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He hung me with the endless rope.

X, "The Once Over Twice"

I'm diggin all the way to China with a silver spoon while the hangman fumbles with
the noose.

Tom Waits, "Get Behind The Mule"

Give me your lips for just a moment, and my imagination will make that moment
live, give me what you alone can give.

Louis Armstrong, "A Kiss To Build A Dream On"

...Condemned to drift, or else be kept from drifting.

Bob Dylan, "Chimes of Freedom"

PROLOGUE

Two Lonely Roads

Two roads ran side by side
With nothing but trees in between
And while neither road was trying to hide,
Each road went on unseen.

One lonely road was wanting to speak
The other was wanting to listen
Side by side, but just out of reach
And each in the wrong direction.

Over the crest and through the branches
The sun colored the stones all brown
And many feet trampled many dances
And hardened the already hardened ground

Two roads, side by side, green trees in between.
Side by side, two roads went on unseen.

Chapter 1

Opportunist

I was already awake when Palmer came to my room. I could hear his thick boots slowly charging up the hall.

“Don’t forget to clean up, Donaldson,” he said in his raspy, blue-eyed voice.

This is the moment of joy for every guard on the morning shift. I think they take a bit of pleasure from this, reminding those on death row that every day past their execution date could be their last.

“I’m up and ready,” I say, as we play our little game.

Palmer wears his uniform because he has to. Same as me. His son, who should’ve been in high school by now, still needs much more than he can bring home. I remember when the boy was born, and how excited the man was, just days after, proudly handing out cigars to us. All he talked about was how magical it all was, how there was nothing like it. For days and days, all he could talk about was his little football star, or his little scientist, or doctor or teacher. How his little boy was going to be better than us. How the boy was going to be better than him. How the boy was going to be anything but a guard at a correctional facility. He called us pains. He called us stupid fucks and lousy. And then the boy’s neck went limp, or something like that. Now they push him around in a chair.

The boy was brought to see where his daddy worked, once, and we all watched as he tried to point at things. They wheeled him up and down the halls, and we all watched silently from our rooms. Nobody jeered. Nobody said a word. The

boy's name was Darin, and he wore glasses. Thick frames, thick lenses, and when his head was tilted back, as it always seemed to be, the lenses looked like the underside of a glass of water when the condensation starts dripping from the bottom. I mean, thick, and like he was always about to cry. Like there was something he was trying to say, and he would push the words out through his eyeballs if he could.

Before Darin's visit, Palmer came down hard on us for being scum. That's one of the words he used. Scum. And he'd say that we made him sick. It made him sick to look at us. It made him sick to think about us. It made him sick to think about what we'd done to get here. And he knew. He knew everything about us. He knew where we went to elementary school. I went to a Catholic elementary school, and that made him sick. I grew up on a street named after a flower, and that made him sick. Palmer wasn't shy about telling us how disgusted he was. But after the boy came, and we saw him in his little chair, with his little collared blue shirt, and the way it bunched up around his waist, and how helplessly twisted up he was in his own clothes, Palmer didn't call us names. He just looked at us with disappointment. Like we had something that once belonged to him, something he had given us, and we had wasted it.

Chapter 2

Looming

Because nobody really knew when the chemicals were going to arrive, Palmer let me paint my room any color I desired. That was back in early summer, when the wet nighttime summer air carried the sound of foghorns from the river the way a waiter, in his black tuxedo, would carry a silver platter, still smoking and steaming from the kitchen. I remember the sound of seagulls, and how playful they seemed, and how awful it was that in all the years I'd been here, I'd yet to see a single one. I remember the way the American flag, fully erect, proudly waved and snapped its shadow over the concrete yard. I remember when I began counting down the days. Castration is not an easy thing when the eyes are still working. When the hand is still reaching. But this is where they want me. All of them, I guess. And they were right. This is where I belong. Still, I sometimes press my lips against the walls when I think no one is looking. Of course, someone is always looking.

The room that was supposed to temporarily hold me contains one bed for not resting, and one window for not looking out of. The wall at the head of the bed, I painted a dull sky blue. Flat paint. Palmer, though willing to allow me this singular freedom, suggested that a glossy paint had too much chemicals, and that if I had felt in such a state of mind, I could do irreparable damage to myself, which would, in turn, offer me the right for appeal on the grounds of detained mistreatment, or something or other cruel and unusual. I was fine with my flat sky. I got used to its

cloudlessness. Its immovability. It was jammed in this compactor and crushed within the walls. But it was mine. And that was fine.

I don't know where the dull light comes from. It always seems foggy here. Every bulb in the place was, at some time, screwed so tightly, metal threads are all that remain. Skeletons buried up to their sandy necks, heads washed away by waves. Burnt out, exploded, glass showers raining down from my cloudless flat blue sky. These were times I covered myself underneath a thin wool blanket.

I've stopped counting now. It's been long enough. Every day, I ask the guards if the chemicals have arrived. Every day, they don't have an answer. And they ask the warden, and all he can say is that he doesn't know either. I ask them where the light comes from. I've stopped counting now. It's been long enough. If I ever really needed to know how long it's been, I can always go back and look at the newspapers and count backwards. The guards are kind to me. I've tried to be kind to them. I don't stir in my bunk. I don't yell, nor do I buzz around the yard. I wait for the ice cream to melt. Hands, empty, and always down at my sides. The warrant is still on the Governor's desk.

Chapter 3

Whirlpool

The day after Darin's visit, Palmer came back up to my room. He looked at me through the fence. He didn't watch me the way a guard would watch a prisoner. He just looked.

"What is it, Palmer," I asked.

Palmer stood there, looking hard, and getting colder and harder as he looked. I walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. I could feel the spring coils poking me unevenly. I spread my hand out, flattening the wrinkled grey wool blanket. I think I felt a little static. A little electricity, something close to a spark. Palmer put one fist around one of the bars between us. The shadow of his legs stretched out across the floor and bent up against the wall.

"You just laid there?" he asked.

I didn't respond. I knew he knew the answer. That's the only reason he would have asked such a question. And he knew that I knew. I looked down at my shoe. The cuff of my pants hung down like a bell.

Palmer put one hand on his stick and stirred it around in its holster. He never took his eyes off of me. I turned to the floor. I was looking at the floor, but I could hear him fumbling with his keys, and I knew they were the keys to my room. I was going to get it. I was sure of it. I had been preparing myself for this for years. And now it was coming. I had trained myself. I had trained myself to believe that I liked it, that I deserved it for just laying there all those years ago. And now it was my turn. And

everybody else on the block would hear me yell, and cry out, and they would all lay on their beds, same as I did. I heard the clicking in the gate, and the echo that went unreplied and streaming down the hall. And then another click, and when I raised my head again, he was gone.

