

These Waking Dreams

Stories by
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[Contents]

0	
1	The Pier
2	Cannibal Cafe
3	The One With the Snake
4	Buckley
5	Rabbit?
6	The House Sitter
7	Flight From Freedom
8	Wings (Original Copy)
8.5	Arches Asylum
9	The Drink - Transcript 1
10	Saint Aloysius Cemetery
11	Interlude: Two Men at Night
12	The Fallen Horse
13	Sage's Labor
14	LAX - Redondo
15	The Big Quake
16	The Boutonnieres
[]	

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He'd grab me by the shirt and say things like,
"There is a price to be paid for dreaming."

"I saw a great wave
Climbing over the green lands and above the hills
I stood upon the brink
It was utterly dark
A light shone behind me but I could not turn
I could only stand there waiting"

"Night changes many thoughts"

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1 - The Pier

Another Sunday in Pacific Beach where the day drinking has gotten the better of us, and that old feeling of the looming 100 mile drive home sitting in my gut. I gotta make it back to you before the sun is down, I always say. But it is already dusking and my twenty-twenty is in shambles.

That morning, we rose at eight and got straight to the champagne and soccer, carrying the buzz from last party into the day as if we hadn't slept. The night before, I had gone running off with some guy's bicycle from the taco shop—he gave chase for 800 yards before we danced. Cheese was off pulling down basketball hoops and kicking over traffic signs, and Dan had fallen asleep on a hardwood floor again. So we start Sunday hard and don't think about our decisions until everything is funny again. Even when an old lady tells us at a stoplight "that's a real childish thing to be doing," we continue driving around town with the windows down, hurling water balloons, yelling "die, pizza boy, die!" and "you should fuck that dog!" at every walking idiot we see.

There is an old man on his highest gear pedaling hard to get up the hill, his beach-touched hair coming down in grays, no helmet. "You gonna have a stroke, old man?!" we scream out the windows; one of us smashes his back tire with the car door as we shriek by. He tumbles away.

I run into one of my old students and give him an autograph. He buys me a drink and says he wants to meet me at a bar after dinner. "We'll be at all of them," I yell at him as I run across traffic.

We climb a rope ladder to the top of The Drink, which is under siege when we arrive, the deck completely stormed—the day looks like it's going to be ruined.

Men start looking violent and girls start running home with jackets over their hair. They shut down all the patios except ours.

"I don't remember there being a pool here!" I say, sloshing around in my only weekend pants.

"I don't even remember there being a roof deck," yells Joey, who spits in a bottle and throws it overboard.

When I get the email reminding me that tomorrow is a professional development day I rejoice.

"Professional development might as well be a snow day for me!" I say, remembering how I am leaving the job after this year anyway. Which is strange because I've just started there. "Fuck dinner. Fuck work. Who's partying with me tonight?!"

Andy grumbles about going home and I can't find the rest of the group, but Joey walks me over to his place which is right above a tux shop. The pants I try on nearly cover my entire patent loafer, the little shiny toe peeking out just beyond the flooded legs. And Joey is even worse. In a pair of nude pantyhose he says "this will never do" as he tries to jam his feet into ladies' shoes. He gets the middle three toes in and starts walking around, his big toe and pinky loose like hot dogs escaping from the pack. The heel snaps and we have a laugh, walking along until we reach the end of the pier.

This is a place I've come to only in dreams—in China, in Wilbraham, even in mountain tales alongside my grandparents, and though would seem to fit in Pacific Beach, I know it is here just as it was in the Desert—I've simply never

been to this pier in my life, there is nothing to ground it to, no ocean from which it hails, no memory in it except for the life it has had in my sleep.

We enter the final place before the sea. The steel wire chairs and small tables write it European, maybe, and the many bookshelves. Too, it is quiet, if not for the guests. If it served food, it might be breakfast, and while it is on the pier, it has no view of the water except through one window next to whichever table we sit at, and this window, we discover, doesn't overlook the Pacific but rather a fountain in the middle of a courtyard. The courtyard is empty, stone, and the fountain simple—this is where Joey and I find ourselves that evening in our absurd tuxedo wardrobes on the last legs of a bender, a broken heel, sodden, skipping-work drunk and hungry for blow.

We yell at the waitress, who is nobody. "Bring us four, you wicked bitch."

Laughter.

I stare at her and pour water on the floor.

"Four what?"

"For drinking! And a loaf of bread, unsliced and toasted."

"Ok, an unsliced baguette. Want me to burn it?"

"Yeah! Just take the whole thing and jam it in the toaster, bring out the crumbs when you're done so we can be sure that you did it."

Joey sends a text then kicks a pile of books off the shelf. They are children's books. I recognize Good Night Moon. Then I see that the chairs we are sitting in are not steel but Fisher Price, those big one-piece plastic molds of our kid days, comically sized legs and hollow backs. The table has shrunk in size too, and the walls, they are playslide yellow. There are little sticky stars on the ceiling that glow in the dark and fake paper flowers on the floor.

The waitress looks at me with patience as she sees me wrap my head around it—I've stumbled into an old recess room, a time from before memory.

"We want some fucking applesauce!" Joey screams.

"And old pizza. A whole box of it that's been sitting out for three or four days at room temperature. Bring that!"

"Still not in the right place, boys," she says, gesturing to the window. I look out into the courtyard again, which is now camped in the cover of night; the water coming out is neon blue beautiful, and the ground is full of sky, a constellation map of every star I've ever seen.

"Look closer."

Indeed there are bars on the window now, and just behind them a framed picture of my family and I around the Christmas tree in our old home, the photo I've slept with by my bedside ever since I moved out 12 long years ago.

"This is no memory," I say to the witch, who is looking at me with intent now that I've come to understand.

Joey is gone; it is only her and I, and then only I, unable to speak as she closes the padded door shut on her exit. There is a burned loaf of bread on the table and a greasy pizza box in the corner, but I haven't had an appetite in weeks.

2 - Cannibal Cafe

When the order arrives, the patient's skin is bubbling at the shin. Delicately, he pulls his jean leg up and sees a burn the shape and size of an iron—flesh comes loose from the body. He brings it to the front.

“I didn't know they did this at places around here anymore,” he says, showing his leg to the woman behind the counter.

“They don't, and here you need a certified cutter on to be able to do it.”

She takes out a pair of scissors and inspects his wound.

“It almost looks like a pizza slice!”

She peels the skin back from the point by the ankle, up to the crust at mid-shin, where the flap is still attached. With the scissors she cuts halfway across the crust, then pulls the rest off by hand. When the flesh is released it seems to shrink, crinkle up, like looking for something of itself to hold onto. It is milky white when held up to the light. She puts it, like melting cheese, into a steaming pot of something and closes the lid.

“Give it a few minutes to soak.”

“All right.”

“Hey, you know you look familiar. Have you been in here ever?” she asks.

She is a dumpy young woman with greasy hair, falling out of her top at the tit and stomach. He finds something attractive about her.

“No. Never. But I get that a lot.”

“You remind me of that Wes guy, you know who.”

“Wes Anderson. Wes Bailey. Wes Morgan. Wes Craven.”

“Where's he from again?”

A man on the other side of the counter jumps in, “Lady, can I give my order?”

She inhales, then looks back to the patient.

“The states. Western Massachusetts. Amherst.”

“I had a friend who went to school there!”

“I went to school there.”

“No way! Did you go with him?”

“Look lady,” the man butts in again, his nose like it’s ready to start pouring, “I’m here from the city and I’m very busy. Do you see me? Do you see this watch? What time do you get off? I wanna show it to you.”

“In an hour,” she says, looking to the patient again. Steam starts hissing from the pot. To the patient, “Your order’s up.”

“Can I get it to-go?” he says, looking to his order.

“You’re going home to share with someone?” she asks.

“No, it’s just myself.”

“Look lady, I’ll just write my order down okay? And keep it on until you reach the bone.”

“Whatever you want, slave,” she says.

“Good.”

“I’ll stay here and eat until you’re off the clock” the patient says.

“Okay, but I got another shift starting at midnight.”

“That’s just an hour in between.”

“Plenty. Go enjoy your food. And save some for me,” she says, and when she smiles he notices that she has dirty little teeth, like black beans without the skin on them. He hadn’t noticed that before.

3 - The One With the Snake

In this one, a snake is crawling into my ipad through the headphone jack—I only see it as the last of its tail is squirming in, helpless to stop its entry.

Later, when I am in facebook, it begins messaging long lost friends of mine, people with names I do not recognize, friends who had ceased to exist until just now in this compromised subconscious.

It writes “push up” to Graham Christopher, our high school president who once peed on my parents’ couch after drinking for the first time, and pokes its head into “like” and unlike on its own post five times while I watch on.

It knows all my passwords, and uses them to buy snake games on itunes, looking at me with its silly tongue out.

“Get out of there!” I yell at it. “You suck anyway.” It plays on.

After losing a few lives, it types “knee socks” in the facebook search bar and gets a video of some wet friends of mine doing a bikini photo shoot with schoolgirl cottons on, the mist of the water fan making their white socks sexy clear.

In the end, it finds a porn video where a woman puts a stick-on dildo on a motorcycle seat and sits, proceeding to go 100 on the freeway. It pauses the video at this climax and begins sharing the clip on my page with an emoji caption.

