reasons, karma is assuredly not active on any consistent level, and fairness only exists inasmuch as we are equitable with others, which a solid half of us are *not*…*and*…the human species has in fact *never* been incapable of visiting unspeakable cruelty on itself, and almost certainly never will be, short of mass global hypnosis to the contrary…*and*…the world itself is *almost* fucked, as a planet and as an idea, very likely headed for a bleak future…*and*…

…And I can never, *ever* get back the years I lost. I *accept.*

I refuse, however, to *resign* myself to these unfortunate truths. And I refuse to hide *my* unfortunate truths to protect the sensibilities of the powerful weak.

That…is the fire remaining on the path.

Extinguish my fire…is that what you want me to do?

Or, you want me to kill my passion…because you're…*tired* of *hearing* about it?

Fuck you. Greta wouldn't want me to do that.

You want an act? Well, this was whole *play*. I hope you enjoyed it.

Red and Orange

2006. CHRI$ TYCOON is outside his apartment at the end of Davis Street. GRETA comes down the sidewalk. When she sees CHRI$ TYCOON, she calls him over. They embrace, talk for a minute or two. What they're saying can't be heard. The glow is missing from her face.
When the two part ways, GRETA evaporates from within CHRI$ TYCOON's arms, dispersing with the afternoon sun. CHRI$ TYCOON stands alone on the sidewalk in front of his apartment. LIGHT SHIFT to gold and grey as the season changes. The scene washes away in a downdraft of falling dry leaves—tan, red, yellow, brown, orange, purple. When they settle, the better part of a decade has passed. The leaves are barely recognizable, half decomposed, bobbing on small waves among the reeds on the shore of the Kellogg Bird Sanctuary.
LARA and CHOUCHOU walk a mulch-covered trail, talking, tossing handfuls of corn kernels to the many geese, swans, and ducks.

BLEY

That was the last time I saw Greta alive. The last time I heard her voice, or felt her arms around me. I didn't even invite her to stay. Seemed like she had moves to make that day. It was almost fall…a little more than a year *after* my stay in Allegan General, a little less than a year *before* Greta hanged herself and I went into 1 North at Borgess Hospital, the psych unit she sometimes called home.

Several years later, on one of our walks at the bird sanctuary, my friend Lara shared the only glimpse *she* had, of what Greta's final months were like. They lived in the same apartment building, around that time. Greta appeared frequently at Lara's and other tenants' doors, asking for tinfoil. She was famous for it, there. Enough said. She was freebasing a lot of *something.*

Lara was my…girlfriend, of sorts…the year *before* I met Sam. We were touch-and-go forever after as friends, proving better for each other later in adulthood, after *both* our thickest dusts had settled.

LARA

Oh, you already know…I'll take myself out, if it ever came down to it. The husband knows this is in me. Especially if anything happened to him…That's basically what I told my therapist. I was like…my anxiety is *worse* because he's so *good* to me. Because now that I *have* him—

CHOUCHOU

—For like…*ten years* at this point—

LARA

—*Right*! So I get into these consuming thought patterns like…*what the hell would I do if I lost him*? What would I *do* with myself? That's it. End of story.

CHOUCHOU

Once you've been there enough times, even when you're way down the road, past all the bullshit, seen what this life really is…I think death never totally stops being a realistic option.

LARA

This is why we're still friends.

CHOUCHOU

Well, we don't meet a lot of people who can *stomach* the idea…of a person so bluntly comfortable with Hunter Thompson-ing their way out.

LARA

Because they haven't been there.

CHOUCHOU
Sometimes, *there* is *always* there. When you've *been* there.

LARA
If you're not afraid of being honest with yourself.

BLEY
Lara *got it.* Sometimes though, even the *best* people don't *get it*. At least, not at first. That's what counts them among the best. The capacity to *come around* to it.

A year after Greta died, I became close with one of her best friends. Mary and I made eye contact for a few seconds in the vestibule at the funeral, but didn't know who each other was, and only crossed paths again by chance. When we met officially, we were both about to leave Kalamazoo—she, bound for Prescott, Arizona, and myself, for Roosevelt University in Chicago. As it happened, we both came back a year and a half later, and picked back up where we left off.