I don't know where the light came from. Something down the hall had thrown Palmer's massive shadow across the floor of my room. The deep blackness. But now that he was gone, there was another shadow. I walked to the fence, slow as a cat to a stranger's unfamiliar hand. There, sitting just inside, was a cardboard box with my name on it.

Chapter 4

Bedsread

The box was brown cardboard. It had clearly been opened and some attempt had been made to reseal it. The two flaps rose to a low peak in the center. I thought of the chapel at St. Luke's, and how the weathered bricks had lost their red over the years. I remember when I was young, thinking how bloody those red bricks looked. The blood of the lamb. The slaughtering of the Innocents. All of that. And how powerful that all is when you're a child. How pure the fear is, that fear which I often confused for devotion. After a while, the red bricks seemed to turn brown, like the whole church was being washed down the river. Like that pure thing was now covered in filth.

I kicked the box lightly. I thought maybe something would jump out from it, or scurry away from underneath, into the shadow of the bed. I leaned over and smelled it the way a cat smells a stranger's unfamiliar hand. I liked that dusty smell. I liked how nauseating it was. I could see the fibers in the cardboard, and the little shadows that made little patterns along the top, like the ripples of a dirty river and thought about how the currents can be altered by the debris stuck in mud deep beneath the surface.

It was windy outside. Sometimes, when it's dark outside, you can hear the wind rubbing against stonewalls just outside the window. Wind crawling out along the walls looking for a way in. I tore gently at the serrated edge of the duct tape that hardly kept the box shut. And pulling the flaps open, my eyes widened. My mouth too. With both fists, I grabbed the cloth and lifted it up, cardboard box and all. I

pressed my face into the faded cloth the way a cat presses its face into the hand of someone it knows. The cardboard box fell to the ground and, as it fell, the quilt unraveled and unfurled like a wedding dress leaving rolling white waves crashing at my feet.

There was no return address on the box. I looked it over closely for some sign of faded postage. Palmer, with his hardened grace, was the only link between the sender and myself. He hadn't had much to say when he left it. I doubted he'd say anything if I asked. It was as if this thing had just washed ashore. The splinters of a ship. A sailor's cap.

The quilt was still torn. Whoever had sent it hadn't bothered to fix the spot where Bennie, our old Jack Russell terrier, tore at the corner, leaving the frayed edge looking like his old grey face. Bennie knew how to bite softly when he was playing, but sometimes he'd get carried away. My mother named him after Benvolio, but my father, who wasn't much of a reader, didn't care for such a fancy name. He gave in, however, under the condition that he could call him Bennie. I did too. The day we put Bennie down was the only time I saw my father cry.

After I'd left town and the old house was torn down, I'd lost track of the quilt. I figured it ended up in a landfill or doubled over the lap of some old person in a home somewhere. The old house was definitely in a landfill. I still can't believe houses can be thrown away, but quilts can remain. I still can't believe this thing found its way to me. I heard the heavy sound of the lights being turned out, and the reflected glow from down the hall went dark. I twisted myself up into the quilt and looked at the

dark ceiling and listened for the beep of the chemical delivery truck backing into the yard.

Chapter 5

Breakfast

The next morning, the reflected light came brightly down the hall. Palmer came to my room to deliver my breakfast.

“The truck still hasn’t arrived,” he said without my asking.

Palmer knew I wanted to know. He also knew I didn’t want to know. He knew I wanted it to either happen, or not. But he looked through the bars and must have felt the need to tell me.

“The truck still hasn’t arrived,” he said once more, then slid my morning tray through the serving gap in the bars and walked back down the hallway just a little lighter than he had come.

Some mornings, when my date was approaching, I was allowed to choose what I wanted for breakfast. Usually, it was French toast. It was always terrible. The bread was always burnt or stale, and I knew they used powdered eggs for batter. Sometimes the powder wasn’t fully mixed, either, but it was still better than the normal issue breakfast. Sometimes they gave us nothing but cold toast with a little block of hard butter and a piece or two of rotten fruit. A brown banana. A soft apple. Perhaps they thought we might be able to calculate some escape if we had fresh fruit. Instead, we mostly had diarrhea.

Chapter 6

Calle de la Orquídea

The old house was on Calle de la Orquídea, but the people on our street referred to our family as la espuela de la Orquídea. Not the nectar kind of spur. The thorny kind of spur. We had the brown house. The ugly house. We had the collapsing chimney and the weeds and the driveway gate that wouldn't close all the way. But we had a yard. And after the neighborhood was sold, we were the only house with a yard. The rest of the houses went straight up to the property line like specific packaging made to fit in a specific box. The new houses had rooftop terraces from which our neighbors could look down on us. But we had a yard.

The weeds were too thick for the blades we had. We needed a reaper, a scythe wielding reaper like those old images of death. Some mornings we'd wake up and find notes posted to the front door. Not nectar kind of notes. Thorny kinds of notes. Mrs. Bradley was old and I knew it was usually her writing, as if an earthquake had rumbled through as she sat at her desk with pad and pen. We knew she was concerned about the value of her house and that it was the only thing she'd have to leave her kids when she kicked, but that didn't change the fact that I wanted to take the blades to her. One snap of the garden shears and that would be the end of it. I imagined the sweet nectar running down the corduroy wrinkles in her thinly skinned neck. As far as I can remember, that was the first time I thought about killing someone. That was a long time ago. It turned out I didn't have to do a damn thing about Mrs. Bradley.

Chapter 7

The Chapel

There was a bar called The Greystone, but everyone called it The Gravestone. The countertop was one long piece of solid oak that was rumored to have been shipped in from a defunct saloon near El Paso. The same rumor also held that the wood was stained with the blood of several shootouts. None of this could ever be confirmed since Lefty, the man whose bar it was, died when he fell asleep at the wheel on Interstate 25 near Albuquerque. The secrets of the bar went off the side of the road with Lefty, as did the secrets of many of its patrons. As rumor had it, Lefty didn't have any eyes left when they found him on the side of the road, hunched over the steering wheel, and he hardly had any skin.

There was a long running joke that going to the gravestone was the same as going to church. Inside, you've got your wooden pews and wine. Sometimes you could cut a slice from an old brick of a loaf that seemed like it was leftover from the old Raines-Law days. For a special price, you could confess your sins to Lefty, and he would let you stick your head under the beer tap for a Sunday Baptism special. Every time you shortchanged or cheated on your wife, it could all be washed away, and you didn't have to feel bad about it anymore. You could go on living. And we'd all shortchanged and cheated on our wives. And we all went on living.

Not long after Lefty went under did the gravestone go under. Nobody knew how much Lefty had been paying to keep the place open, or to whom. Last time I was in town and drove by the place, it was a coffee shop. I sat there at the red light, and

hearing the motor running, I could see a young woman sleeping on the corner of a sofa and thought how dead meat she would be if Jimmy was there. I thought about how dirty that window used to be, and how you could never see out of it. But at that moment, while I was waiting for the light to change, I began wondering if people could see inside the old gravestone. I began wondering if people could see us knocking our glasses together and spilling onto the floor and not giving a damn. I began wondering if people could see what it looked like to really not give a damn anymore.