“You better do something about that,” a younger version of myself tells me from the bottom of my parents’ basement stairs. I tap at the screen. The snake then enters the porn frame and begins crawling into the muffler of her motorcycle.

“No, wrong way. It can’t get buried deeper.”

I start shaking the ipad, slapping the screen until the snake’s point begins to peek from the headphone hole, but I realize here I am not prepared to deal with it when it exits in full, so I stop and look for a weapon while it crawls back inside. At first, all I can manage are some tiles that had come loose from the flooded floor winters ago when the toilet pipes froze over. I start the tapping again, and when a few inches of the snake escapes I put the ipad on the ground and try to cut through tail with tile. The strike is dull and the snake only slithers back in, where I see it has begun sharing photos of girls I had stored in a secret album from years ago.

I hit the screen harder now, placing it in the fireplace and waiting for half of this slither to come out before stomping on it with both feet. Pinned, it makes a sound and starts filling up where I am standing; like a water balloon under a faucet, it keeps growing, and the more feet of it that are pourn into my fireplace the more I realize how unfit I am to deal with it.

In my last attempt, I conjure up a cleaver from another dream and strike out with fury, slicing its meat abruptly, the follow-through taking an inch of the old hearth beneath. There is a final scramble just before waking where I see its head and fangs eject, flying just by my neck, landing both teeth into the basement wall.

4 - Buckley

In this one, I move immediately from deep nap into my car, awakened by the rain at sunset. I am headed for trader joe's and a simple monday pasta, but end up beyond northern LA, still in a half sleep, so that I am unfamiliar with the exits and uncomfortable with their bends. Realizing I am well past my town, I take the next ramp and go straight instead of curving, crashing through several exit posts and down a flight of stairs. But my car is unnerved, so I head into the new town and find a yogurt shop.

They are just opened and run only by women. I look at the menu and see yogurt bananas which sound nice so I double back to the parking lot to check on my ride, which has now become a trusty steed. There are several outdoor bar stands to serve as stables, so I leave the horse there and head inside. Through the window in the queue I can see him.

“What will you eat?” a woman asks me.

“The home yogurt, with grain and cinnamon?”

“Yep, and for protein?”

“Sure, and the banana.”

She rings me up and spins the screen to me.

\$21.39

I slide my card in and out.

“Oh, looks like Buckley is enjoying his spot,” I nod through the window, seeing the horse eating the paper streamers hanging from the awning of the storefront.

The woman looks over weirdly, but I cannot tell if she sees what I am seeing.

“Receipt?”

“No, I’ll just check on him and be back in when it is ready.”

When I go outside, I realize I have not roped the horse in. On my approach he begins to wander in the open lot, which is gravel and sand. I chase him, but that sends him farther away. I yell at him to sit and he does, long enough for me to walk over and set the backs of my fingers to his nose, where we both acknowledge that we have never seen each other before in our lives, but we are somehow in love. I step closer to control, but he neighs to his feet again. I steal a stroke from eyes to nose against the grain of his growth before he moves about the lot at speed, telling me he is certainly a horse.

“Buckley, heel! Stop!” I command in a fright.

He shrinks to his back and opens his huge underside for petting. Dust from the lot surrounds us both in a cloud. Wary of the kickout of his hooves, I approach from the head again. His hair is young, long and unbrushed, I comb it with my nails, our last soft moment framed within this shield of flying sand.

I am able to get a rope around its head and lead it back to the first stable, but know then that this is absolutely a horse, and I have no order guiding it any way, back or forth. I tie him in ever loosely and go inside. The yogurt comes out like a big pale candy bar wrapped in a wax sheet.

I leave the scene knowing that I will be leaving the horse behind.

5 - Rabbit?

I am drunk driving up a hill in Palos Verdes, looking out at the city lights after week of light rain, it is so clear. Chiggity check yourself before you wreck yourself is on the radio. I am singing and being very silly with my fingers and hands. Some mood I am in. Now something like a rabbit runs under my car. I see its white cotton butt as it jets out from a driveway, or a set of bushes, whatever life hole it came from. I don't even have time to brake and hear not a thing as I drive over it, not to mention how little I feel. But I am sure I have hit it. And I am sure this is the first living thing in my life I have ever run over. In fifteen years of driving. Not even a squirrel in all those days in the northeast, once even stopping short for a mouse in the dark.

Joey had hit something before. A deer. It felt like we had run through a giant pothole, I turned to see the damage in the road, but instead saw it seizing, hooving out on the sidewalk. But these are half-thoughts, and it is a full moon November night. Something about this accident reads profound, so I cycle back to see the rabbit fallout. When I get to the spot, expecting to see a carcass flattened red in the street with tires tread upon its soft back, I see nothing, and am not certain I am in the right spot at all.

“Did I turn full circle, and enter some alternate world where there was no rabbit?” I think, turning the music all the way down, “Or is this how life goes? A mad dash through the finish and then not even a sound, a bump, a trace left between the road lines? There must be more. This rabbit, it has a trick on me. It is in my undercarriage right now, and when I check it at home it is going to spring out and chew my face off. Yes, there must be more.”

My new home is an eerie place on the weekends; I still haven't grown used to the quiet. And the quiet is bigger now because the campus is vibrant and relentless during the school week—children and maintenance and golf carts and class bells, every nature thing scared into the bushes. But on the weekends it empties into a great flourish atop the canyon and sound echoes like stories on a lake. You can hear peacocks coming up the trails in the early morning. The owls hooting in the night. The crows chasing their colors. It is an odd solitude at school then, when I am mixed with freedom and fright.

I bend down to look underneath my car when I land. Waiting to have something fly out and latch onto my face. But it is nothing. Not even a spot on the tire. I come inside and write this story, and get drunker off wine than I have all week. I wake from the couch to shouting in the air. The yelling of women. Or one woman. I can't tell. Sound winds under the ceiling of clouds and over the green nightland, echoing remnants of song. There are many shouts when I wake. Just as those in my sleep. Both like the seance of women. The full moon arcing down.

6 - The House Sitter

For a tough, outdoors-type, he has a beautiful cabin in the deep woods. He hands the keys over to me out on the front deck, which is filled with flowers. I can hear them wilting.

“I seem to have misplaced hell somewhere.”

“What’s that?” I say.

“I said ‘I misplaced an l’ somewhere, you know, in the instructions. I’m sure you’ll find it.”

He gives over the slip of paper he’s pulled from the sky.

“Have a good time, enjoy some company if you want, just follow the instructions.”

I slip it into my pocket.

“Buckley is running around out back there. He’ll come in at dark or when he gets hungry. Just keep the door unlatched, and listen.”

“Got it,” I say, looking out at the coming night.

I invite two girls over. There is wine, lots of it. Just as the sun begins to drop into its set the sky turns to weather and dusk is done in a flash. Then a strike of lightning in the black. Rumbling.

After another pour I think of Buckley. Who isn’t in yet. And so I take the girls on a walk out back with flashlights. It isn’t long before we’re roughing it into switchgrass and wetland. Murmurs come from the ground.

“There could be snakes down here. And 100 acres besides. I’m not chasing this fucking thing all over the county in the dark.”

We turn back.

There is lightning again, but no sound after.

“How do you even know this guy?” one of them asks.

“I don’t know. That’s the one piece of this story I’ve been trying to figure out. How did I end up house sitting for a guy like this, who I met long ago in a dream?”

“Maybe he’s your father.”

“Of course he’s not my father, he’s out with his father right now.”

“Everyone’s a father. Except brothers.”

“I need a father.”

The rumble from the last flash comes and shakes up the land.

“Ooh, let’s stay and wait for the rain,” she says, jumping into the jacuzzi.

“No no no, you do not sit in a pool of water while there is lightning, that’s like nature 101.”

“Ooo, look at you! Such an outdoorsy.”

“Inside!”

“What about the dog?”

“Oh, hell come back. It always does.”

The night is weird in the old cabin, and lots of things are said that spill onto the floor. In the morning, the girls are in their underwear next to a stain on the carpet. I go looking for the dog again. But it isn’t anywhere. And I’m not even sure I remember its name.

When I come back into the house, the girls are making coffee in the kitchen. They’ve dropped grounds on the tile. Each has something written across their underwear. One says, “DUDE,” the other says “PLAY.”

“Guys, we better fuckin bail on this place.”

“Bail?”

“We drank five of this guy’s bottles and lost the dog. Yes, bail.”

“But won’t ‘this guy’ find you?”

“How should I know? I don’t even know who he is! Gather up the empty wine, I don’t want him to find it.”

“I thought you’d never see him again.”

“I could see him anywhere. Haven’t I told you this is a dream?”

“Well, I couldn’t tell.”

“Isn’t that the great pity?”

“Go get the truck ready.”

I put three beds in the truckbag, and there Buckley is, waking quietly in the morning air. A shepherd of some sort.

“Girls, he’s right here!” They come out in their underwear, but say something different this time, “HOME” and “SKY.”

“The lightning must have spooked him.”

“It spooked me.”

“Okay, the engine’s running, let’s get moving.”

Just as we are about to pull out, the man arrives. He is with a wife and a father. There is also a son, who doesn’t look up from his phone.