That first time around, before we moved away, we went on what was probably the most *two friends of a mentally ill suicide victim* date of all time: a screening of a local documentary film following the lives of—and featuring interviews with—the residents of a group home for emotionally disturbed persons…And they were all in attendance, sitting in the front row. During the question-and-answer session at the end, one of them got agitated and argumentative, bringing the event to an abrupt halt. It upset Mary…reminded her of a side of Greta I never really saw in person—threatened, threaten*ing*, not able to be talked down. We left the Little Theater—a staple of old East Campus at the top of the hill in Vine—and took a quiet walk over to East Hall to sit on the steps.

As the nightlights of Kalamazoo turned on down below, Mary started to cry. I waited for her to find what she wanted to say.

MARY
I used to tell Greta to *get over it.*

And then she fucking *kills* herself, and *what did I learn*? A few weeks ago I told *you* to get over it. And *you're* actually doing everything you're supposed to be…finding meds that work for you…you have a plan for what's next…you're not even screwing around with your weed probation…

I'm so sorry.

BLEY
I put my arm around her while she cried out shame, and grief, and the joy of epiphany. She wasn't as tough on me as she thought. She was an *infinitely* better friend to Greta than most people ever were. Even before she *got it.*

BLEY (*cont'd*)
The only thing I remember, from Greta and I's last conversation, is when she said

GRETA
I mean, no matter what I try…my life is fucked anyway.

BLEY
And if that's all I remember, then those are ostensibly the last words I ever heard ring out, in her sweet voice, from her sweet face.

You *don't* get it…until you look into the eyes of a beautiful being you love, someone who has tried *everything* to get right, and failed—which for Greta included going wholeheartedly back to Jesus, via her family's Methodist church—someone known to the know-it-alls around them as simply *bad*, and treated as such…who tells you directly, *I've given up*. I mean, think about it…If that's how she felt *then*, what hell must that last nine months been, for my poor, dear Greta Jane?

You *don't* get it…until you know, as I do, the indignity of having your *belt* taken and locked away—at that moment and *only* at that moment realizing how much weight you've lost, because you have to walk around a psych ward for the rest of the week clutching two fistfuls of waistline in order to keep your pants up.

You *don't* get it until you know the barrenness of a life after death wherein you find no adequate support system, despite years of struggling and striving and smiling.

Until then—and of course, I wish this life on no one—*you don't get it*.

So, stop speaking for us, stop talking like you really know or understand us at *all*, stop hash-tagging about us to get attention for yourself. If you want to help us, *listen to our stories*, and *listen to experts*. *Learn* something, don't just parrot. Or, *you* get out of the way.

That's right…it's time for everyone *else* to practice some acceptance for once.

Anyone still not getting it? A couple of you?

(*sighhh*) Well, it's your lucky day. I've got a couple more things left to accept, to show you how it's done. After this, you're on your own.

Full disclosure as always? I *am* still crazy, though it's *finer* now...aged to perfection. So I believe I'll ride it out. I *accept* that there's no complete fix, for minds like mine. And so, I also *accept* that I'm partly responsible for fitting myself into the world, by growth, by adaptation.

And I *accept* that my blink of a lifetime is no different from anyone else's: finite, of an indeterminate length, every minute worth a fortune.

BLEY (*cont'd*)
…I'm sorry, was that too much of a cliché, coming from someone who just spent all this time excoriating people for using platitudes?

Hey, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

There goes another one…my bad…aren't I the *worst*?

2019. Late in a snowless December. Mount Olivet cemetery. SAM's grave isn't much tended to anymore, except when the grass gets mowed. Her little Eastern redbud was cut down a few years ago. The same plaque on a stake, with the movable letters, still marks the spot.
CHOUCHOU stands in the barely-cold, smoking, talking to SAM. Another cigarette burns for her, in the grass at CHOUCHOU's feet—above her ashes, above where ten years earlier CHRI$ TYCOON buried the ring SAM gave NOKA. A year before *that*, he had smashed SAM's ring with a rock on the steps of East Hall, tossed the pieces down the steep hill.
For the first time, though he has visited SAM's grave *many* times, CHOUCHOU acknowledges out loud

CHOUCHOU
You know what, you need a goddamn *gravestone.*

Everyone *else* out here has one.