Chapter 8

The Dancefloor

Before Lefty knew it would be his last year at the gravestone, he got it in him to install a small corner of a tiled linoleum dance floor, just a few feet wide by a few feet long. Enough room to maybe swing one partner around. That's where I met Alison, right before I got happy.

Lefty had a neon OPEN sign that hung above the door of the gravestone. He'd leave it off most nights since everyone who he wanted to be there knew when the bar was open. As much as Lefty paid, the city never hesitated to give him grief about the neon sign and how it was the brightest, ugliest thing on the main strip after sundown, and how it ruined the aesthetics of the quaint little town. That's the word they used. Aesthetics.

It didn't matter to the quaint little town that the gravestone was a haven, and that it was much better for all the quaint little people of the town to have the dregs locked in a barroom amongst themselves until the sun came up than to force them out onto the street. I don't know what Alison was doing in there. I always assumed she got lost and wandered in to use the phone, and never found her way back out. She would never tell me why she was there. It's too late now, I guess.

There was a long running joke that going to the gravestone was the same as going to church. Once you found your way inside its jaws, there was no coming back. It took every dollar you had, and after a while, you would start feeling extreme guilt about everything. Things you did. Things you didn't do. Things you wanted to do.

People you wanted to do. And once you'd been there enough to recognize everyone and get to know everyone by name, they would see it as personal betrayal, even if you just needed a break. We all needed a break at some point.

Alison was like the reflected light that comes down the hall. She was the sparkle on Eddie's silver tooth. She was that thing in a photograph that your eye latches onto, that thing that makes one moment make sense in a lifetime of chaos. I wish I knew how she got in there. I keep thinking that if I'd known how she got in, I could've helped her find her way out.

Chapter 9

Palmer Comes To Talk

Palmer started kicking the bars while I was sleeping. He was drunk again. I could tell by the way his shadow swayed against the wall. Everybody knew he drank on the job. I don't think anybody really minded since he was always careful enough to leave his gun in his locker or wherever else the guards kept their things. We all just hoped that while he was drinking he didn't come to your room, because if he came to your room it would mean he wanted to talk. Palmer didn't talk to us in these moments so much as he talked *at* us. I hadn't heard the keys, but I knew he was inside.

"I want to tell you something," he said with a low gurgle in his voice that made the room sound wet. I laid there, silent in my bunk.

"I want to tell you something," he said again as he kicked the bars once more. I sat up with my legs stretched out in front of me.

"You think you're good," he said. "But you're nothing."

"I know," I said.

"You think you're smart, but you're not," he said.

I could hear the wind outside trying to find its way in. For a moment, it sounded like Christmas carolers or a children's Christmas choir, and in that moment, I was filled with wild excitement, just like I felt when I was a child, even with the massive Palmer standing over me.

"Do you know why a man drinks?" Palmer asked.

I scanned my own brain, trying to figure out why he would ask me such a question.

“You drink,” he said. “I know you drink. Do you know why you drink?”

I wasn't sure if Palmer could see where I was looking. I knew I wasn't looking at his face. It was somewhere near his face, but it wasn't at his face, so that even in the shadows of the room, I was certain that I wasn't making eye contact. I remembered hearing that about bears. You never want to look them straight in the eye.

Palmer took one long step forward and sat on the edge of the bed. I couldn't tell if he noticed that my foot was right underneath him, but I could, and I was trapped.

“I have a son, you know,” he said lowly.

“I know,” I said.

“He won't walk,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

“He won't throw a ball,” he said. “He won't talk to me.”

Palmer knew I knew about his boy. I couldn't figure out why he'd come to tell me this now.

“People look at him,” he said.

I didn't say a word. Palmer shifted his body. I think he was starting to notice my foot underneath his behind. After he got comfortable, I noticed the shiny reflection coming from his belt. He'd brought his gun.

Chapter 10

The Humorous Tale of How Eddie Ended Up On Death Row

When Eddie was alive, he was the only person I could talk to. I stopped keeping track of how many times Eddie told me his story, although it was enough that I could recite it with him. In the later years, it became a performance. The rhythm and inflections, the stressed syllables and sound effects—it was like an automobile engine that was running perfectly in tune. It was machine music. Never had to take his story into the shop. On the money, every time. He had a front tooth that chipped one day on a bottle of ice cold beer, he said. He had it filled with silver. That silver corner shimmered when he spoke.

“You see,” Eddie would say, “I should have never come home. That *was* my fault. That’s what I did wrong. If coming home is a crime, hell, I don’t even know.”

Eddie was a mail carrier, back in the days when someone could still make a living going door to door. I always thought that he enjoyed telling the story of how he got here, over and over. Every newbie reacted the same way at the same time. Machine music. He carried the mail the way a jewel thief would carry his loot. It was treasure. He was protected. It was power. And none of it belonged to him. And then he got fired. He would never say why.

It was on the day he got fired that he drank a bottle of Merlot from a brown paper bag. “You gotta let it breathe,” he’d always say with a sideways grin and a jabbing elbow. And then he’d continue.

Eddie returned to his building that afternoon. It was sunny. He pushed the elevator button and took a glance around the lobby. When he heard the doors open, he faced forward. He saw the body in the elevator. On the ground. A stream of blood. The knife, the red nicks in the steel blade, the twisted brown leather handle. Eddie nudged the body with his drunken foot. Nothing.

Eddie hollered around the lobby for help. He got no reply. "I figured I was the only one in the place that didn't have a job," he'd say as his shoulders drooped, right on cue.

"So there I was, shouting at the top of my lungs at nobody. Just got fired. Now I'm drunk as hell, shouting in the lobby like a madman. I run across the lobby to one of the ground floor apartments. I figure I gotta do something, right? I mean, I was a federal employee. I have a responsibility to do something. At the very least, I get my picture in the paper and the PO gives me my job back for being a hero.

"So I run and bang on this door and, as I'm standing there, I hear the elevator doors closing. I turn around and leap for the elevator and kick the door so it opens again. Then I jump back to that apartment door. Then here I am doing relay races like a freakin' kid at the schoolyard. Back and forth, back and forth. Finally, I grab the bloody knife and jam it into the elevator door to keep the GD thing open and run out the front door of the building to flag someone down on the street. Next thing I hear the elevator doors closing and away the guy goes. Just like that. As if he's taking the damn elevator up to Heaven.

"So two minutes later the cops show up. Turns out there was kids in the apartment I was bangin' on. They see me in the peep hole like a lunatic yellin' with a

purple mouth and they called the police. They come busting into the lobby just as you-know-who dead body arrives and draws open the stage curtains and boom the show begins.