“Stay here.” I get out to greet them with my backpack on.

They are unloading things from the thing. “Hell of a storm we weathered. The house hold up alright?”

Buckley comes running from around the corner into his owner’s arms. He flops his ears, says something through his slobbering.

“Yeah, it spooked the dog a little, but he’s good.”

“I see. You get to use the tub?”

“Yeah, before the lightning.”

“There was lightning?”

“All night.”

“Hmm, we didn’t see it. Hey can you help me bring this casket inside? Everything in it is melting.”

We leave a trail of water behind us while lugging the cooler from the gravel to the front deck.

“Thanks. Here, come in, I’ll pray for you.”

“Okay, you can knock a few bucks off. We had a bottle of your wine. It looked like the cheapest one.”

“A bottle?” the old father asks in an echo, drying off on the couch.

“Which bottle?” the man says.

“Umm, I don’t... oh it’s right here,” I say, opening my backpack. Which is full of clinking. The first one I pull out is half scotch.

“Looks like you’ve had more than wine,” the old father says, the echo again.

“That’s the good Glen. Were you going to take off with this bottle?”

“Look, I packed that bag last night when I had had a few. I must have gotten that one confused—I’m not trying to burn you here.”

“That’s exactly what it looks like you’re trying to do,” says the old father, standing in the kitchen, washing off a cleaver from last night. His hair leaks down in gray strands.

“C’mon guys, you said I could enjoy some company and hang out, so that’s exactly what I did. If it’s a big deal I’ll replace the wine, I don’t mind.”

“Guys? Son, did you at least feed the dogs?”

“Of course I fed the dog. Wait. Dogs?”

The man moves into the bedroom, “I specifically told you about the sick dog in here. It was all there in the instructions!” There is yelling through the doors. Then, “Oh God—he’s dead.”

When he comes back into the room, I am gone, and the scotch too. The truck is peeling out down the driveway, and Buckley is in a tree. There is shrieking coming through the trail of dust the truck has kicked up, and a pair of underwear left on the drive. The father holds them up to the light. They are plain white.

He feels his gun in his holster and walks inside, smoldering.

The dog follows.

7 - Flight From Freedom

That night I was reading Denis Johnson in tight clothes, making a dent on a box of wine. He has this story where they are orderlies and junkies and one of them pulls a knife from some man's good eye. A hunting knife, buried to the hilt. They steal pills and drive miles around in a gun-black night right into the first snowstorm of the fall, seeing things in the flats: graves, drive-in movies, hitchhikers, snow angels.

I mark poetic lines in green and smart lines in blue and take lines of white and think about the dream I had on the way into work today where I slam on the brakes and the puppy crashes through the window, its eyes suddenly on the outside looking in—bloody bold things like cartoons, telling a funny story, not mad at me at all.

I get a chicken quesadilla from taco bell and eat it with Antonio and the painters, who tell me the best places to sleep on campus and give me something to huff on before my only class of the day. A monday.

Then, I have a small coffee in a huge mug and can't look at the kids when they walk in, acting livid when I find out they haven't shared their presentations with me on google docs, though I haven't told them to.

I put three out of six on the whiteboard and they all hop to work. The presentations are terrible and it is clear none of them has a clue what A I is or what a research question is supposed to be, so I tell them how terrible these questions are and how they will never be able to answer them, how they are like robots who cannot see the light. They change their questions to something I will

more like reading—something about video games, concussions, or a zombie apocalypse. I suggest they find a way to relate to poetry as well.

When the kids leave and I am erasing, a bird flies into the classroom and breaks its face on the board, then sits down and makes noise.

I have a yearning to feed it works and sugar, but can't spare either, so I bring it to the nurse, nestled in my hand softly now. The nurse is clueless and makes four phone calls before I bring it over to the biggest fig tree there is on campus and place it on a low limb. When it falls to the ground and flaps I am sure that it is going to die. Maybe not now, but soon, some day this week, in a world far from mine. But I pick it up anyway, telling it to try harder, to dig its toes into the wood and eat the little rain the world gives it until something goes ripe and plentiful.

Then I walk away, and am back here again, wondering if it was a fig tree on the peninsula or an oak on the east coast. Wondering what the bird was trying to tell me, and whether I want it to be sunny or cold in this story. Wondering how much my parents arriving in two days for my wedding has to do with any of this and if those centerpieces we bought will hold up in the weather.

8 - Wings (Original Copy)

A covey of crackheads on the bluff, must have been three of them, filtered by sunset and the coarseness of rock. The smell of sand mixing in the salted air and the waves gentle, soft as pillow and distant cares, to caress the earth to ~~grass~~glass.

Some view!

No, it is the same every night,
We are looking for birds
But they are buried in the ochre

Then why come here tonight?

For to fade into the cliffs, of course
And the burning clouds
Ah, yes yes, how we burn

But what of the palms, of Catalina?

Look, there it is rising out of the sea
Just as we speak its name
Some distant ancient—

Your eyes are too long, soft one,
I can barely see myself,
Look!

The wind shook up, and pebbles down the bluff from whence he leapt.

Into the cloud

Into the sea

Into the blind

When I get to the Drink later that night, I am still very certain of what I had seen—a crackman throw himself from a cliff and invisible to air. I tell Andy this, who, maybe laughing, checks my nose for blue stuff again.

“You sure you want this to be your story?” he asks.

I drink beer straight out of the pitcher and look at him madly with my mouth around the big rim. “It’ll be just like that time you gave CPR to a guy who was overdosing—only this time there won’t be a broken chest.”

“Yes, but I actually did that. There was a news report and everything.”

“There could be a report on this! I bet there already is, just wait.”

“What were you doing down there at the lighthouse in the first place?”

“Running. I went down there for a run.”

“How far?”

“Three miles.”

“And you really asked these questions? About the palms and Catalina?”

“Yep. And they said they were finding themselves. It really made me think.”

“I don’t know if I believe it.”

“Me neither.” There are televisions on in the bar playing surfing videos and ocean music, we glance at them from time to time as time plays a round on the wall.

“Hey, you remember that time we saw all those flagellates whipped up at night under the boat engines in Catalina.”

“Yes! Little water glowsticks. B caught one in her red cup and stirred it around with her ring finger until it was neon blue. Yeah, I remember.”

“Oh, and the lobsters, and eels from the scuba, and Lew hooking that fish through the eye.”

“I think that was you. Remember your bloody arm?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Remember the shore of red when we arrived, all those crab shells bunched up along the tideline?”

“Oh man, so many bees too, I didn’t even know bees ate like that.”

“We had to rake the sand of dead crabs with our bare feet, shaking off the hungry bees just to have our spot to sit and drink and play.”

“It’s a fight for that spot.”

“I’ve never been so brave amongst bees.”

“Hey, you know what I remember most about that trip?” I prompt Andy while he takes his turn with the pitcher.

“Is there something wrong with your pint glasses, boys?” the barkeep asks.

“Hey you shut your fucking face! I’m telling a story.”

Andy spits up in the beer. I grab it and have another gulp.

“That girl we saw coming down the mountain, Paul and I, remember me telling you?”

“Yeah, she had a hard fall.”

“Damn right. And Paul and I are just sprinting down the backside of the trail in Vans, on six mile drunken legs. I’m at speed beyond my control and ready to take a seat and buttslide to the finish instead of going head-over, you know. Then we come to a little clearing where the grade turns and lets up before another drop, so just for a second we could see you all jumping off the boat at the harbor. Then the drop and there she is laid up in the switchgrass, her arm sticking out of her ass making this stupid face like a bloody fucking idiot, probably groaning, but

we were too fast with the wind to hear. I only got one look at her in my falling balance, though I'm sure her collarbone was twig-broken, like a bird run into glass. Little thing just lost control, I thought. Then we raced to the bottom."

"Even Paul didn't want to stop?"

"We couldn't if we wanted to! Anyway, he says he didn't see her. But I'm telling you she was right there, flapping like a fool."

"I believe it, I remember watching the helicopter land there later on."

"Maybe that's the story I'm trying to tell."

Into the blind, she leapt
Like a meteor coming out of its hold
That's how planets are made

What can you see from up there?

Only the white crests of the waves
And what looks like an ember upon it, rowing,
It is all so small

Those are stars idiot
Look how hot that one burns, orange,
The lighthouse swirling on your face

The sound of oars flapping in the chop

There were men overboard
A report showed later
And not all of them came back to land

8.5 - Arches Asylum

Strange.

Strange I hadn't thought of the full moon today. Not until it pops up over the mountain at 8:30. Then ten, before it settles behind the gray swath of cloud blanket renting half sky since we outsided Arches. Windows and pulleys.

There is an hour between this time, moonrise and night, when I'm convinced again about the wonder of this life. One good hour. Then dark.

The place we're staying is off a long stretch of desert road well into the red rock high rises that make up that which could not climb the Rockies, or fell from it. Yes, that's my sense—something seems dejected about this land.

~~Even more, there's something about this RV and camper site. The site of our residence for the night. I pick up on it when I first run into what I amount is the owner, tall gray man in a clean golf shirt with a moustachey, proprietary air, doing a hose can of spray onto the greenest grass I'd seen for a couple hundred miles. The whole property had evidence of greening, come to think of it. That spray treatment he was giving it must have had to do with it. The guy moved on quick when I came out of a bathroom, as if he didn't know I was in there and I caught him in an act.~~

All of the campers are strangely avoidant. Our neighbors don't speak English or at all. And everyone is in their tent or RV as soon as the dark. Like they know something we don't.

