

*THE
DARK
NESS
ELIJAH
KAMPSEN*

Cover by Elijah Kampsen

The Darkness

Sophomore Sonnets and Stories

by Elijah Kampsen,

featuring photography by Jordan Thompson

and ink sketches by Raegan Koepsel

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For M. – repent or revenge.

*“Every line is about who I don't want to write
about anymore.”*

– Jesse Lacey

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Author’s note: the comments and opinions expressed in this collection are mine and mine alone. Therefore, the views expressed do not necessarily represent those of other contributing artists.

Prologue

Hello.

I'm glad this work has found its way into your hands. I think for some time I've just wanted someone to hear me out, though I'm not particularly the kind of person to enjoy "grumbling," so don't feel like you've failed me as a friend in some way, by having missed some sort of signs. I haven't asked.

Maybe now you're reading in an effort to understand me – even if sometimes I can't understand myself. And maybe you can help to explain it to me, this unrelenting need to be pitied, while at the same time despising pity. I need to be loved, I need to be cared for. I don't believe I'm asking much, but I have been told otherwise.

You see, it's been some 8 months since I was shoved into loneliness. And I can't take back what I've done as the choice was not mine to make. I don't feel guilty; I'm smart enough to recognize the things I can't change,

but oftentimes too weak to change the things I can.

I believe in God, I truly do. But in doing so, I must ask myself if I should be waiting and asphyxiating, or if I can move on and learn to breathe on my own again. I'm waiting for a sign, I guess. I'd ask for help, but I still don't believe my problems are so pressing. I guess it's something of my giving nature. I think others need His help much more than me, and I'm willing to give up my fair share if it means that someone else might be better off.

I must've been raised to be this selfless. I'm guessing some therapist could help pinpoint the exact moment in my life when I became this way, but I don't believe it's so important to know where it came from, as is just to know that I am.

I'm well on my way to simply embracing the darkness within at this point, and I don't know that that's right. Should I instead be fighting to light the way? Or should I simply take what is given to me and wait until the sun

rises itself? And who's to say it ever will?

I've always been attracted to the darkness I think, so maybe she was just a fluke. Maybe it was never meant to be, and maybe she was just given to me as a gift for trying to be selfless. But why then was she taken away? Have I begun to become selfish? Was she always? Is selfishness the way of the light? And if so, where am I now on this imperceptible spectrum?

I feel like I've awoken in a deep fog, which I suppose would make some sense. Fog is just bright darkness, right? I'm left to try and coerce the fog away, or wait until the sun finally sets on me. It can't be much longer I don't think. I don't know that I could take it much longer if it is.

But I guess what is there to do but wait? Waste away my time, never knowing which way to go. I'd like to make some progress at least, in one direction or another, darkness or light, rather than just standing still as I feel I am now. It would ease my thoughts

significantly to know I was traveling in *any* direction.

So I guess this is me, trying desperately to find my way.

Thanks: To the bands that wrote the records that have kept me sane (by my standards): Senses Fail, Bring Me The Horizon, Passion Pit, Periphery, and Thursday.

[The Darkness \(mix\)](#) (link opens in Spotify)

1. “Jabberwocky” by Fear Before
2. “From 24C” by The Matches
3. “Time’s Arrow” by Thursday
4. “You Were The Cancer” by Thursday
5. “Slaughterhouse-Five” by Bury Your Dead
6. “Crooked Young” by Bring Me The Horizon
7. “Blacklist” by Bring Me The Horizon
8. “Antivist” by Bring Me The Horizon
9. “Not Getting Any Better (Designer Drugs Main Mix)” by Innerpartysystem
10. “Between The Mountains And The Sea” by Senses Fail
11. “Love Has Led Us Astray” by Thursday
12. “Blackout” by Senses Fail
13. “The Sharpest Lives” by My Chemical Romance
14. “Bite My Tongue (feat. Oli Sykes)” by You Me At Six
15. “The Truth About Heaven” by Armor For Sleep
16. “These Four Words” by The Maine

*“Courage is to walk through the valley of our
thought, and in the desert that you fear, sit down
with open ears.”*

– James “Buddy” Nielsen



Photo by Jordan Thompson

Faded



R. Gabriel

Faded

For weeks you've recited your I love you's.
I'd like to think you thought I couldn't tell.
I know now that you were just paying your
dues.