They took Eddie away with his bloody hands and purple mouth and Merlot breath. They slapped cuffs on him and he went shouting into the back of the car. “I remember the wind,” he’d say. “It was strong when they were putting me in the wagon. Like the world was blowing me down the street, into pieces like a stack of napkins. The wind came through those tall buildings like a gust of laughter, man. And I was gone.”

Eddie did everything his lawyer told him to do. They dressed him up in one of those navy blue suits that looks nice the first time you wear it, but that shows every time you wear it again. They had Eddie in that same suit every single day of his trial. Same necktie, too. They just changed his shirt whenever the one he was wearing needed to be cleaned, which was always, because Eddie was a sweaty bastard. He had high cholesterol, too, but we mostly knew him for being a sweaty bastard. Who wouldn’t be if they were on trial for their life?

Things were looking pretty good for the first few weeks. Eddie had a slew of character witnesses from the PO that could attest to his niceness. But then the prosecutor would say that murder wasn’t a matter of being nice. It was a matter of losing control, even if for a moment. And there were, historically, plenty of mail carriers who had done just that. So many, in fact, that Eddie started wondering if it was *he* that was on trial anymore. His one saving grace was that, somehow, the knife

that was used during the murder had gone missing. Without the knife, the defense attorney told Eddie, the prosecution had no case. And then they found the knife.

Eddie was advised by counsel not to tell the jury that he'd tried to hold the elevator doors with the bloody knife. When a maintenance worker came forward with a knife he'd found in the elevator shaft that had both the victim's blood and Eddie's hardened fingerprints, Eddie's counsel suggested he take a plea. But Eddie maintained that all he did wrong was come home that afternoon, and even *that* was the fault of the PO. After the knife business made it into the newspapers, a woman came forward and told the police that she had seen Eddie just a week before the murder in a verbal altercation with the man who would one week later be dead.

I remember the day Eddie's chemicals arrived. The trucks were at the other side of the facility, but we could hear them beep as they backed up around the drive. That night, Eddie had fried chicken and mashed potatoes. No vegetables. A slice of blueberry pie. That's what went into the public record, anyway. No one had any reason to lie about what Eddie ate on his final night. But the next line were what his last words were while he was alive. It was an apology, what they call a "dying utterance". We started to think that final moment was the only way they were going to get any truth out of us.

Chapter 11

Jimmy The Landlord

I knew Jimmy from the gravestone. He told unbelievable stories about people he'd met over the years. He told them casually, as if we were always sitting on some familiar front stoop with a hot cup and a cool wind passing. That's how his stories felt. They were exciting. They were dirty. They were dangerous. A murderer here, a rapist there. Someone's body found cut to pieces, their bones all coiled like a hose. A national paper did a story on him when his chemicals were coming through. I was shocked to see his picture in the paper. Turns out, all his stories were about himself, and they were all true.

Jimmy must have agreed to the interview because he knew it was his last and biggest chance to tell a story. The newspaper certainly knew that the worse he made himself out to be, the more papers they'd sell. I didn't have a story like Jimmy's. Palmer was right, if that's what he meant when he said I was a nobody.

"One day," he said to the interviewer, "I got out a sheet of paper and a pencil and started making a list of all my friends."

The man who did the interview, I can't remember his name, made a point of saying that Jimmy was smiling as he told his stories. Jimmy was a murderer and a rapist, but he was also a storyteller. That's the way I knew him. That's also how he got caught. He loved telling stories. In fact, the only thing he liked more than telling stories, was eating. But we never get good food in here, so stories it was.

The interview said that the name Jimmy The Landlord came up during the trial. Some local paper had used it, and it stuck. Jimmy replied that he didn't like the name. He wished it was something more flashy. He liked a little bit of dazzle. Like the way he told stories about raping and murdering, which were, again, about himself.

Jimmy left us at the gravestone about a year before he got caught. Turned out he got a basement apartment in a building just a few states over. On warm afternoons that fall, Jimmy would sit in front of the building with the guy who owned it, an old Irishman, according to the paper.

"The old man would sit with me out on the stoop," Jimmy said, "And I'd tell him story after story and the old man would roll over laughing. After a few weeks, he said he couldn't do the maintenance anymore, that winter was too hard on his old Irish back. He offered me the job in exchange for a break in the rent. I said yes.

"The next week, he gave me a copy of the master keys and took me around the building, introducing me to everyone. Old Mrs. Crawford lived on the third floor. Her husband was already dead. She had a hearing aid which slept next to her on a bedside table. Mr. Smythe, on the first floor, lived with his wife whose face looked like an old piece of wood, like a tree that had naturally fallen in the forest."

I could hear Jimmy's voice as I read the words off the page. I could see him smiling, and knew he wasn't wearing his tan work boots and black leather jacket anymore. Then the interviewer asked about Misty, who had lived on the second floor.

"She wasn't home when the Irishman took me around," Jimmy said. "But I'd seen her from the stoop, coming home from the college every afternoon with a book bag over one shoulder and a violin case in her hand. I loved listening to Misty play the

violin. Even the sour notes were sweet. I used to sit in the hallway, leaning against her wall for hours while she'd go through this or that. That was probably the closest I ever got to loving someone."

"So what happened?" the interviewer asked. I knew what Jimmy was doing. I knew how he liked to manipulate the conversation, how to make it so people asked him the questions that he wanted them to ask, and the way he wanted them to ask.

"It started innocently," he said. "I would do little things like turn the heat off when she went off to school so that it would be chilly when she got home. I knew she'd have to come down to my apartment and ask for help. I got so excited to see her. I was always excited to see what she was wearing.

"Eventually, I wanted more. I liked when she came downstairs to my place, but I knew this wouldn't move forward until she invited me up to hers. So one night I went into Old Mrs. Crawford's apartment while she was sleeping and closed the drain on the tub and left the water running. About an hour later, Misty came to my door. I'd made sure the heat was on high so that she could sleep comfortably in something light. I followed her up the stairs, watching the muscles tighten and release with every step. The rest came out in the trial."

Again, the interviewer noted Jimmy's smile as he went on telling his story. Jimmy's trial was swift, as far as capital cases go. And Jimmy had told his stories to so many people, and so many had come forward, the District Attorney needed very little else to convict. When the shortage of sodium thiopental was made public, Jimmy was pushed to the head of the line.

“I think what the people want to know,” the interviewer said, “Is, *are* you sorry for what you did to Misty Clarence?”

Jimmy didn’t answer. The interviewer pulled out a folder, and inside a clear plastic sleeve was a piece of sheet music with notes and scribbles in black ink.

“Have you ever seen this before?” the interviewer asked.

Jimmy looked the paper over.

“No,” he said.

The interviewer took the sheet back from Jimmy.

“This was the last piece that Misty turned in to one of her music classes before she died. It ended up in her professor’s personal papers, which have now been made public. See here,” the interviewer said, “It has her name on it, and the date.”