The night turns to fire and beans. The wind picks up hard and the chevron gas sign gleams on at 10:00 pm sharp, illuminating our spot with sour lighting. I catch a waft of something chemical.

We get beer drunk in the tent. A challenge for us to finish 18 black modelo cans. I do my first shotgun since senior year, I mention this fact, swear by it. Andy laughs and shotguns two at the same time.

We are making a mess of it now. But don't care. We chew the weed caramels we were going to save for the weekend. Something is dropped.....Andy tells me about his psychotix uncle who used to live in Vegas. They had him committed for

winning too much. Committed to an asylum. “For winning too much,” Andy says matter of factly. I wait to ask questions, he is throwing himself at the story now.

There, at the asylum, they used to have a tall, clear tube of poker chips, cheques as they’re rightly called, all ages and sizes and colors of cheques in this tube, in total the approximate size of a mcdonalds playslide. This Andy remembers because his father had told him and he had recorded in his mind that image of so many chips in this cleartubed playslide. And the men, the assailed they were sometimes called in those days, would bet, and the winner, get this, the one who gets this number of chips right, right to the exact thousands maybe millions of em, they would be let out. The winner is let out of the Vegas asylum. "No questions asked," Andy’s dad tells Andy who tells me as Andy’s uncle had said. Right outta the straights.

So then each week, Andy's dad tells him this, each week the men got one guess for how much poker chips they had in there. They wrote it down on little sheets of paper in dull child’s pencil, the size of a thumb, they'd write down their 1,457 or their 700,910 or 1000000001 or sevun, and wait and see what got called, announced at primetime every sunday. A spectacle of it, Andy remembers his dad almost verbatim, and he was there that night, his dad. The night the men had written their numbers.

“Had there ever been a winner?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

“Did they always bet on the same amount of chips?”

“I couldn’t tell you. Listen.”

Andy’s dad watched his uncle put down a number he is very set on remembering. And so also set on Andy remembering. The number was 666,001. He says the inmates take their time slipping theirs into the red square box that runs from outside the holding room to the floor inside, like returning a video at a movie box. The chip room itself is about the size of a classroom with nothing inside but the tube and a mirror behind, like an art display the men aren’t allowed to touch. The men often watched themselves in the mirror coming up to slip in their numbers. They are all very cagey about it. Wiry. Spectral. They linger outside, looking in on the barrel tube staged like some lunatic’s playset, full of different chips and

sizes. Some would sit outside all week, counting one by one every chip they could see. Some would yell numbers aloud and the men would fight about it. Some would just watch. At last, at some point before 8 pm, all the participating men are meant to have slid in their number. Andy's uncle puts his in with the rest. Andy's dad watches him enter it.

Andy's dad is then asked to leave. 8 pm. Visiting hours had ended. "But the drawing is at 9," he tells them.

"You cannot be here for the drawing. You must leave."

He leaves, telling his brother "good luck and more."

The brother is remembered for saying something to the extent of "I never needed luck," but Andy doesn't have the exact line.

And now here's the kicker. Andy's dad takes a wrong hallway after signing out his papers on the visit and stumbles through what he thinks is a restroom: an unmarked door next to the painted symbol of a man on a white column (he wore glasses). Entering, another door in front of him has just swung open and back, he thinks this is the stall. It is not. It is the kitchen. It is completely empty. Cleaned. Still lit. He stands in the kitchen. He can see through the rectangle of a steel chef's station and into another room. It is the poker tube room, or rather a viewing room for it, behind the glass mirror but looking in. The tube is within his vision, nearsighted though he might be. That tube of reds and greens and blue black circles, he'd never forget it. In the viewing room there are men. Hidden from the inmates by the two-way mirror, but Andy's dad can make them out, there is no doubt. Men in white coats. They work here. They are looking at little slips of paper. They are holding them up and flipping them in the air. Their howl mouths open in muted laughter.

The night melts. Melts and spills. For a flicker moment I feel I am in a boat. I spill again. It dries.

Dries. I come to. Gasp for water. Find one. My bladder full. Neck creaked.
Shoulder stiff from the gravey ground somewhere I have lost my sleeping mat.
Andy is unmoving.

I stumble and tear out of the half zip into the air. But it feels less like air than the
inside of a car. The whole tent site. Unmoving. still. And quiet. Not even snoring
or a nose whistle. Too still. I move into the bathroom which is even less air.
Automatic lighton. And spotless sinks and floors. I dont even tiptoe the clean
floor. The toilet flushes for me. Copper sink. The dryer dries for me. Is nearly
quodt. Sterile is the word. I come to.

Take a walk after I try and look out and see someone standing next to the car

Nothing at all. I take to wandering. Is back to
Wandering.

End up near the fence on the edge of the land: Signs are reading

Beware of Bad Land
Do not enter, Bio Hazard
Bio Hazard

There are signs that say this
I read them
I look beyond them The bad land
Bio hazard
Eyes flicker whose?
A scratch on the ground behind me
Steal away, sideways, from the eyes and the scratch, and find myself unmoving,
laying down in the grass, that green carpet gas can grass, panting
Eyes to the skycatching breath
Stars underopen, and the moon nowhere to be found, I close into a half sleep

Then I feel the crawling
The hair of small things
The spiny pinch on my neck
I am frozen back into awareness, still-sober awareness of where I am and what
this land is and what might be crawling on my body, what is threading into the

hair of my body ..is contagion, sterility... All of this thought happens in a thought before I am sprinting back to the camp, I run off the grass, rocks under my barefeet sharp but run hard, a hard panic as I think I still feel it, not but it's no gone. I come panting up to the tent, the hair of legs still standing my hair.

“Andy!” I gasp, unzipping the half open fly, “we gotta get outta here,” I say, almost diving down onto the open sleeping bag. A pant as I come down next to Andy, still sleeping wide mouthed while a fistsized black shelled something, its many long legs, crickles along toward his teeth, the sour glint of the blue red sign overhead reflecting off its back. I slap it away.

9 - The Drink - Transcript 1

Do feet pics actually do something for anyone here?

Only if they're clean feet. And she's got raw meat between her toes.

It's not that I want to get married only to get divorced. I just don't want to break up an engagement. That seems way worse than a divorce. Everybody gets divorced.

Yes. Everyone gets divorced. As your best man, this is the best advice I can give you.

But I just said that.

Pour four shots right now!

You want the free ones or the cheap ones?

Clean or dirty. It doesn't matter.

I like them small and dainty.

You guys talking about feet?

Haha, I knew this guy would jump into the conversation. Feet meat is like his Batcall.

It's all such a trap. You fall in love. That's a trap too. But a different one. I have been in that trap before. It isn't so bad. But you fall in love at this high-stakes point in your life when everyone else is doing it and her clock is tick tick ticking—yes, of course I'll have another one why are you even asking me you scum—

She's gotta have real strong foot knuckles.

This bathroom door is always locked!

Yeah girl, leave your sandal outside with me if you don't want to wait. He'll be a while.

Heavy knuckles and a foot toe strong enough to pick up a roll of quarters and break it in half.

Another one for Cheese!

And crusty heel skins.

Mmm yes, use a carrot peeler to slice that off gimme that crusty heel on my sandwich you know what I like.

And like I said, you're in love and you don't want to break up of course, and you want her to be happy, and she's totally right to want you to commit. Look at me. How else do you expect her to trust me?

Honestly, marrying someone is the best way to buy their trust.

I was at the store the other day in the international foods aisle and there was a couple there with their kid in a shopping cart in front of the only thing I came into the store to buy. I walked out without getting anything.

Hey, it's open! Someone pass this girl the care package.

The smell of hot pussy instantly dominates every other scent.

Okay, real question. Any of you ever depthroat a foot?

So now our relationship is predicated on how much I care about this wedding, which is spiraling out of my control more and more. But I am invested into it because, well, I have sunk ten grand already. And another ten on the ring.

Umm, hell yeah. Baby feet are hella easy to swallow.

Cheese you broke another glass! Go change out the ice you worthless ant.

There is raucous everywhere. I can't hear a thing except the ringing.

Why is there even a telephone in this place?

For the one who makes calls.

Can I answer it?

No, nobody answers it. That's what makes it hilarious.

But the spirits, the spirits are flying in the air!

And in here too.

I'm glad you're my best man dude.

Bitches love sandwiches.

Cheese!

I'm glad she let you come out this weekend. How many do you have left?

I have every one of them left. Let's have another.

Hey, when's Goodman getting here?

He's already here. He's behind the bar.

Hahaha Goodman! Goodie goodie goodie. What a good little boy.

Don't give him any more bones, he's had like six, he's gonna take a shit on the floor while we're sleeping.

If we ever go to sleep!

Then he'll shit while we're awake.

Okay old man, I won't give him a bone. How about a shot?

Dude remember when you fed my fish 151 on my birthday?

Are you bringing Goodman camping?

I'd like to, but there are bobcats there. We're gonna have to keep a close eye on him if we do.

I'll help with that.