I know that loving me was truly hell.
"We accept the love we think we deserve,"
you're in denial you deserve me, true.
But you must've graded me on a curve,
and discounted all the blood that I drew.
In my eyes, you were the one to settle –
unsettling that I believed you knew:
the precious ring, wrapped tightly in metal
keeping me on Earth, grounding us, was you.
"We're not meant to be" – a coward's way out.
Just say you don't love me. Without a doubt.



Photo by Jordan Thompson

The Darkness Mounting



The Darkness Mounting

Why does it seem you're at peace with
leaving?

Only you, my dearest, can inform me.

Am I missing the trick to your calming?

Colon, bracket – control+C, control+V.

Unsought lessons in absolute darkness,
my eyes are straining to see the blackboard.

Chalk outline circling love now lifeless.

Doctors detailing cures I can't afford.

I tell myself I want what's best for you.

You *should* be selfish, and you *can* be free.

I want to be selfless, I really do.

But no one taught me how I could just *be*.

Following your divine script toward the
“light,”

the stage directions read Exit Stage “Right.”



Everything we had
you threw away for
the promise
of better days.

Photo by Jordan Thompson

The "Enlightenment"



The “Enlightenment”

Their company of thieves gone belly up,
they’re selling all their assets, all they’ve got.
Borrowing on credit from their great club,
too big to fail, and yet, too big to not.

This product they spread around
underground,

an oh so empty love fashioned daily,
from ingredients like they’ve never found,
masterfully faked, but reflecting palely.

Redefining your “love” definition
as one in which the total persons’ three –
as: you, and I, and God: perfect Christians;
new requirements I may never meet.

“I can’t love you if you don’t love Him, see?”
But it’s not Him who says you can’t love me.

Let me love you.



Photo by Jordan Thompson

I: Causeway

*“Anyone could see the road that they walk on is
paved in gold.”*

– Fastball’s “The Way”

It’s an unseasonably mild afternoon two weeks later that the truck surfaces. Two Garland County sheriffs come upon an abandoned vehicle on the side of an unmaintained road. It matches the description of a truck reported missing some 50 miles southwest of town.

When Helena’s family asks what was recovered from the truck, the answer is apathetic: several Arby’s cups, a broken cell phone, and an empty jewelry box.

Her mother went on the news that night, declaring that the search was not over, despite the local sheriff’s earnest advisement. She would never stop searching for her daughter. Throughout, her husband stood behind, a consoling hand on her shoulder, a jaded look on his face.

“What if she doesn’t want to be found?” he’d asked her that morning. A swift smack in the face had put him in his place.

Sitting in a patched green lawn chair just under the lip of the roof, and behind a sheet of rain spilling over clogged gutters, I watch him lean out the driver’s side window of a new pickup. It’s dark red and lifted a good 3 feet off the ground, in stark contrast to the tan Ford Escort we used to go out in. If I didn’t already know better, I’d say he was compensating for something.

“Hop in,” he says, though what it is exactly that makes him think I will, well I’m sure I have no idea.

“I haven’t got all day, Helen.”

“What do you want?”

“Get in and I’ll tell you.”

“Just tell me.”

“Just get in.”

Now, I know better than to do this to

myself. In fact, I just sold the gold necklace he gave me for our 3rd anniversary. The \$240 cash in the wooden box under my bed says “move on.” But maybe I should just hear him out... If not for curiosity’s sake, then for closure’s sake.

“Hey,” he says softly as I climb in the passenger seat.

“Wait, hold on a second.” I hop back out of the truck, leaving a slightly confused Elliot to wait on me. I swing open the front door of the house and run up the stairs to my room, briefly noticing the clock on the microwave which says mom won’t be home for another hour.

My room is a landscape of mountains of clothes, some dirty, some clean, but no strategy to tell the two apart. I struggle to scale the one nearest my bed, and then grab the small wooden box from underneath.

In my rush back down the stairs, I nearly trip and throw the box’s contents down the hallway. On my way out the door, I pass the

mirror in the entryway.

I take a few steps back and look into my own eyes, which return the wild stare.

What are you doing, Helena?

I don't know. Does it matter?

Shouldn't you think of the conse—

Stop. Just stop. You want this.

I want this.

My dark hair in a huge disarray, thanks to the humidity. But that's nothing new. I try to press it down, but it fights to stay a mess, and I decide it's not worth the battle.