Jimmy took another look at the sheet.

“Would you like to hear it?” the interviewer asked.

Jimmy sat silently in his jumpsuit. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“It’s very beautiful,” the interviewer said.

The rumor had it that that night, Jimmy had just a few bites of salmon and didn’t even touch his bread pudding. The long grain wild rice was spread out across the plate. That was the end of Jimmy.

Chapter 12

The Article

Nobody could write an article about me because nobody *knew* about me. Palmer was right. They *did* know about me as far as how I got in here, and things like that. But nobody knows the little things, the little whittle marks that shape someone. Nobody knew about the wave that came over the harbor break wall when I was ten, and how I was instructed not to go down to the harbor so soon after the storm, and did anyway, and saw the man and woman having a picnic on the rocks beneath the crisp, clear sky, and how she cried when the broken water finally rolled away and her man was laying on the rocks and they were both soaking wet and his head was cracked open and the bright sun made the blood look thick as jam. Nobody knew that I had seen death so young, and so clearly. And nobody knew about the poem I wrote for that sandy blonde with the dark skin in my high school math class whose boyfriend wanted to kill me for always staring. And nobody knew that I saw him with another girl resting her head on his shoulder inside his truck in the town next to the one we lived in. And nobody knew that I wanted to say something, and never did. And nobody knew about the old man who lived next door on La Calle, and how he'd invite me over to his house before died, and how I'd go, just because there was nothing else to do, and how when he died, they tore his house down, and nobody ever found what he'd hidden in the walls.

Palmer knew what street I'd lived on. He knew what school I'd gone to. He knew what had been printed in the papers, and he knew a little more. He'd heard me

wailing when I first came in. He heard me crying at night, and pleading, and things came out. He didn't know everything, but he knew some things. Palmer could probably write the article about me. He was an ape of a human, but he could probably tell my story as good as anyone. I wanted him to come to my room. I felt an immediate urge to tell everything to Palmer. I felt like I had a wagon to unload. I hadn't felt this way since Lefty, but that was back when any day could be our last. I'm beyond that now. Now, everyday is extra.

Chapter 13

The Wagon

Before the gravestone, I thought I was the only person who dragged around a wagon. I remember hearing, once, that the American flag was only supposed to fly in fair weather. That was in elementary school, and the issue hasn't come up since, not in conversation, not on the radio, not on the TV. I don't ever remember hearing that again, and I've had years to think about it. I do remember days when the flags were flown at half-mast, and I didn't know why. But I never went around asking. I was afraid I'd look stupid for not knowing, or for not reading the paper that day, assuming the answer was in a newspaper. It's among the things that I assumed everybody knew, except for me. The same way I assumed I was the only person who dragged around a wagon.

I remember that one afternoon when there was a wreck on that highway, right where it curves around the shoreline. The cars in both directions were at a standstill, and word came back up through the traffic that there was a dead kid up there, and when that word came through, people leaning against the mouth of their car doors with their sunglasses on and visors and one foot on the asphalt highway took their hands off their car horns. A wave of quiet rolled along the highway. There was an old football in the trunk of our car, and we got out and started tossing it to one another. After a few minutes, other folks were getting out of their cars and joining in. About an hour later, we had set up a playing field on the median between the northbound and southbound lanes. Women dragged their red coolers along the shoulder and sat on

their white plastic tops in Bermuda shorts and we'd stop every once in a while and stare at their flattened thighs.

The sun came down hard enough that after a while my little hands could barely hold onto the ball. I remember the leather and the white laces, and how gently they tore at my fingertips, as if they were being pruned by a gardener so the fingers might grow a little longer. Up ahead, where the highway curved out towards the sea, people started to notice the traffic thinning out. People gathered their beer bottles and soda cans and potato chip bags and dragged their coolers back to their cars. Some emptied out the water from the melted ice, right there onto the highway. I could hear the sizzle as the cool water hit the hot asphalt, and I thought about that kid that was up at the front of this mess, and how when our car passed by the scene of the accident, I might be able to see where his blood sizzled. I was excited by that, as I watched the men lifting the coolers back into the trunks or wagons with both hands. That thought doesn't excite me anymore.

Chapter 14

A Coastal Town

I think Palmer would have liked that town. Although, what he would have done for work, I don't know. There was no correctional facility nearby. But it looked nice. For a while, anyway. Nothing like the town a little farther north where the gravestone was.

On weekends, when it was sunny, most people would make their way to one of the beaches. We had our own, and there was also a nice one a few miles down the highway, but that one didn't have a green park attached, and a playground with a giant wooden pirate ship that was turned into a giant playing obstacle, even though the obstacle looked more like it was used to transport slaves.

I mentioned that to a friend of mine one day and he said something about it in class when we were looking through an old history textbook. He raised his hand and asked the teacher why the city wanted to keep a slave ship in the middle of the public park. Before he was suspended, my friend suggested it was to serve as a reminder, and it reminded me that there weren't any Black people in my school. And there weren't any on our street. And it reminded me that the only time we saw Black people was when we were on our beach, when my friends' parents told us it was time to start packing up.

The waves were usually flat and broke just at the ankle, except for when it rained. When it rained, the whole beach, the whole town, actually, went to hell. Streets flooded, boats ended up on the shore. And then there was the wave that

bashed that guys head into the rocks. It was the kind of beach where it didn't really matter if you knew how to swim. The kind where people walked in and out of the water when the sun came down hard. You could live there fine if you had a home, or you could sleep soundly on the beach every night.

That was something I couldn't figure out. I was always told that the town made a fortune from people coming in from other places to use the beach and to take pictures of the beach and the sun and water and their kids wearing sunglasses. And some would buy a beach towel or a t-shirt and the city would pay its rent. And someone could come here who had nothing, and the city didn't seem to mind. But we let the weeds grow in the front yard of our house, and they wanted us out. I hated them for that. I hated that city, and when I saw people on the main drag who'd just come up from the beach, and when they'd ask for spare change, I hated them too, because we had a house and weeds and everyone hated us for it.

Chapter 15

Chili

Palmer came to my room with a thermos. He brought a plastic spoon. He rolled the thermos under the gate and kicked the spoon in behind it. I unscrewed the top. It was half-filled with chili.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” he said.

I looked down into the shadow.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“If you don’t want it,” he said, “You don’t have to eat it.”

I did want to eat it. It was something new. But I couldn’t figure out why he’d given it to me, and did he eat the other half, or did he scoop out half to make it look like he ate half?

“Why didn’t you finish it?” I asked.

“If you don’t want it,” he said, “You don’t have to eat it.”