Thank you. Here, just hold the ice bucket, I'm going to dump this outside.

The bathroom's open!

Well, at least the wedding will be a hell of a party. You guys gotta get some good swags to wear and make sure you liven the place up. Summer wedding in California.

Is there gonna be karaoke?

Not sure. There is a live band. They usually let people sing at the end.

That ice sounds like an old man coughing!

It sounds like someone is spitting up glass!

That's because it *is* glass, come take a look!

Hahaha, there is a baby foot in it. You guys keep baby feet in your glass bin?

What the fuck on earth is this guy talking about?

Baby feet. Feet meat. Meet and greet.

Whose dog is this? It's eating again.

Stop fucking feeding it! Of course it's going to eat if you feed it.

This really isn't a good environment to raise a dog in.

Don't you tell him how to raise his dog you plague.

You're the plague, not I.

Do you think a dog will eat himself to death?

Not exactly. They'll throw up a ton before they die. But if big dogs eat too much then run around they get bloat and their stomach explodes.

That's fuckin gnarly, how do you know that?

Happened to this German that we had in the Desert. We found it like two days later behind the camp, it was goddamn disgusting.

And that's how you know what bloat is?

Guys, I'm trying to talk to you about this fucking wedding here.

What?

The wedding. It's in two weeks.

Dude, I thought you had that wedding last year.

What?

Check it out, Dan is going to skate through the ice pile!

That is so dumb.

No, that was the engagement party you idiot.

Sounded like a wedding to me. So many Asians!

That has nothing to do with it.

But it was at a fucking house. You did not think that was the wedding, dude.

Bro, are you even divorced yet?

Yeah, man, the new thing is to get divorced before you even get married.

The spirits! The spirits are calling.

Can we pick up the phone just this once please?

Hahahaha, guys Dan's elbow is FUCKED. Come take a look.

That chick bit me!

Man, you better take that thing into the rabies store. Look at it. It's got dog bones in it.

Just tell him to put some ice on it, he'll be fine.

I am going to get bloat tonight. Can people get bloat?

Noo!

Hello?

It is spirits. Is your bathroom open?

Sean, it's for you.

Don't answer it!

You guys remember the girl that drove us from Chameleon to the Bay?

Oh man, not this one again.

No, tell it! It feels like that kind of night. What's he call it again?

The band gets a ride from Molly through a war zone...

Joey had had it in the trunk.

We know how it goes.

Joey. Had had it. In the trunk. And Sean was in station filling a cooler with emergen-c and water, Our pupils stretched out the windows.

Our pupils stretched out the windows. Yes, love that line.

Cheese was scratching for another one, and our music playing on the AUX, The sky falling in overhead, She swooned then, remember? She looked back at us and literally swooned, going forty and sand.

Swooned means passed out, right?

Mostly, yes.

So Joey crawled up from the end and took the wheel, Sean poured orange powder from the packet and began to inhale, Cheese roared, Andy filmed.

I remember it all. But the film is missing.

Let him tell it!

We need to get this thing in drive! Captain Joe bellowed, drumming the SUV over a curb and into the Pacific.

It took on water then!

Save the sandwiches, save the beer, we hummed.

Everyone was singing.

The waves piled in, we were set to go down.

Set to go down.

"Dump the fat girls. Everyone else to the back!" Captain made an order, so Cheese crooned another line loud, and when Sean took off his gas mask the airbag punched him in the face.

Thought it was over then.

Shut up man! This is the good part.

Dan was there when we hit land to pull us out of the HmmmV, but it was still a scene. We were bloody, and Cheese was yelling for a medic but we couldn't see him from the neck down, Andy kept pointing that damn camera. The Captain drummed it brakeless back into park.

Sean watched his eyes go from horror to glass when the flashbang blew up his nightvision, and Cheese on the Bay couldn't hear his own voice so he kept asking what time of night it was, and where all the ladies had gone.

You're all on thin ice here. Even in the desert.

And they say marriage can't be saved.

At this point, all Sean could do was bury his head in the sand. When we started feeling the rockets play overhead we tried to get the phones working but they had turned to melt in the water, and the only dry one was playing music, a riff amplified by the sea shell.

That's music the phone is playing?

The bathroom is open for last call.

A wind now, and the notes drafting through The Drink, down to shore. The
blanket of lights sizzling static about the pier, the rockets in the sky like coughing
and us all huddled in under the spell of song.

And spirit.

Right, the spell of song and spirit.

10 - Saint Aloysius Cemetery

This is the bachelor party, except replayed at my parents home 3000 miles off. In my brother's bedroom Paul is kicking my ass again; he pins me and Taylor slowly sits down and takes a fart in my mouth, I nearly throw up.

There is discussion of books and films, and Taylor is curious what we have, so I bring him to my largest case, once rich with the history of our family, in the side room. There are many books falling on their sides, gaps in the titles, board games mixed with nonfiction mixed with sheets of poetry and old notepads.

"How about a crime thriller?"

"I only have one," I say, pointing to a fallen oil painting.

Cheese gives us all a huge dosage of pain medicine, saying "for when you break your leg" or "that will break your leg" and we fall into a swimming hole. Upon emerging, we have fishing poles but no bait. We stick the hooks in anyway. The hole is in the middle of a street, a great depression, there are two fish staring up from the bottom, waiting.

Andy throws a cast but misses the water. He brings it back in on the road, the hook dragging in the light like an earring dancing across pavement.

"I know we're supposed to eat right now but it's dusk and I like where Andy's head's at!" I say, reeling.

"Yes, but I need bait," he says, so we walk down to the A Plus Mart through the projects, they buzz Andy in. He comes out with nightcrawlers in his pockets and we cast again right there in the parking lot.

"What are we catching?"

Nobody responds.

As it comes to dark, Taylor notices "we better get back, the walk is only getting longer." The streets stretch out in my loosening memory, the house a run away.

We are pacing with the dogs along the sidewalk now, fishing poles dangling ahead, "a lot of bites but no catch!" I say, Goodman running well, leading the line down the sidewalk around the most familiar bend of my youth. But when Basil joins us his running is more erratic, he veers sidewalk to street to sidewalk, and so I too. We've no leashes when a car approaches, its wheezing engine telling us it is cold outside, this poor broken car. As it overtakes us, I see it is a mother behind the wheel with her toddler in her lap, the toddler steering and laughing in ecstasy as they pass at 20 miles, a purple van.

Then we arrive at the street to turn home, Goodman leads us right, but Basil, on the scent, keeps running dead ahead. I yell him back, but he is on a concrete block now, moving on its own like a streetcraft untethered. I yell again, furiously, loud as I can, but the block only gets smaller with distance. I shoe up and sprint after him, he notices me in chase just as he passes the gate to the cemetery, his eyes come to life. The good boy jumps off the pedestal, dodges a crooked car, and comes running back into my arms, wet from the rain that is falling.

I am heavy now, sodden, and can hardly walk with Basil in my arms, panting curiously; I pull at the cemetery chain link to move me along, but I've fallen into the slow. The graves stretch out like gray shadows on the black field.

There he is in a hearse, his bald top and thin gray strands greasing down an infected head, muttering muttering, the rain pouring into his open window.

"Shut your fuckin face," I tell him.

"I will kidnap you both!" He steams, scraping his car along the fence, "Just one touch I'll chew your faces off I'll burn it I'll burn I'll fuck your life." He stampedes slurs out of his mouth growing fierouser until I reach the very edge of the cemetery, reading the street sign for home just above us, ashamed at all we've done to him.

11 - Interlude: Two Men at Night

It was the ides of March, I had just turned 30, which was another ides of sorts, and I was just coming back to life from bottoming out on a harrowing weekend, one which I am still tracing back together from the scraps of stories that made it out alive. None of it is real. The days are too fuzzy now, the nights too sleepy.

Even the afternoon spent in the Vet—three hours for a few lousy drips of ear fluid—a figment as I turn in the moon.

Her garage has been beeping every two seconds for a week now. It sounds like the heart rate of dying. Yet it has kept me up tonight, that and the still air and the too dusty groan of the conditioner next door. I give up on sleep, and though I know I should stay and fight out the night because of what awaits me beyond her doors, I kiss her on the cheek at two thirty in the morning and set out back into the wide open.

Imagine here, one moment, in Garden Grove as I drive past the church, an older man, quietly standing, cast in the light of the statue of Mary, preserved in thought and time, under the glow of the Mother just this night as I drove out in the middle of it, two a.m., for the beeping of the garage and the running of my mind too fiery to stay in that room where there was no breeze, and perhaps drawn back to my den of vice where left is a box of wine and all the fans to cool me, this Sunday night, staring upwards at a statue but no less statue himself, this man cast in light.

Imagine then too, but a few moments later, as I entered the 22 freeway, where only truckers and tanks ran at this odd hour, and perhaps still hazy from the half sleep I'd fought since midnight, the late winter fog on my windows thick, a figure now lunging in the shadow of the eight lane drive, in the extreme left, cast in all black, hurling onward, some odd shaped bag from its back ~~as if it were a curse~~, trekking through the freeway lanes on foot, a dialogue block above his head saying slam the pedal to the floor and shut your eyes, this man cast in shadow.