When I return to the truck, Ellie's face is poised in anticipation of some great reveal. I don't like seeing him so anxious. It makes me anxious. So rather than stab him with the sharpened tip of my tongue, I opt for the less piercing, maybe more anticipated, "Where are we going?"

"Does it matter? I just thought we'd take a drive and talk."

"No, I suppose it doesn't" I say, sliding the box discreetly under my seat.

The rain around us pelts the red summer dust, knocking loose little puffs of dirt with each drop. The cab is silent for a while, and I stare aimlessly out the window, cheek pressed against the cool, streaked glass. The streetlamps are growing further and further apart as they approach the edge of town and the surrounding gloom of an afternoon thunderstorm. Their yellow glows fragment into a hundred chaotic rays, magnified in each droplet of rain strewn across the windshield. The drops, of course, bend and break at random, but I find I am still able to predict each new course with alarming accuracy.

The passing sign proclaiming “Now Leaving Harker Heights, See You Soon!” marks the end of the grace period I’ve offered him.

“What is it, Elliot?” His face is still tight with anticipation for words that apparently aren’t coming out without a fight. The dark outlines of his brown eyes tend to make people think he’s gone days without sleep, which I

suppose would be flattering – if the thought of me had kept him up at night or whatever, but I know better than that. It’s just make-up.

“I just wanted to talk,” he says.

“Well, yeah, I figured as much.”

“Will you let me talk?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Look, I know that you think what I did was wrong.”

“Are you afraid to say it? What *you* did?”

“No, I thought I might spare you the reminder.”

I laugh. “As if. Everyday alone is a reminder.”

“I know that you think what I did was wrong.”

“Well that’s a curious choice of words too. Do *you* think what you did was wrong?”

“No. Fucking. Way. Am I dreaming? Ellie? Tell me I’m dreaming.”

He scrambles to wrap the comforter

around Kaitlin and himself, but it's much too twisted to cut the scene.

"Helena, wait!" He chases me out the door.

"For what! Do you have some sort of revelatory explanation?"

"Helena, I can explain."

"So do it!"

"I... I..."

"For god sakes Ellie, I don't have time for this. And I don't have time for a cheating asshole like you." It takes everything I have not to scream at him. But I don't want to hurt him like he's just hurt me. I don't want to stoop to his level. I am the victim.

"Of course I think what I did was wrong! But you have to understand, it felt right at the time."

"You're a dog."

"But I know it was a mistake, believe me."

I almost do, believe him as I look into his eyes. The cracks in his irises are new. They seem to emulate the dry, fissured landscape around us. They say he's broken like me.

"It *was* a mistake," he clarifies. But whether to convince me or himself, it's hard to tell.

"Well I don't think it was a mistake."

"What do you mean? Of course you do."

"Of course I do? No. In fact, I actually think it's great, what you did. It showed me we weren't gonna make it, before I wasted another minute with you."

"Come on, Helena."

"Don't. Say my name." Because I imagine him calling out to Kaitlin the same way. Maybe even Katie for short... "Take me home."

"Take me back," he says.

"What! No!" Goshdammit. I should've known. I did know! I knew he'd come crawling back to me. And I thought of exactly what I'd do when he did. I won't consider it for even a

second. He'll drown in his misery before I'll throw him a life ring. "Is this what this is? You're trying to win me back?"

"Well, you're quite the prize, Helena." He delivers this line without the customary sexual tension usually reserved for something so corny. I can tell he's trying, he's so new at it.

"I'm not the one who messed up," I counter.

"I know that. Believe me, I know that. You did everything right."

"So why would I want you back?" Yes, why *do* you want him back, Helena? Fuck, I don't know. I don't? I don't want him back.

"I'll be better. *We'll* be better." I reach for the box beneath my seat, intending to show him the money he gave me, but I think better of it. *I am the victim, remember?*

Instead I reply, "You know, I saw her yesterday." The awkward silence that follows seems to indicate this part wasn't in his rehearsal.

"Oh yeah?... And?"

“Don’t sound so excited.”

“Helena, I’m no—”

“—Two months ago I’d have wanted to strangle her... But today, all I could think was how good a couple you two’d make. The two-faced whore.”

“Helen—”

“No. She’s a slut and you’re an asshole.”

“Relax. No one is disagreeing with you.”

“But if you weren’t so intent on not fighting with me, you would.”