It's not like they're turning this place into a strip mall any time soon…you *know*?

He pinches the end of his cigarette, rolling it between his fingers until the burning cherry falls to the ground, and then, picks up SAM's cigarette, extinguishes it similarly.

You need a gravestone so maybe I can stop *being* one.

CHOUCHOU EXITS. BLEY enters, holding a bulbous stem wine glass. He makes an apprehensive circle around the desk, on which sits the laptop, the lamp, the

pipe, and a neat stack of journals. Two battered storage boxes sit on the floor to one side.
BLEY sits, stretches, cracks his knuckles, takes a drink, and

AURORA (*voice message*)
Sorry for Ozzie barking in the background—

OSCAR
—BARK!

AURORA
Oz! Stop. If you're coming tonight, please—

OSCAR
—BARK!

AURORA
—let me know. *Oscar*!...That's rude…Talking.

People are getting here around nine-ish.

BLEY
I'm *not* coming tonight. I'll let her know soon.

I used to have friends who rarely left me alone. Who I traveled with. Who I lived with. I performed for their wedding ceremonies…like, *ten* of them. I cared for their homes, their pets, with all the thoughtfulness and attention to detail I apply in my own life. I used to have friends who thought of me on holidays. I used to have friends who slept in piles, and open-mouth kissed each other, and me, all of us. I used to have a *lot* of friends, some who were not perfect, many who were no help at all, but I *loved* them.

Most of the people I called my friends, it turned out, *were* full of shit. Up to and past the end of Chouchou's life, almost every last one of them ditched me over some perceived slight…over some image of me based on who I was a long time ago, at my worst…over their inability to grow the fuck up and open up the way I had. So many have gone away, it is almost accurate to say *all of them* have.

How was it so much easier to maintain friendships *before* my life stopped being a disaster? I suppose it doesn't matter, because *after*, I began to get the distinct impression that, while everyone else's brand of asshole was considered acceptable, mine *never* was, and my new self apparently did nothing to redeem me. Year after year, one by one, all but maybe five of my very closest friends dropped out of sight.

BLEY (*cont'd*)
Only a few more of them died, at least…like the bass player from Turkey Fister did. Electrocuted to death at work at the end of 2011.

The fifth tattoo. A half-scale 50 cal. bullet next to a one-twentieth scale wild turkey's profile from the shoulder up.

In all this absence, in all its forms, I remain dogged by that *inability* to form new bonds.

AUDIENCE
Unwillingness?

BLEY
Sometimes, yes! Sometimes I don't see the point in trying! And people from my past do come back once in a while, but with most who do, it doesn't take long for me to realize they haven't changed. Others, who actually deserved to meet the whole Christopher Charles Bley, probably never will, and that breaks my heart. Lara's gone. Mary's gone. Tackett's gone…*again.* For the third time, actually.

So, what, now I'm supposed to start almost entirely over? Talk about exhausting.

DEPRESSIVE STATE
…Is this *really* what we *survived* for? To eventually die alone? I dunno. Being dead *now* sounds nicer.

BLEY
Well, if the world is telling me I'll never find my place, never be anything but a burden…what am I supposed to say?

I think it'd be a *burden,* to Aurora…to let her know, the mere fact she thought to leave a message and remind me of her New Year's Eve party—after already surprising me two days ago with her invitation—means as much to me as when she solemnly embraced me outside St. Augustine's Cathedral, after Sam's funeral. I regularly go many, many months without feeling so included by anyone. In response, I have developed a broad habit, a *lifestyle,* of not *burdening* anyone. It is a crucial part of *the act.*

There are only a handful of time zones left living in the twenty-teens; 2019 is nearly all lifted and dispersed, dustlike, from the Earth.

So many years living this way, I find it difficult to process niceties a lot of people wouldn't think twice about. I'm bewildered by the smallest gesture.

All told, this is a profoundly lonely way to be.

MOM (*text message*)
I'm awake now but I doubt I'll be awake at midnight! Yawn! So Happy New Year to you! 2020! Woohoo!

BLEY
Mom. She should have had a nicer life. She should have gotten better husbands and better sons. She shouldn't have had to drive me to the emergency room so I could get myself locked down for psychiatric care. All she wanted to do was laugh, cook, work, read, write, and have a nice time. I'm partially responsible for robbing her of life-force. I burdened her plenty.