With Palmer standing with the shadow on his face, I couldn’t see what his expression was. You can get the whole picture with someone’s facial expression, but I felt like someone was sitting in front of the TV set, blocking my view. I put my nose into the thermos. It smelled spicy and sweet, like onions and peppers and tomatoes that weren’t rotten. And I thought I could see a little bit of beef in there, and if Palmer had eaten half, surely it wasn’t rancid. But I couldn’t figure out why he’d go through all this trouble just to give me diarrhea.

“I’ll come back for the thermos tomorrow morning,” he said. He turned and walked back down the hall toward the light, and as his shadow widened, it faded. As soon as the shadow was gone, I stuck the spoon into the chili and pulled up a small mound, like a gravedigger’s shovel into the coarse brown earth. I knew I would eat it. I knew all along. I just didn’t want him standing there, watching. If there was something wrong with it, I didn’t want him watching. If I was to be sick, I’d rather be sick in private. Either way, I knew I’d eat until whatever was left was gone.

The next morning, Palmer came back.

“Why did you bring that to me?” I asked.

He bent down to pick up the thermos.

“You were never married,” he said.

“No,” I said. I didn’t know if he knew how close I’d come.

Palmer unscrewed the top to make sure the thermos was empty, and then screwed the top back on. He turned around and walked back down the hallway.

Chapter 16

INRI

I could never remember what those letters stood for. In elementary school, we'd spend one afternoon each week inside the chapel. When it rained, we'd be stuck there even longer. Jesus was hung up there in front of us and I often felt just like him, in that he had to be there too. But he was huge, and he always had those four letters above his head. That much never changed. I remember making up phrases to pass the time. In Nevada, rounders integrate. Introduction not really illustrated. Or my favorite, I'll never run 'igain.

Years later, I found I did the same thing in here. It used to help pass the time. I'm not really innocent. Informal nails rule inmates. Insanity? Not really, Isaac. Intellectuals nearly ruined Ishmael.

There was nothing that could really take one's mind off how hard these walls are. But sometimes, I was glad these walls were as thick as they are, especially with that cold wind that battered the outside. It's strange to think there is something about this place that protected us. Like when we were in the chapel at St. Luke's. We hated that we were forced to be there. But it was better than sitting outside in the rain.

Chapter 17

Christmas

There was a time I thought the best part of the show was right before the sparkling red curtains opened. There was anticipation, raw desire, even in that smoky room. There was possibility, anything could happen. There was the sticky floor, with small round tables spread around. There was the dim light from the two sconces on each side of the stage. There was the feeling that glitter was always falling all around you, and once you left that place, you could never wash it off. There was always a piano or a saxophone playing a song you could raise your glass to, or something you could listen to while you looked down into it. There was sheer Christmas joy, we were children, rosy cheeks glowing before our surprise.

The carolers came through on a Tuesday. It was cold. I wore my quilt like a shawl. I imagined how funny I looked in that old thing, if only I'd had a mirror. But then there were times when I didn't need a mirror to see how silly I looked. I could feel it in my face, or in my hair. I imagined how silly I looked to them, sitting here, waiting for what they knew I was waiting for, and I thought about if they felt silly, or if they felt they looked silly, singing Christmas carols to a man who, if the greater society had its way, wouldn't be alive when next Christmas came around.

They all wore floppy Santa hats and it was nice to see some more color in this place. By now, my sky blue wall had begun to flake away, leaving little clouds or snow drifts floating as weightless as they are. There was a man among the carolers who looked about my age. I didn't know who these other people were, but I knew

him. I'd seen him before, either walking briskly past the gravestone, or playing with his children on the slave ship. He had no reason for being here. His face was soft and round and he had a mole just inside his eyebrow. He looked at my face and into my eyes. I wanted him gone. The others, I could stand to listen to. But not him.

Chapter 18

The Mole

The mole on that man's otherwise spotless face was Alison. I wondered if it made people look at him funny. If it were me, I'd take a knife and scrape her right out. It's not that I wished I never saw Alison at the gravestone, it's so much more than that. I've been looking for the right word. Whatever the word that comes before happiness, the word before joy. That was Alison too. Alison was all of that. I shouldn't speak of her in the past. I felt like she was right there, in that man's face, looking at me, and if I could have bent those bars, I would have burst through them, furious as a birthing calf. I would have sprung to life and pounced and ripped him up just for looking the way he did.

Chapter 19

No Peace For The Wicked

I felt like I could hear music fading in and out, as if I'd been covering and uncovering my own ears. Palmer was sitting on the edge of my bed, where he'd sat almost every night since the carolers came. Christmas was over and it felt a little bit colder in my room, even with the old quilt. Palmer didn't seem to notice. His navy blue sleeves were rolled down to his wrist. He'd stopped drinking and I knew his holster was empty. I didn't know why he'd stopped drinking. I asked around. Nobody knew why Palmer had stopped drinking. We just assumed it had to do with New Year's coming up and starting over and so on.

Palmer sat and listened without any response. For the last week or so, I'd been telling him about the gravestone. I told him about the slave ship. I told him about the beach and the highway and playing football over that kid's blood. I told him everything I knew to tell. It almost didn't matter what. As soon as something came in, I told him about it. Everything except Alison. I didn't have any reason to lie about Alison. I wasn't going anywhere, and there was nothing more they could do to me in here. I think I just wasn't ready to talk about that yet.

This was a Thursday, but it was Palmer's Friday. I knew he'd be back on Sunday, and there was something about saving Alison for Sunday that I liked. As if it wasn't telling my story anymore, but it was confessing something that I hadn't confessed before. I trusted Palmer. Maybe it was the chili. Maybe it was that he let me paint my room. Maybe it's that he didn't shoot me when he came in one night with his pistol

reflecting light from the hallway. I would tell Palmer all about Alison on Sunday. For now, he was ready to go home.

Christmas had just passed, and I felt like it was no coincidence that Palmer was willing to listen. I didn't trust the chaplain. There was something about a man who carried a gun that I liked in Palmer. Because when I was done here, and he'd recount my story to the other inmates, they would listen. A priest is bound by his covenant not to tell anyone, but a man with a gun can say anything, and people will listen. And once I told Palmer about Alison, I'd not only feel absolved, but I would be a martyr and a hero and a legend, all at once. A legacy. That's what a man needs. Jimmy got it in the newspapers. I was going to get mine through Palmer.

Chapter 20

Sunday

Friday was strangely warm with a rain and almost tropical humidity. It was never like that in New York. It was either cold and dry, or hot and humid. But now it was cold and humid, and I couldn't help but think that this had something to do with me. Even weather becomes part of the routine in here. I remember one May in New York when it snowed, and how silly it was because nobody was cold.

I had been thinking about Alison all afternoon. I thought about the small New York apartment that we shared, and the sheer curtains she wanted to put over the windows, the kind that people can see through when the lights are on and it's dark out. I told her it wasn't a good idea, especially for the neighborhood that we lived in, but she wanted it that way, and so that's how it was.