“If the question is whether or not she’s a whore, the answer is no. I would not agree. She’s a respectable and intelligent girl.”

“Good to know. And if the question is whether you’re an asshole?”

“Then the answer is yes. I’m an asshole.”

Silence grips the truck like a great, green snake, constricting so tight I can’t breathe. I want to believe him. I want to hate him. I want to forgive him. I want to hurt him.

Ellie twists a knob on the steering wheel and the windshield wipers slow to a drag,

tossing the remaining drizzle lazily left and right.

After some time, Ellie adds, “You know, I don’t talk to her anymore.”

“I bet.”

“Seriously, I haven’t heard from her in weeks.”

“Well, you know there’s a simple way to prove that.” I reach for his phone that’s been sitting on the dashboard undisturbed and undisturbing since we left. But as I do, Ellie swings his arm out to grab it.

The truck swings to the right. Ellie hard-presses the brakes and the wheels drag across the pavement. He reaches his arm across to hold me in my seat as the front bumper crashes into the guard rail at the edge of the bridge we’d been crossing.

The right front wheel hops it and the truck jerks to a stop.

Airbags consider stirring, but after brief deliberation return sluggishly to their hibernation.

“Oh my god, are you okay!” Ellie shouts.

The windshield matches his dark, shattered eyes reflected in it.

The phone now lies on the floorboard just beneath my feet and I stomp on it, screaming. “Let me out! Let me out, let me out, let me out!”

With my door pinned shut from the outside, I claw my way across him and out the driver side door, forgetting that we’re 5 feet off the ground and scraping my palms in an effort to break the resulting fall. I collect my footing and start running as far and as fast as I can. I think he is too stunned to move, but before long I can hear him coming. Faster than he ever has before. And I remember the times we used to move together. Fast, then slow. Hard, then soft. Lust, then love.

I feel his arms wrap around me and I can’t run anymore and I collapse to the ground and he holds me and I don’t fight anymore. I don’t want to run anymore.

And we just sit there, bridge towering

over and around us like the walls I've been building – defenseless against the elements. And I can feel his body trembling and I don't fight the sobs anymore.

I think, together, we had everything. Even when we had nothing.

"I never asked for any of this," I say, looking into his eyes. The cracks in them are gone. The rain has come.

"I know, sweetie. I know," he says, rocking me in his arms. After nearly 15 minutes of this, he finally begins to loosen his grip around me. He soon lifts me up and we head slowly toward the truck.

I veer to the right and lift myself up on the guard rail, hanging on to a support beam next to me. He still watches me carefully as he surveys the truck damage.

"Front axel's bent. It's done for," he relays.

I turn around and extend a hand to him. I gently graze the mole on his ring finger as I pull him up. Our hands trade places as he

holds the beam while I hold him.

Beneath us is a sight to behold.

The rain from the storm rushes between the pillars of the bridge and just above the waterline a thick fog floats stagnant. What was likely a riverbed as dry as my mouth mere hours ago is now a serpent slithering through the valley. It moves with a desperation only rivaled by the breaths trying to escape my lungs.

A hundred feelings are circling my head, and every time I reach out to grab one, I nearly lose my footing and fall in. Excitement! Lust! Love? It's hard to make out much in the storm of emotions, but I think one thing's for certain: fear is not among them.

“Would you jump with me?” I ask.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I flip it open to a text from mom. “where are you??” Ellie reads over my shoulder.

“I don't want to go back, E.”

“I would jump with you.”

A breeze arises and he holds me as I

stretch out my arms, letting the wind blow through my veins... It soon passes, but thankfully the feeling of being free from my ties does not.

“So let’s do it,” I say.

“What? Jump?”

“Let’s keep going. Let’s not go back.”

“What about school?”

“What about it?”

“Uh... Don’t we *have* to go back?”


“We don’t *have* to do anything.”

“No?”

“No. We can just keep going. We’ve come this far. Don’t turn back now.”

I don’t wait for a sensible response. I grab his hand tight and we start up the road.

And I’m pleased to find I don’t have to pull.



The difference between
existing and living
sits at the edge of caring,
and not giving a shit.

Photo by Jordan Thompson

Resistance



R. K. Kasper

Resistance

I'm writing this truthfully so you'll see,
though I may look content, it's just a face.
Fogged through your 2D glasses reflecting –
acting in black comedy, I'm misplaced.
I'd ask that you quit hiding behind Him.
You should realize that I deserve the truth.
The gaze you look upon me with so dim,
you're drowning in the fountain of youth.
I don't want to be just another ex,
a blessing that got you where you are now.
You're beautifully full of it lips signed checks
overdrawn. I cashed more than He'd/you'd
allow.