And yet, if it wasn't for Jab's new wife, my parents could *still* be dating. My mother took much longer than I did, to answer some important questions: Family or not, *how many times do you have to let someone hurt you and screw you over before society says it's acceptable to cut them off*? How long before *you yourself* believe you can *survive* cutting them off, from an emotional standpoint?

My answer, if I haven't I've made it clear by now, is *fuck* society. *I* call those shots. And I *will* survive.

A volley of fireworks begins across the city. The following text appears onscreen as if typed in real time (V/O RECOMMENDED):

The year becomes 2020 as I stare into a void through the word processor on this screen.
Here I am, alone for the second New Year's Eve in a row, excepting the company of a cat, a glass of wine, and a pipe full of grass.
I've barely written a thing.
Here I am, in this old house, where I've had no more than a half-dozen visitors in two years. This house where, thirteen years ago in this very room, I stood butt naked by candlelight and screamed the vocals to a song about my own suicide into a microphone. A few weeks later, when I was released from 1 North at Borgess, I walked straight here, across the entire east side of Kalamazoo. This house…woke up here on the first morning of Sam's death…
This house.
I've lived in a lot of houses…but have I ever gone home in my life?
When can I go home?

A slideshow, of sorts. Pictures of SAM and NOKA together, in places special to them, BLEY's memories, in which the couple dissolves away, leaving the scene empty, one after another. The steps of East Hall; The backyard at SAM's house, posing by the vegetable garden; High atop sand dunes overlooking Lake Michigan…

BLEY

I've held out on you.

There were two more letters in that box—the one I don't need to open but always do.

FORD

Noka,

Thanks for the support you have been to me these past three weeks. Enclosed are two single articles of Samantha's. I thought you might like them.

BLEY

I can't remember what those two things were. Good odds they were among what was burned.

The grass in front of JAB's house, dressed beautifully for their high school prom; the multipurpose room at SAM's camp, last night of the session, performing their song onstage; outside NOKA's high school graduation…

Maybe I didn't burn *enough* things.

2000. Labor Day weekend. Fish Town. Leland, Michigan. When SAM and NOKA dissolve, the photo without them, in turn, burns away, revealing an antique photo of the same place—the connecting river from inland Lake Leelanau flowing out into Lake Michigan, boats parked on both sides along old wooden docks lined with shanties. Down the dock on the right, tiny in the middle-ground of the photo, a young boy walks toward the foreground, followed by an old man.

The entire image is revealed as the front of a notecard on unbleached tan paper stock. A pair of hands unfolds the notecard. One hand picks up a pen and begins to write (V/O RECOMMENDED).

SHERI

Noka,

This card made me think of last Labor Day weekend. I like it because it seems to remind me of the natural changes of human lives. I like to think of the little boy as someone's Grandpa or great-Grandfather—telling stories about Leland in the 1920's. The man behind him probably died many years ago but lived a full, vibrant life and his children or grandchildren still visit his grave once in awhile and tell stories about him

I guess it comforts me to think of Samantha, and all of us, and this great wide world that we know, as parts in a colorful tapestry. All interwoven and connected. Our individual experience is forever connected to everyone else's. I don't believe we can comprehend the enormity of the whole cloth, but we can sense that which holds the threads together. And so the experience of Samantha is intimately our own.

I think the connection between you and Samantha in this world was among the finest. Your friendship and love was a great gift. I know she would want you to live a full life—full of love and diverse experience. I will be there for you in any way I can be. Thank you for all you did for her. And for me, especially in the last few weeks.

And I believe that she spoke the truth a few weeks before her death when she told me that the two of you would be together in the end.

BLEY

Any of that sound familiar? Threads and tapestries? Yeah, I stole it from something really nice Sheri wrote to me, twisted it around, and used to mess with your heads in Act I. Hopefully, this late in the play, after all I've said and done, nobody will be shocked. I'm a *Bley*.