12 - The Fallen Horse

The only time I had fallen off was in a dream the night after he died. I was trying to get him to cross the tiny stream behind the ranch—it only ran half the year, and even then it was no more than two or three feet across and a foot deep. We had crossed it a million times and I never came out wet.

In this one, he decided in the last moment to jump it and I was not prepared, falling off backwards into the muck. It was late fall and there were leaves at the bottom, I felt them with my hands. I came up with the autumn on my skin cursing a blue streak, only to see him munching grass along the streambed, wearing a look that said, “You were supposed to hold on.”

The day before, we were grooming him for the last time. He got spooked by the cat and broke his lead. He went tearing into the street, slipped when he hit the pavement, falling hard. He broke both of his front legs and the ribs down one side. Screaming ugly, thrashing. After one look my father went for the .30-.30 to end the misery, but in the minute between going in and back he had died on his own.

We called a dog food company and they sent a truck with a crane and took him away. It was our fault—the lead was old and frayed but he was so gentle, he normally fell asleep while being groomed. I doubt he had dreams like me.

13 - Sage's Labor

In this one, I awoke to waterfalls on the television screen in a dark room, knowing you were next to me. And Sage panting between us both, as she had been all night while we stirred between deep rest and restlessness, like her, the dusty wind barks of Garden Grove howl howling.

I put my hand on her contractions, small balls of muscle falling down her ribcage, she panted deeper as I felt them and all I could equate the feeling to was pushing out a hard poo; then began the whelping.

The bed was soon very wet, and filled with several dogs of different colors. There was a gorgeous one with brown and white markings and perfect hair, sitting chin-up as if it had been blow dried into existence. Two others were simple and white and squeaky like bald pigs. The last one was soft and gray and marked with unnaturally blue streaks along its back which shifted in the light, as a river. I loved it immediately.

You still had not woken, though the waterfall was gushing now, our bed a swamping boat with five dogs inside it, four brand new to the world, and I remember thinking how happy you would be when you woke—I remember that being my favorite thought, so that it warmed me to tears.

Then Sage began another contraction, this one crumbly, like many marbles; it moved up into her throat. She coughed twice, made a wet sound with her whole mouth and then gave out a sack as red and living as a heart. It pulsed there on the bed as I blinked my eyes open for the morning.

14 - LAX - Redondo

In this one, we are at an International Airport—me, you, your family, several thousand other suitcase idiots—I suspect the holidays, our bags like we've packed for a long go, weeks abroad. Somewhere at check-in we realize that one of us, you or I, has forgotten an essential, an id or passport or more, something that calls us to go back.

So we do. There are six or twelve hours until boarding and home is not far from LAX. Along the way there is a party, green and red lights and holiday sounds. I get very drunk and want to fall asleep but instead drive. It must have been hours of drinking because I am not able to control the wheel or the brakes or the maps, I only end up on the skids of Redondo doing laps around the beach. You are livid.

“We've been here before, we're going in circles, Sean!”

Back, I yell you into that scary state of quiet that could explode anytime and do something big and life changing for me, or to me.

I try a new route along the pier, end up on the sand churning gears, and soon the car is in water. Oh, and the dogs are in the back, that part too. They bark at the windows as we go into the sea, and I yell, “Good thing it's only a rental!” looking wildly at the Pacific. When I look into the rearview I see they are not dogs, but children, our children, laughing just as I would laugh.

You exit in a huff, caring not that your travel boots get wet or that the tide is going out or that it is nearly sunset.

“I'm getting a Lift. You need to find your own way.”

I watch you from the tide, and when the lift doesn't arrive you get on a bus. I see your perfect skin and the white train of your dress as the door closes air behind you.

I put the car back in drive when the water has receded. It is now dark. The map is working but I cannot see the time.

You are in different clothes when I arrive at the airport, sitting with your family around as if to console you. You don't see me walk in, none of you do, and I cannot face you because I still have not gotten what I went back for.

15 - The Big Quake

It was another night of Topics of Conversation, this time with Mark and his new beau Joshua and sometimes Cain who was too drunk to be useful and also three glasses of red wine with moon dust.

In this game, you write topics down on paper I've cut up and then we talk about them in slingshot fashion.

"Any topic? Like anything? I don't know what to write," Josh asked, as everyone does the first time.

"Anything you want to talk about. Or want us to talk about. From 'wool socks' to 'best place you've ever visited' to 'worst restaurant experience.' Someone new draws a topic each round and they talk first, then the rest of us, in order. The key is, each of us can only talk about the topic once. There is patience and precision in it. To say what you mean just once."

"Just once!" Mark added. "No sidetracking or back and forths."

"Yep, and each of us *has* to talk on each topic."

"Okay. I think I get it."

"Okay! 3 minutes to write down however many topics you want, go!"

There was already heavy wine flow and buzz in the air. Leaves were shaking up outside from the ginkgo and tipping on the porch, a windy winter night. The candle inside was warm and Josh was sitting happily on the carpet while Mark, Cain and I were tight on the couch and sometimes it felt like college and other times it felt like a dream.

I drew first. "Okay, the first topic is," I began, unfolding the slip from the bowl, "Condoms."

Giggles from the crowd.

"I, personally, do not use condoms. B and I haven't used 'em in about 4 years. I probably haven't bought a pack of them in 5. And no, she isn't on birth control."

"Whaaat?!"

"Pull out game strong, I guess?"

"Yeah, either that or one of us is infertile, but I'm only like 20% worried about that because we've never really tried, but I've said my part. Cain, you're next, what do you have to say about condoms!"

Josh was already having a time, ~~finding the game like Mark's eyes, winning~~. He finished his wine first.

We went around, Mark finishing with an off-handed comment about really needing to use condoms more for health reasons we never got into, then Josh drew, and Cain, and Mark, and like that again, music and wine, red and white, and Goodman fluffing around on top of us all and vape smoke and weed smoke, like that and that some more through Favorite 90s band and Does anyone still write in cursive? and Childhood Fears.

"Childhood or childish?" I quipped.

A laugh?

"Oh man," Josh said, speaking like he'd written the card he's just drawn. "Mine was always claustrophobia."

"Really?!" Mark asked.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"How so, like elevators and closets and stuff?"

"Ha, I guess closets. But also just like, cars. Like we would have big family trips and pack the car with six of us and I would just be uncomfortable the whole time. I still remember."

"You sure it was the space and not the people in the car?" Mark joked, drawing him back into the room.

There was then something long-winded about a mother, and Cain nodding with his eyes shut to Fleetwood Mac. When it got around to me I was loaded with a comment about my old house, sneaking in the attic on weekends and sleeping on the insulate, sensing the shifting of the roof under the wind and frost—squirrels skittering on the shingles and the touch of all things that go bump in the night. Nobody was really listening.

The door opened and a gust stole Cain out with it. Leaves trickled in and the hooting of owls and, man, what a wind.

We moved on to a second glass of moon wine, hoping to see some movement in our eyes. The topics continued.

Best live performance

Worst neighbor/roommate/housemate etc

Good vs evil

What ice cream flavor would you be

Nearly an hour passed.

Then I opened one of the last. It read, "The Big Quake" in a handwriting I hadn't noticed on any of the other notes.

Was there a rumble then? Somewhere, there is always.

It began.

"Okay, so I thought this was an easy one when I first read it, and I was actually just talking with someone about the quake of '98 and how we haven't had one as big since, I was only ten, and I wasn't there; but actually the more I gave into this one, I realized it wasn't just about the shifting of earth's plates, but the shifting and quaking in us all—a quake of the heart," Mark and Josh made eyes, "a quake of the mind, of the soul, even, and especially a quaking of the loins!"

"The loins!" The laughter again.

"Quaking of the loins. There's a phrase I haven't heard like, ever."

"What does it even mean?"

"Oh I think we all know what it means!"

"You're crazy," someone said.

I dressed the blades of the ceiling fan with five socks and turned it on.

Now, the music was louder than at any other point in the night and our pupils were bigger than the bowl. We heard the music and smelled the lavender from the candle, something from The War on Drugs. I opened the door to bring the wind again and Goodman started butt-shaking rich with joy as the fresh came inside, filling.

"Is it time for the walk?" Mark said, moving to his jacket, me to Goodie's leash.

"Definitely walk."

"You need a jacket, Josh?" I asked, putting my own on.

"That's okay, I'll get him one," Mark insisted, moving to his apartment then back over in the time it took me to leash Goodman, his tail wagging his butt butt-shaking his tongue out my tongue out, the growl of the wind on the pine trees hungry, you know how the chill feels the skin.

We went up to the field first, where there is the most unobstructed view of the heavens I've seen yet in South County.

"Can you all figure out which way is north?" I asked, and they got it on the second try.

North was north, of course, but the sky was covered in that direction, so I showed the Dippers and Orion instead, to light the way; then tried something that might have been Taurus but I didn't know, so made the shape of a stickman with my own body, letting Goodman run out after a rabbit, my flashlight doing flashlight things on the grass on the moon.

Down the hill we went then. Finding a ball up against a fence, I pulled it loose and kicked it down towards sea. We all laughed at the rolling away, me the hardest.

Then came the skies above LA where there was talk about plane patterns over LAX and the locality of a lightning storm.