“Believe” and “deceive” writ poet in mind:
a perfect rhyme scheme *every fucking time*.

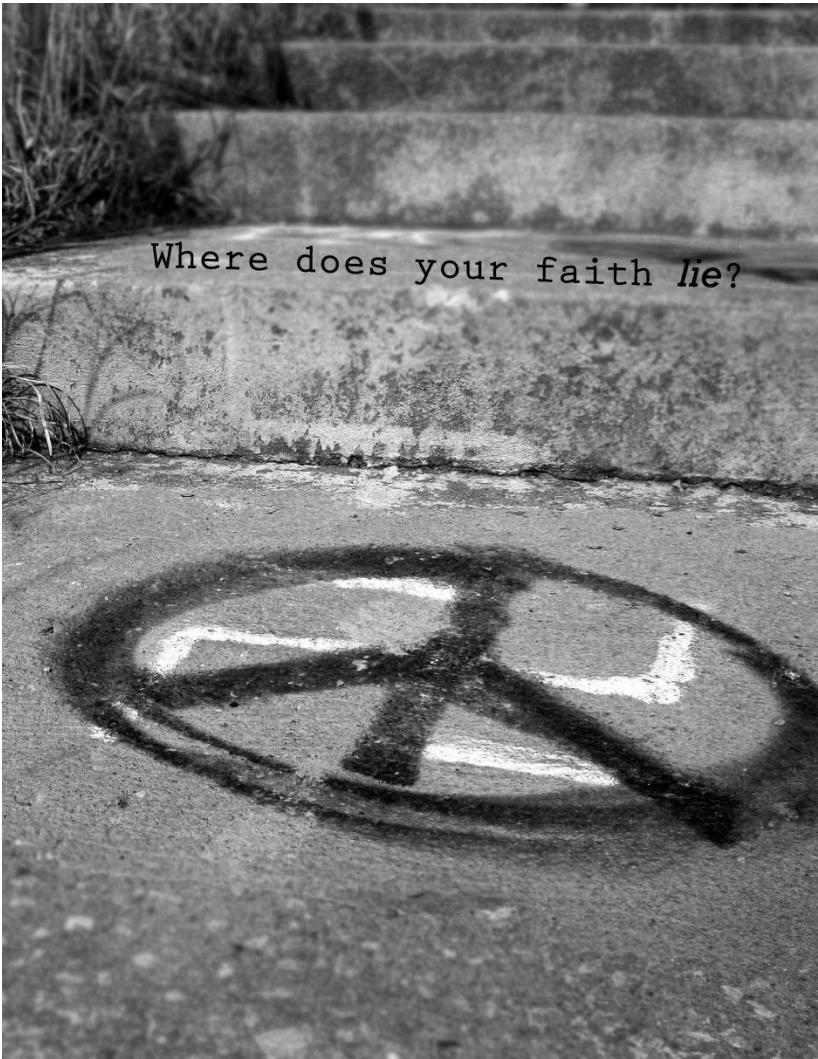
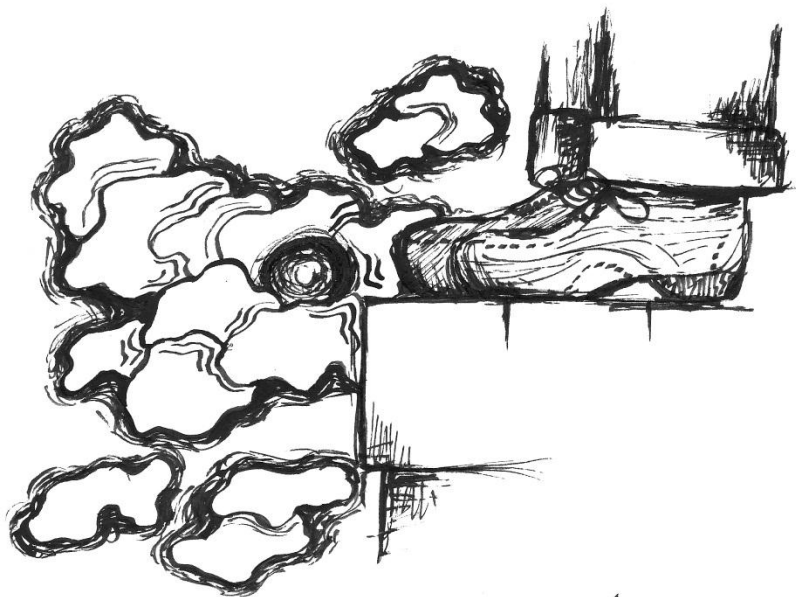