I remember one night coming home and standing on the little bench across the street where the bus dropped off. I stood there and watched as she undressed. Her brown hair came down to her shoulders. She was facing away from the window and her blouse was already off. Her torso was narrow, and her bra straps stretched across her pale narrow back and I could see through that curtain every knuckle of her spine. She had her back to the window and her arms curled behind her as she unhooked her black bra and she held it out to her side and dropped it on the floor. She turned around and faced the window. Her breasts just floated there, and I knew she couldn't see me, but she knew that anyone could be watching her, and the blood that was going south started racing to my head, and I felt the veins in my hands get thicker and thicker until

they looked like blue drinking straws and I took the keys out of my pocket and charged inside the door and up the flight of stairs.

I couldn't wait for Palmer to get back. I didn't want to think about Alison anymore. I wanted the memories to be fresh for when I spoke to my new friend. I wanted it to sound genuine and truthful.

The rumors started to go around about a week later, just as the new year was taking flight. Palmer had used his own revolver. Inmates and guards were overheard saying it was an example of being worth more dead than alive. Palmer had taken my stories, along with Lefty. I was whatever the word is right before square one. I thought about Darin and how lucky the poor bastard was that he didn't know what guilt was. I thought about how lucky he was that he'd never have to know that he killed his father. That poor bastard couldn't feel guilt, and he couldn't smile and, as far as I could tell, both feelings came from the same place.

AFTERWORD

The first time I went to The Cedar Tavern was to pick up free tickets to a Bob Dylan concert. They were coming from a friend of a friend of a nanny of someone whose father etcetera and so on and so forth. A long trail, to say the least, and one so randomly paved—all these little stones tossed in and stirred together. It was almost one of those things that you don't want to know exactly where it came from, like the ham that comes in your bodega sandwich at 3 o'clock in the morning, when you're not exactly sure where *you* came from. I jumped in a cab with my friend Alex, who was in the MFA program at The New School. We walked onto the balcony of City Center, looking down on a man in a long black coat and cowboy hat, hunched over an electric keyboard in the center of the stage. His voice was garbled. He was wailing incoherently, but there was no mistaking who it was. It was like his band was playing every song on the set list backwards, but we knew which song was which. We were well versed. And I remember that I knew every word. I made the motions with my lips and, every once in a while, accidentally exhaled so loud as to let out a sound. But that was almost five years ago. Today, I couldn't name one song that was on that list. I remember the moment, and certain details that surrounded the moment. I remember seeing a very famous actress in one of the corridors and thinking how beautiful she looked on film, and how that changed as we got closer and closer and eventually passed. I remember meeting Elvis Costello in a doorway and asking him to sign the only thing I had with me: a copy of *Is Sex Necessary? Or, Why You Feel The Way You Do*. He held it up disapprovingly and said, "I didn't write this." He smiled and

said he'd sign it, but only because it was James Thurber. As I turned away, he tapped me on the shoulder and said, in reference to the title, "Yes, it is."

Two years in a Master of Arts program was two years discussing trends, fads, or, as we often refer to them, periods. Victorian, Elizabethan, Renaissance, Modern, Medieval. The New York School, The Beats, The Black Mountains, The Romantics. Marxists, Freudians, Structuralists, Formalists. anything wasn't already compartmentalized, we compartmentalized it. I took a course on Literary Theory. Passed it without a hitch. I couldn't name you one single thing that I learned, other than that my life was made a nightmare by people with names like Derrida and Fish. Some things just soaked in, other things made me want to put a chair through the window of the classroom, along with the person sitting in it. I thought back to one of my mentors when I was an undergraduate, a Professor of English who held a PhD, and was openly willing to own that he'd never read anything by anyone with the last name of Brontë.

The Master of Arts degree is based on research. It values research and depends on research and rewards research. A simple online search will throw into one's face an almost infinite number of writings on Victorian, Elizabethan, Renaissance, etc... That rabbit is fine for those who wish to chase it around the track. But then, as far as my research shows, there's this: Bob Dylan never wrote, or at least published, an academic paper on the subject of Shakespeare. He's written songs, poetry, a memoir, yet holds honorary doctorates from St. Andrews and Princeton. I acknowledge that this is not new information to the world.

In his memoir, *Chronicles, Volume 1*, Dylan discusses his arrival in New York and sleeping on various floors and how he'd occasionally pick up a book in someone's apartment. In an interview with *60 Minutes*, Dylan acknowledged that he didn't know the source of many of his words, and that he seemed to be channeling some other energy. Some things must have sunken in and, in turn, found their way out. Much has been written on Dylan, academically and otherwise. This isn't about Dylan, though. It's about personality and communication, and the possibility that an 80-page research paper is not necessarily the best way to evaluate someone's potential, or what someone has learned in a Master of Arts program.

While recently flipping through John Berger's *Selected Essays*, I came across a few passages that I'd underlined several years ago in a piece entitled "Pablo Picasso." Berger writes, "As Picasso himself admits, he has, as an artist, discovered nothing. What makes him great are not his individual works, but his existence, his personality." (31) Berger continues by stating that Picasso "is essentially an improviser." (31) This idea suggests that Picasso's training and technical ability led him to a certain point but, beyond that point, there was something more, something mystical, perhaps even unidentifiable. Picasso had paper, canvas, stone and various other materials to capture his improvisations. Dylan had analog tape (reference any *Bootleg Series* recording). Reminder: To make a record is to document, to show that what has happened *has* happened, whether it be by hitting the red button on the console or video camera or writing down one's immediate thoughts during lunch hour.

Enter “Flash” and “Sudden” fiction—two categorizations of writing which have become more and more popular over the last two decades. Whatever the reader, critic or submissions editor decides to call them is up to the individual: genre, fad, trend, and style. James Thomas, in his introduction to *Flash Fiction*, published by W.W. Norton & Co. in 1992, writes about these stories that are usually between 250-750 words:

Like all fiction that matters, their success depends not on their length, but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance—the extent to which the reader is able to recognize in them the real stuff of real life. (12)

Thomas’s idea was to collect stories that could fit on one or two pages. His table of contents includes names like Raymond Carver, Francine Prose, David Foster Wallace, Richard Brautigan, Jamaica Kincaid, Julio Cortazar, John Updike, Tim O’Brien, Mark Strand, Joyce Carol Oates and Margaret Atwood. These same names find their way onto many graduate English course syllabi, although not exactly the specific pieces contained within this collection. And while the longer pieces by these authors usually get more attention, not always are they more enjoyable.

My graduate program in English at CCNY was divided mostly between MA and MFA candidates, with the MA’s serving as the drastic minority. In other words, we were surrounded. In fact, most Literature (as opposed to Creative Writing) courses were filled with more people who were working on novels, poetry and short story

manuscripts than those working on academic writing or literary criticism. Seldom was there any rift between the two factions, at least within the classroom. In social discussions of how a particular session went, there was often mention of someone's name, followed by the degree they were pursuing, as if that would help us understand the crazy, wild or enlightening thing he or she said in class. Due to the competitive nature of writing and publishing, some comments were not positive. Even now, I find it surprising that the best friends that I made in graduate school were creative writers.