“One time last summer I sat on this vista. A student came out, unable to sleep during freshman orientation. We watched the electric rain from the clouds over the city and the planes avoiding the storm as they came in to land. I asked him questions about airplanes. He was a stupid shit.”

Josh and Mark held hands, conjuring up more fire from the skies, something shaking stirring in the windy air. We walked knowing there was snow far off in the tips of the Angeles mountains even though we couldn't see it.

Back up the hill the long way now to the Village where there was a giant xylophone to bang and Mark and I did so, as much in sync as ever the night the night did I tell you there was wind, and leaves and love how it all quaked, then the playground, the swingset, the sand, the jungle bars and the big tree in the middle I climbed until they were moved beyond worry, Goodman doing zoomie circles figure eights the infinity of the white night playground sand, and it finished just like this:

We jumped the fence and walked back inside and smoked for two hours until they couldn't listen to me any longer. Then there was the sound of lovemaking through the walls and more music, music in my head in my eyes full with memory and hope and madly in love with the world, as I sometimes am when the night quakes just so.

16 - The Boutonnieres

We woke up in a pile on the morning of my wedding, one of us already in tuxedo. My cousin, climbing his head up through the floor, began laughing.

“Look’it this pile of nasty nachos right here. What the fuck did you all get into?”

His voice cut the haze which came down in spirals; I flicked a chunk of nose crust into the air before realizing we had fallen asleep on top of all of the bridesmaids’ bouquets. Stewey, in the tux, was suckling one.

“And why the shit is Stew in that tux already?” He poked the fat one with a broomstick. “Hey, Stew! Why’s your dick out man?”

Stew mumbled something and scratched his crotch, but made no attempt to open his eyes.

What the fuck *had* we gotten into?

“What the fuck did we get into?” and,

“Where on earth are we?”

I began to remember a friend from college—he had gone on to play professional soccer, but hadn’t been invited to the wedding. I wondered why he was here now in the tree fort with the rest of us, camped around a hole in the floor with a rope-ladder falling down on my hometown lawn, grass sweat-tipped with the morning mist of mid-fall New England.

“I’ll tell you what we got into,” Tommy, the soccer player, said, rousing from the back corner. “It was that fucking drug take-back center.”

The crime leapt back inside me like a shit in my belly. I puked down the hole onto the lawn, learning by the way it fell that it was a windy morning.

“Nice one,” Joey awoke. “Can’t you ever puke like a normal person?”

“Where would have been better than that?”

“A toilet?! A plastic bag? Your own hair?”

I looked at the plastic bag in the corner. It was full of other, smaller plastic bags. The short of it was that we had ransacked a prescription drug take-back center and got away with it. And the long of it was in pieces now that we would need a team to put back together.

Johnny, dependable, my brother, was sitting on his phone straight-faced like he was reading the morning news and not nursing a blistering hangover.

“Johnny?”

“I’m trying to get more flowers.”

With a broom stroke, my cousin swept a batch of white petals down the hole, I watched them catch in the breeze.

“You guys really wasted these ones.”

“That’s what they were for!” Tommy said.

“Do you think Amazon will deliver to the fort today?” Johnny asked.

“What are you drunk? Of course they will.”

The set up was so amateur. A couple of ladies sitting behind a folding table in a goddamn middle school gymnasium. They had one single lockbox and it wasn’t even bolted down to anything, and a clipboard with some bullshit government printouts on them. I had a mind to clock one of them straight away with the board, but a snatch-and-grab was the clearer choice. The only question was who was doing the running.

The security had a lame cover on the front entrance. The guy looked like he had an eternal case of the hiccups. The fire side was unmanned, so we parked around the corner. Sean came running with the box and nothing on his tail but the distant sound of the school’s alarm. Some of us had forgotten how fast he was. We got

two green lights and hit a left into a neighborhood where we parked the car and left it. We walked a mile through the woods to the dock.

The wood was loud with floored leaves but the trail was as we had always remembered it. It led right back to the beginning of everything.

When we got to the old dock it was as our youth, aching its old wood poles in the mudslick. I took my feet off and stuck them down into the New England stew. It was cold in the first layer, then warm and soft under its pudding skin top, like the day was still with it though the moon was up and we were lighting out.

“Should we try and blow some of these to get a kickstart?”

“Only the small blue ones!” I pulled my feet out then dropped them down further.

“Wait, doesn’t anybody want to look up what some of these are?”

“Hand ‘em to me, I’ll tell you right now.”

Johnny had a leatherman which he used to yank off the zipties.

“What a world. Not even a lock on a box like this.”

Tommy was grabbing the bags and looking at them through the light of his phone, “Old people stuff. Laxative, codeine aspirin, aspirin, ibuprofen, ooo anti-depressant, anyone want this one? He threw it into the air and nobody grabbed for it. It fell through the dock into the shallows.

“C’mon guys, this is perfectly good stuff,” I said, sticking my fingers in to fish out the button bag.

“I don’t really wanna take anything anybody else isn’t doing.”

“Well, where do you guys wanna go?” Tommy asked.

“Somewhere weird.”

“Somewhere sleepy.”

“Somewhere old.”

“I want something that hits me in the face, makes me puke then gives me the rolls.”

“Now we’re talking.”

“Adderall. I’d like to blow some adderall.”

“Awesome. Gross.”

“Adderall’s good. Oxy’s good. Xanax will be good for the morning. I’ll probably just do a blue or two and zonk with it.”

“No c’mon man. You always do that. Try a little wild card. Doesn’t even look like there’s blues in here.”

“Well what else is there, dickface? Keep reading em out.”

“Okay okay,” Tommy said, pulling out sandwich bags and orange bottles dusty with shelf life. There was a one gallon bag half-full of unmarked capsules towards the bottom of the load. Tommy took one look at it and laughed. “And finally, here’s our mystery bag.”

“Are they presses?”

“No, lookit these shits. All blank capsules, who knows what kind of power is inside them.”

We all looked over to Stew, who was smoking a cigarette on the deep end with his back to us. He attuned our stares amidst the silence. “I’m not doing that shit again,” he said, warding off the spirits.

We laughed, remembering the days we used his liver for fodder, and pressed it no further. There was everything we had dreamed on this dock anyway: the wild of a western Massachusetts pond, foul old friends, the fair air of fall, warm jackets, cigarettes, two bags of wine, a bottle of whiskey, a little blow, and an earnest

reason to celebrate. I sat there waiting all night for them to ask if I was getting married just so I could have a reunion like this, but they never did.

“We’d better get Keno to bring some breakfast up here,” Joey said. “Everyone want sandwiches?”

“As long as I don’t have to move. Shit, are my eyes all right? I feel like you dopes punched me in the fucking brain last night.”

“Hey, you don’t have to say any lines or anything like that do you?”

“No, we’re doing vows, but just to each other. I’m not touching a mic today. Joey is though!”

“Yup. Gonna crush it. Gonna tell your whole family about last night.”

“Good luck remembering.”

“Oh, I remember. And I just texted Keno, he’s gonna send a dude to bring a bag from the shop within the hour. Stew, put your dick away we gotta get some food in us.”

“Water,” he smacked his lips.

“Okay, here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to do this shit like a spectrum. See here, this line, this far left side, pure downers, strongest stuff.” Tommy put down a few small, pressed circles, blue and white. “As we get closer to the middle, less pure; then” he puts a stick down, “after the stick, to the right, uppers, less pure, to the far right most pure.”

“What the shit, uppers and downers, circles and cunts and sticks and lines?”

“Which way is left? Your left, or his left?”

“Where’s the baby dicks? Where’s gone the time?”

“Dude, just give me the adderall.”

“No, here’s how we’re doing it, shut your rhymes. That’s group one,” he points to a group of circles. “Those are the feely ones.”

“Feely.”

“Yeah, they make you feel crazy in your body and shit.”

“Genius.”

“Right? Okay, and this next line, these are the moodies, take you up and down,” he says, pointing at each little bunch, “then some weird ones, just for pleasure, followed by these the scaries, a dash of sad, then a helping of sentiment. You fuckers get it?”

“No.”

“Xanax ain’t no fucking depressant.”

“That second line makes me wanna jerk off.”

“The last line makes me happy.”

“Would you guys just fuckin zip it.”

“Zip it!”

“I’ll zip something, Joe give me a bump of that, this guy is taking forever.”

“Ooo, bump time, is it bump time?”

“Bump time!”

The four of us scurried into a standing circle on the end of the dock.

“Fine, I’m going to keep laying these out. You guys jump in the fucking water.”

“Hey, did you get any straws man?”

“There’s a 20 right here.”

“Nah, I hate doing this shit with dirty cash. Especially sharing it all night. I’ll get a fuckin bloody mid-vow and hepatitis on the priest. Get us a couppla straws.”

“And some bowls, like vessels, or cups. Something to keep these bags in.”

“Why? We got the bottles for that.”

“It’s going to get windy, look at the pond.”

We did, it was beginning to ripple. It had been eight years since the gang of us had gotten together on this old water. Then, it was winter, and we made Stewey crash through the ice to his waist at the soft spot while the four of us played two-on-two in the middle. He ruined the day by almost freezing to death.