Photo by Jordan Thompson

20/20 Revisions



20/20 Revisions

Fleeting thoughts to which you wouldn't
commit,

but I thought what I thought was right –
what's wrong?

It can't be that the words you wrote were *it* –
meaning “I love you, but we don't belong.”

I lose in a win-win situation,

when I simply can't see the good in things.

Brick by broken brick our falling foundation
weakened in the search for spiritual fame.

Could “stepping back” have brought us each
closer?

Would things be different if I weren't so in
love

with a flaw some being – full disclosure,
simply human, Earth to down, not above?

“Math problems” they're called, so what did I
envision?

So aptly titled – god damn division.

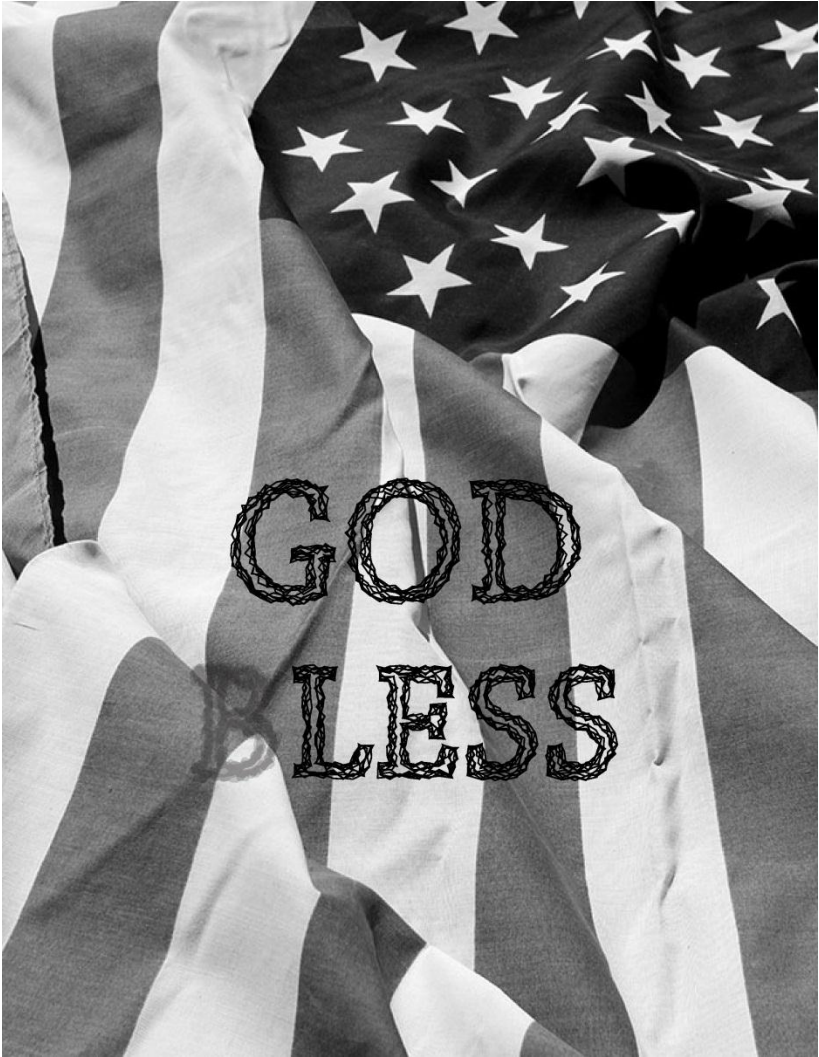
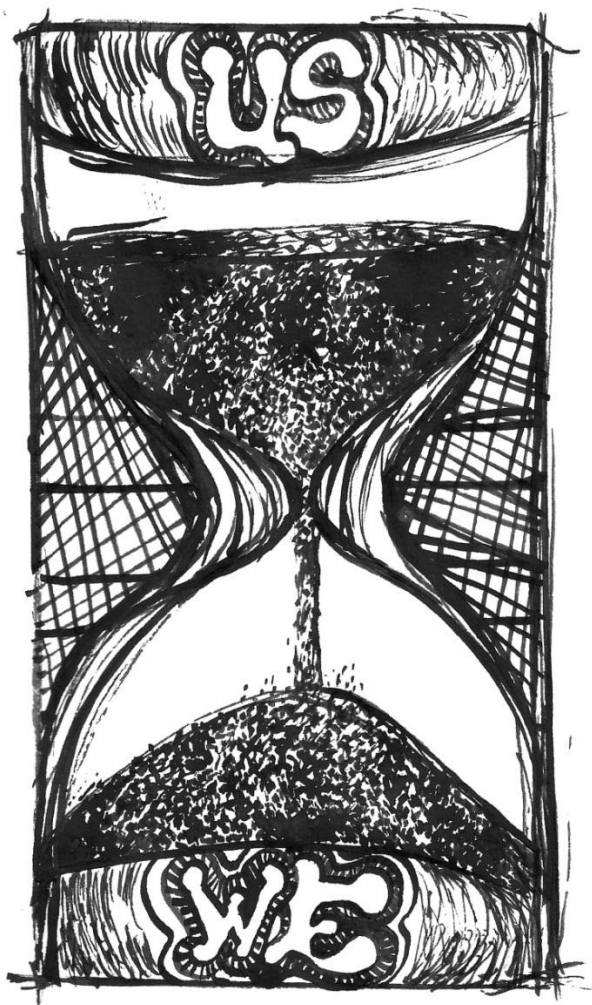