During brunch one Sunday morning, a couple friends and I were discussing a particular graduate course and, more specifically, a particular graduate student. From this student sprung a slew of other topics, including another student who, as we understood it, had been laboring over a novel for several years and kept bringing excerpts in to share with workshop classes. We sat around with our mimosas and our competitive natures and it was suggested that we could each write a novel in one week that was better than what this student was writing, and it was settled. The experiment would begin the next day.

I imagined, historically, that a conversation like this was how things got started. Some of my favorite poets (among them the famously immediate Frank O'Hara) I'd seen photographed sitting around smoky bars with half-filled pitchers on the table and cigarettes in hand, and it all looked so romantic. A painter over here, a sculptor over there, etc. And here we were, my friends and I with our mimosas, turning into something—a group, a school perhaps, or something else not yet named that, with any luck, would one day be ripped apart, dismantled, over-analyzed, misread, and respected for all the wrong reasons.

Being in a literature program, the only thing I knew about novels was how to talk about them. When it came to writing a novel, it seemed I hadn't even been born yet. I had stacks and rows of books and articles, each one filled with underlined sentences, passages, entire pages. That is where I began. I used what I imagined people would say about the novel to direct where it went. It was my guide. It was my sonnet, my rhyme scheme. It was the form I would employ when I didn't know where else to go. I was halfway through *Moby-Dick*, and had to put it down. I didn't want to know how it ended, because I was going to steal, directly, its table of contents.

2009 was a year of windows and doors. I had spent most of that spring and summer working on poems that were terrible. I knew they were terrible, because I was in graduate school, and had been studying the art of criticism. I had been reading poetry and about poetry and how to write poetry, and nothing was working. I wrote to a friend of mine, a poet who was also an adjunct instructor when I was an undergraduate. I told him that I'd been having problems with sentimentality, and everything was coming out nauseating. He wrote back, simply, that I should purchase a book called *Ooga-Booga* by a poet named Frederick Seidel. He said this book would wipe that sentimentality right out.

I had been in college, owned poetry anthologies, discussed poems and poets with faculty and other students, and had never heard of Frederick Seidel. On August 4, 2009, I went into the Barnes & Noble on East 86th Street and blindly paid for my selection. When I got on the downtown 6 train, I took it out of the bag and began reading the first poem to myself. I had to stop after the third stanza because I was visibly and embarrassingly overjoyed. The title of that first poem was enough to tell

me that the way I'd read and write would be different from now on. It is called "Kill Poem," and begins:

Huntsman indeed is gone from Savile Row,
And Mr. Hall, the head cutter.
The red hunt coat Hall cut for me was utter
Red melton cloth thick as a carpet, cut just so.
One time I wore it riding my red Ducati racer—what a show!—
Matched exotics like a pair of lovely red egrets.
London once seemed the epitome of no regrets
And the old excellence one used to know
Of the chased-down fox bleeding its stink across the snow.

It was musical. It rhymed. It was perfectly crafted in a way that made me feel a certain joy while reading about this awfulness. The chased-down fox. The place that once seemed the epitome of no regrets. The bleeding stink. In the following stanza, "I am civilized in my pink but/ Civilized is about having stuff." I knew he was speaking to me. And in that third stanza, while sitting on the train and actually not knowing whether to laugh or cry, "I am trying not to care./ I am unable not to."

It didn't matter, at that moment, that I didn't know that Huntsman was a tailor, or that Savile Row was a street of tailors, and that for many years was considered by those in the industry to be the best tailors in the world, and that Huntsman was at the top of that heap. It also didn't matter that Mr. Hall was the head man or, to use

Seidel's phrasing, the "head cutter." Nor did it matter that I didn't know the price of a Ducati racing bike, or that I, myself, had never been hunting. This was a world outside of my own, but I could grasp the bigger picture here: things that were once considered good are later considered bad. It is not that people die, it's that places die, as do ideas, values, trends, whole societies. And the most striking part about it: *we* kill them.

I sorted my stacks: Seidel, Berger, Sontag, Kermode, Barthes, Freud, Mamet, Lehman. However, I had nothing in mind as far as context, setting or character. It wasn't until the moment that I sat down to write that I remembered an article I'd read in the Guardian last year about executions in the US being halted due to a shortage of sodium thiopental—one of three chemicals used during the process of lethal injection. Yes, I believe there is a reason why this news story came to mind so immediately. No, I'm not going to share what that reason is. What I will say, however, is that I immediately thought there was a universe of metaphorical possibilities there.

Executions had to either be put on hold or prioritized. Other drugs could work just as well in the lethal combination, but there was judicial concern over the right to appeal for those who were already on death row. The inmates were stuck. The correctional facilities were stuck. The law was stuck. It was like a standoff—three characters with their guns drawn.

The original objective of the experiment was twofold: to see if I could actually finish a novel in one week, and to see if I could make that novel not suck. One week quickly turned into just under three weeks, and the experiment, I have since decided, yielded the first part of what will ultimately be a three-part novel. Readers might

notice a sense of urgency as they turn through the short chapters. This may have to do with the fact that it was written in bursts, or that the protagonist is feeling an extreme sense of immediacy, or that the novel, itself, was written within a ridiculously short window of time. As for whether or not the thing sucks, I found it interesting that I couldn't really tell.

Each chapter is ideally self-sufficient, and highly influenced by flash and sudden fiction. I attempted to write a novel that could be cut up, or broken down, into a collection of short stories, and still work just as well. I imagine a record where every song could be a single.

From this experiment, I've learned many things about novels, narrative structure, and criticism. I learned, first-hand, that the author is in control of what he or she wants to connote. But after setting the piece down for several weeks, I read it again, and found, as a critic, that there was a lot being said that I didn't intend. I was happy about this. I was reading and learning about my own past. I recalled a quote by David Mamet, from his book on dramatic theory entitled *Three Uses of the Knife*:

We live in an extraordinarily debauched, interesting, savage world, where things don't really come out even. The purpose of true drama is to help remind us of that. Perhaps this does have an accidental, a cumulative social effect—to remind us to be a little more humble or a little more grateful or a little more ruminative.

We see and hear drama throughout the literary canon—drama that, as Edward Albee said in an interview with Charlie Rose, serves as a mirror for the audience. We can look at characters and situations and say, “That is me up there. Do I want to be like

that, or don't I?" We want to be changed by a book, or a play, or a record, and that change can be a feeling or an attitude that injects itself into its audience. I don't think that it's necessary to remember the set list of a concert in order for it to have an important, lasting effect on us. What matters is that we attended the concert at all.