Before that it was another few years, a fall day, we were only teenagers then, and somebody had stolen a canoe off the truck of a guy in town then gave it to us because they didn’t want to get seen with it. The owner came down to the water with beer and saw us in the middle of the lake. He yelled while Stewey had his pants down shitting in the bow, delighted with himself. Nobody was mad because it was a ridiculous thing to do and the town was silly and fiction was always the best drug there was to escape the madness of this fuckfaced everything else. He made us clean the shit out of the bow, then thanked us for tying it back to the truck.

We had scattered since then, voices in the forest, always in touch but hard to root back to home. It took a night like this to remember how we had gotten here in the first place.

“Okay you picky pricks. It’s ready for you.”

“Ready? What ya got, what ya got?”

“K. This bowl is painkillers and waves, it’s for you Sean; you’ll be able to sleep and itch but it’ll take your mind a little bit too.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“This bowl is airplane drugs, that’s for you Johnny; you won’t think about a goddamn thing that you don’t want to think about.”

“Drugs.”

“Exactly. Joey, this bowl is no-sleep, make-you-shit stuff; it’s for you. Joey, you listening?”

“Yeah yeah fuck yeah gimme the shniff.”

“K, one sec, and you can shit right in the water, it’s okay, Joe.”

“I’ll shit in your cunt!”

“K perfect, and last, this bowl is happy dick. It’ll make you have a stupid boner and screw with your heart rate but you’ll end up passing the fuck out. I think there’s some steroids in it too, it’s for you, Stew.”

“Yeah good good, and what about that?” Stew pointed.

“Oh that? That stuff in the shot glass there?” Tommy smiled. “No, no, you don’t want that.”

“Fuck you, what is it?”

“It’s the weird one. It’s for me. It’ll make you go all over the place. Maybe die a little bit then wake up as someone else.”

“Okay, but what is it?”

“It’s a bunch of our dreams boiled up in a cauldron. Then I spit in it.”

“No way?”

“Nah, I think it’s just molly, percocet, and dillalutin.”

“Should—shouldn’t we all have some of that?”

“Yeah, that’s why I put it out here in the big bowl.”

“That’s the shot glass.”

“I know. Everyone just take a tiny sip.”

“Hold up.”

Joey cranked one last bump for us all before we yowled up at the moon, dinked our lips around the glass. Then the wind came, and with it blankets and towels for our muddy feet and a backpack with wool socks and wine and the music “just a notch lower” and our backs and arms and legs lain just so that you could see the heat in our bodies as one on an infrared from up in the sky.

And on the final night together before we wed, you’ll remember, we were up in that high place looking over the graves and the tree leaves flipping as the sun was coming up like it comes up in the east, then and only then did the man of the cemetery become young again. He looked out at us, as if just finishing with a day of toil, and said "Hello," and by that we knew he was released.

The wedding is just as we’d imagined. I see you an hour before the ceremony in your dress, buttoned up to the cheeks in a corset hardly able to move your head, tree branches coming from your hair, being carted around on top of the dancefloor tiles.

“They haven't set up the dancefloor yet?” I laugh.

“You're not supposed to see me like this!”

“But it’s wonderful!”

I sit, and Joey comes out with sparklers, which he puts on an empty gift table and sets on fire. Somebody tries to douse it with vodka; the fury hits floor and I stomp it out with my dress shoes. Nobody in the audience seems to take care, especially

as Murray, Okafor, and Ramon have entered, two of them shirtless and three wearing sunglasses, playing mystic from their headphones for all to hear.

The theme of the wedding must be water, because the bridesmaids arrive on stage through a waterslide and stand there dripping from their teal green dresses, sopping hair. Someone in the audience hollers something about wet dreams from the top of his lungs, the old women beat him with nude socks.

At midnight another slat in the dock broke
 Stewey stuck his leg straight through it, he had done it before
 And Joey, overheating, went in the water and came out silty and stupid
 and cold,
 He regretted it, but we had fun warming his hairless body, insulated with
 the fun of life,
 Johnny skipped stones across the lake and made sounds he himself
 laughed at,
 While Sean asked everyone questions, lots of questions,
 And when they weren't listening he answered them himself,
 Tommy made a fire on the ground at midnight and everyone asked
 Why he hadn't done it sooner,
 We settled around it at intervals
 Walked at intervals
 Drank wine and sang like this

I feel like we're on a cruise ship.

Because we are, don't you see all these frat girls, Michelle and the pizza gang are all there, look.

But don't just start making out with the first one you find, there's a prize if we make it all the way to Jamaica single.

But I've already married one of them, back in the Desert.

Ask the bartender if you can annul it, there's a lady there you have to see, she sings the most beautiful renditions of happy birthday you'll ever hear.

But I want to hear Who Let the Dogs Out.

I want to hear a baby laugh.

I want to see a fire every night for the rest of my life.

Wait, tell us the ending.

K. So on the way home, when the ship stalled out in the Atlantic, the first thing to break down were the toilets. The scene devolved quickly. A horde of American women was walking around without bottoms on trying to squirt on college boys. Cheese turned wildly violent and decapitated a bartender. Dan was after the American women but they wouldn't look at him because most of his hair had fallen out in the salty wind. And there was a deaf Spaniard who was trying to suck my dick through text messages. I threw up and started stabbing the life rafts. Pigeons were screaming and shitting all around us. Joey pulled his big African ass over the railings and unleashed a brown splash into the sea. It was a brilliant idea, but the rest of us followed suit too late, and let gamble our bowels on the deck, white and black shit everywhere, poker chips and playing cards and yellow beer piss an inch thick. Broken radios screeching hoarse static. Among it came a beautiful woman wearing a white sundress, she slipped in the muck and went sliding towards the rails, a waterslide like a terrible birth. That was when my first wife started turning red and yellow from the sun and dysentery, hollering like the undead as I went after the woman, only to keep us both from going over. I yelled back. Will all the water in the ocean wash this blood from my hands? No, instead my hands will stain the seas scarlet, turn the green waters red. I must do this! She didn't get the reference, many men died. So I had to leave her on the ship, and find the one who sang pretty songs.

Oh, that wasn't the ending I was thinking of.

It never is.

When it is my turn to the stage, I rise up a story and grip, on instinct, the steel line crossing the ballroom. It is tradition for the groom to climb above the audience and scale across a pool of dirty water before arriving on stage. On my first grab I notice how weak I've grown, and remember there was something like this in my training which I neglected, just as the waltz. I slip twice, the gasps from below large but the laughter louder, as if calling me down, so I know that if I slip a third

time there won't be a coming back, that if I fall from here into that cess below I won't make it out in time, I will forever miss the stage; but I haven't the strength any longer, I haven't the strength to hold on, the bachelor boys are hollering from their seats, throwing tomatoes and beer cans at me, I sweat powder out of my eyes, feel chemicals in my bloodcells, the palpating of my heart; my grip goes—I give, I fall, but Buckley, animal, is there to catch me above the pool. I land on his back without a splash and he carries me to stage, just as always planned.

Food is served to the roaring audience, wet chicken and warm vodka molly sodas in mason jars under the seats so strong that when we are shaking hands at the tables after the ceremony everyone is kissing on the mouth. A trio of white guys are on stage, shirtless, playing oboes and drums on their abs and wide string instruments with teeth in them they shake to make echoes. They open the dancing with a song called *Samedi les Jeunes* which I'm told is a call to the rain at last, settling on all of us here at home. Finally, you put your head under mine and whisper, "Perfect. Thank you for coming this far."

"Thank you for lighting the way," I say back, kissing the part in your hair.

At three, the bridal party met us inside a place. Girls were crying and yelling and men were sticking the flower stems in Stewey's bare sleeping asshole while Joey and Sean threw chess pieces and kissed everyone they got their hands on. Someone set a rooster on fire and someone rigged every stoplight in the city to stay green forever and someone made a meal that reminded us of our mothers. There were rabbits in the brush and birds just beginning to talk when the wind stopped and swept up again, petals petal petaling, making a great escape.

My cousin managed to get us out of the trees before the morning had broke and we made like wedding people throughout the rest of saturday. We all had wounds to nurse but were happy to walk through them, for the lot us now felt something that couldn't be spoken, something so alive that if one of us had fallen we would have said such lifetimes to each other in that big set on the dock that Stewey could have pulled his tiny dick out for a piss at the grave site and the gang of us would have laughed at the world forever, all of its stupid secrets so clearly laid out, hastily covered by the catastrophe of the godless.

I woke up next to my new wife in a bed before the sun and just started laughing. I was in love and had gotten away with everything. There had been a dream, once ago, that I was carrying her across an open field, running my fastest—her veil flew off in the wind and the sky poured down red wine that didn't get us wet but drank us in. I dreamt that the world was full of wonder only to wake up and see it confirmed, every last loving frightening feeling fucking thing, sickbare yet shielded before us in a buckling of humanity, flesh warming on the hearth and the soul taking hard breaths through its gills. Words whispering in every crack, filling up the cup for another drink, another.

[Frequencies]

like	94
one	73
just	66
all	64
back	62
when	57
down	54
get	52
night	47
about	46
see	44
here	39
something	36
before	35
some	35
how	34
now	34
only	33
through	33
time	33
look	32
even	31
right	30
again	29
want	29
know	28
over	27
man	27
around	26
water	25
old	24
last	23
come	23
another	22
remember	22