Photo by Jordan Thompson

Reinvention



M. J. G. 2002

Reinvention

I don't even know who you are, do you?
Can you explain what the hell's happening?
And can you see what you're putting me
through?

You've still got me, but I guess it depends...
Depends on whether, are you gone to stay?
Or whether you've simply wandered from
here,

from me, from love, from life. Don't run away.

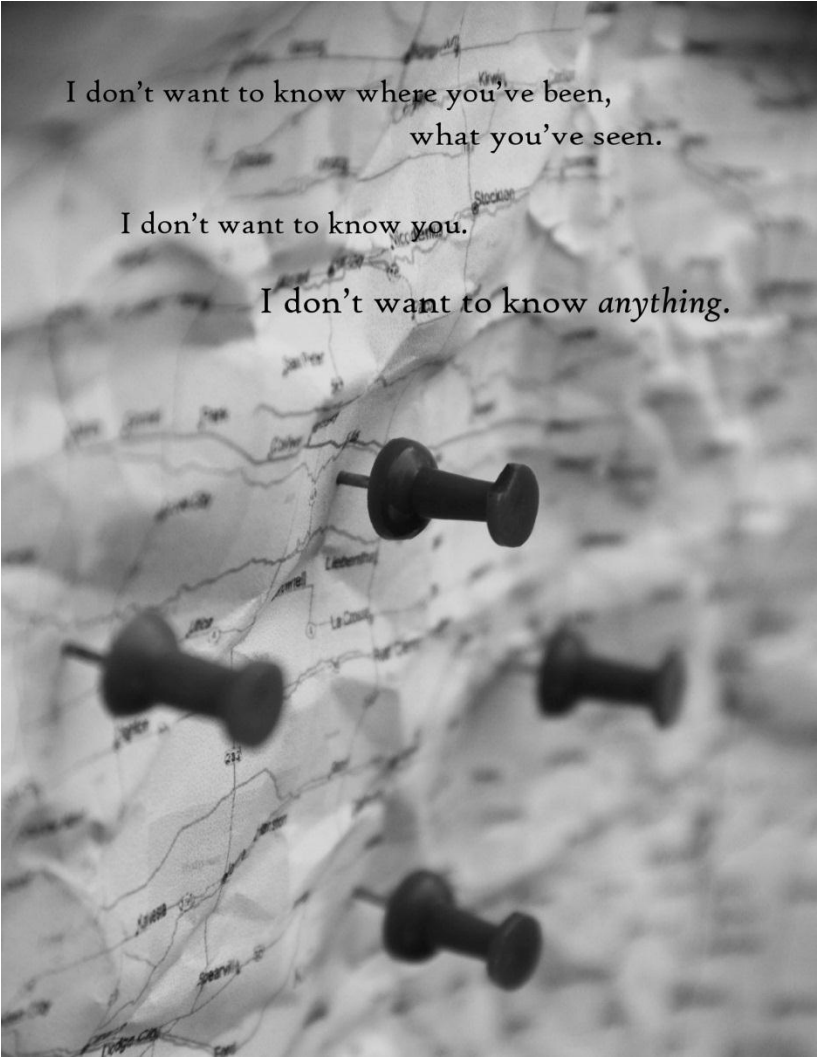
I'm afraid that the end of times is near.