At the time, as I'm sure of Sheri's good intention, to let me know Sam still believed in us…

…Well, I *think* I knew so, but to hear it from someone else, after she was dead…

…It was supposed to be a beautiful thing. It *is* a beautiful thing. But it also got stuck in a weird spot in my brain. To this day, every time I'm thwarted from catching a break in life, I get this…*sense…*like Sam's somewhere, calling out to me, saying

SAM

C'mon…come be with me…I don't want to wait anymore…

BLEY

Every time I remember…like *really* remember a piece of her, despite the fact I've already been honestly, independently, genuinely in love ten times since she died…

Every time I have one of those same old resurrection dreams—sharply more frequent since I gave myself over fully to this…*opening up*…about her…about me…

Every single time…this gentle, nagging presence inhabits me…or, my mind is inventing it, and always was. We only find out when we die all the way, and if it turns out there's *nothing* after, we won't actually *know* we found *anything* out.

Together in the end…really…I can't shake the feeling that, this entire time, she's been trying to get me to come be with her. As if she knows where *home* is, and has been calling me to it. Either she knows how much I hate it here, or, in death, she's become an impatient, meddling little spirit. Or both.

I spend a lot of alone time in the company of memories, since I don't make many new ones. I've hardly made a memory in the two years I've lived in this house.

I remember the *very* first time I saw Sam. Atrain and I were fifteen and had just come back to their house after skateboarding. Sam was a year behind us in school, not yet attending high school with us. I was a smart kid, but adolescent. When I laid eyes on her, all I could do with what went through my head was ingest it and put it away. It felt *immediately* as if she was going to be a part of my future. We didn't say a word to each other. She didn't even look up from her magazine. Two years later—me barely thinking about Sam in the interim, let alone pursuing her, and she *definitely* not liking me—there she was again, quickly becoming the most influential human being in my life.

BLEY pauses. The house is more *quiet* than *silent.* SAM is here.

Maybe I should paraphrase a gem from Gibran—as offered to me once, by a friend who listened…If I look deeper than my sorrow, I can see how beautiful and delightful the person was for whom I weep. That way, no matter how old I get, no matter how long they're gone, I can remember them and smile genuinely.

Okay. She was a wonderful daughter, and an awesome sister. She was artistic, musical, adorably awkward when she wasn't graceful. She was tons of fun, and cool as hell. She was older on the inside of her than the outside. Cared for the outcasts. Thoughtful. Usually unashamed about her own minor imperfections and screw-ups. She wore lilac oil as perfume, and had great hair. As her friend Karah told me, in a passed note, when Sam and I first started seeing each other, *her favorite food is hot dogs and her favorite show is Space Ghost*.

She made me feel worthwhile. She was a best friend, a stunning sight, and an amazing individual. A better first love, I could not imagine. And if any of that sounded repetitive…

…*I know. That's how great the girl was.*

Maybe, once this puzzle is all put together, I'll burn *all* these letters. And the purple wooden bear, too.

That's what this is, you know? A *puzzle*, not a story. You can do the edges first until the cows come home—you're still staring a huge pile of pieces on the table. Disorganized certainly, but as with *my* puzzle, there's a *thousand and one ways* to put it together. Isn't that part of the fun?

Hopefully, this has been at least a *little* fun, on the receiving end. If not, *you* can burn it. I'll watch…

…Maybe I'll toss in the poem Sam wrote us. I don't want anything left of value here.

Held onto simple flowers,
Red that screams into the open road
That cradles tenderly,
And passionate embrace,
Orange that sings like dancing shoes
That gives wider to the heart of an open flame,
Breathing laughs of life into summer time
Sending love like deep fresh oxygen into my heart
Lickable like a cherry popsicle
Bright and unsure like my hair you curl behind my ear
And straw like I twist from your crown in the humid air
The sweet sparkles that sent Dorothy home
Platformed with discotheque
Or the loud clamber of "Detour"
Painful like gravel, slapping knees, and flowing to the surface
Melancholy like prison possession draped across backs
Shameful and scrambled late night creation attacked
By the red ink army
Tangy rinds spread across morning

Seductive
that escape, words from painted lips
Content tabby striped with soft and burnt
Antique tricycle still with luster of boyhood
And grandchildren
Bright Chuck Taylors glowing in a mother's
disappointed eye
Daybreak in Spring
Red
Orange
Fused, intense
Like you and I

2000

END ACT