It's the end of us and the end of we.

The only comfort as you disappear
will be knowing that if we were still "we,"
we wouldn't be – you're not *you*, it's so clear.

Meeting you's a sour introduction.

Just let me be. I pray for abduction.



I don't want to know where you've been,
what you've seen.

I don't want to know you.

I don't want to know *anything*.

Photo by Jordan Thompson

II: Past Tense

I suppose I live for the drama – for that remarkable moment when everything is going oh so wrong, each and every sin feels oh so right.

I walk into the room, wallpapered in sky blue and just as blinding. She sits on the rug, toy train tracks weaving in and around her legs, buildings dispersed throughout the little town. Some tall, some small, *all* run-down and blanketed in a thick coat of graffiti.

Long locks of hair, black and curly fall wild and thick across her shoulders, bare of any other cover than a couple navy blue spaghetti straps, each hopelessly twisted around themselves.

The tension in the room is tangible, like guitar string. I want to sit down and play each woe like a note. The tune would be one of melancholy – something I heard on the radio

on the way home from Milwaukee. I knew not the name or the band, but I remember the notes struck a chord deep within me. It was something about the hurt behind them. They were not complaining. They were simply telling stories of troubles long passed.

Knuckles wrapped tight and white around the steering wheel and foot hard-pressed on the gas, I was trying to leave my troubles behind too.

But they were strapped safe and sound in the passenger seat.

“Hello Elliot.” Her voice is the rising mercury in a thermometer deep within my chest, and I can see her reflected in the window. Streaks on the glass mar her perfect complexion.

She turns to me. Dark purple mascara smeared across her round cheeks. Her eyes, each shaped like a top turned on its side (and composed of just as much disappointment and

potential) are a deep mauve and she fights to crack a smile as I sit next to her.

She lays her head on my shoulder and coaxes my arm around her side. I slide my fingers up under her shirt and across her side before my hand grazes a series of bumps.

“Ow! Goshdammit, Ellie! You’re so inconsiderate!” she screams, pushing me away before jumping up and out of the room. Our bedroom door slams in the distance.

I suppose I am – inconsiderate – having forgotten the remnants of shingles that still blemish her side and back.

I sit still for a long time, watching the sun out the window find the horizon and hide behind it. There’s not a sound, save for the birds, and soon even they cease to converse. I suppose they’ve got nothing left to talk about.

I wonder what they ever talked about in the first place.

In the window now, I face my own reflection. I imagine a small blade in my left hand. The handle is monogrammed “E&H,”

one of my mother-in-law's contributions to the marriage. I use it to trace the veins in my right arm.

The window distorts my face now; at least I think it does. I can hardly tell anymore. My brown eyes shake violently like hurricanes, but calm in the pupils, and my smile has blown crooked.

I plunge the knife between two veins and the smile straightens out.

And I feel once more!

It's a sensation of release, unrivaled since our wedding night. And it lasts about as long.

You see, we had waited.

And God what a long wait it was – eight months and seventeen days. I figured if I can wait, she must be the one. And I suppose in some aspects she *was* the one. The one I'd loved. The one I'd married. The one who'd carried my child.

My pastel fingernails, each filed to a soft curve at the end of a long, skinny bone, slip into the wound. I take special care not to sever

any veins as I pull the skin apart. Beneath it lies a labyrinth of vessels.

I wonder how the blood finds its way.
And how does it know where to go?

Helena could be of assistance here; she's always been good with knots. She takes some sort of special pleasure in undoing them. She used to have me work my twisted magic on her shoelaces every morning. She could then feel accomplished before she even got her shoes on.

I almost call out for her, before thinking better of it. I'm no longer a knot; I've since come undone.

I find a loose vessel and start to pull. It comes easy after a tug or two and before long I think I've extracted nearly six feet.

I toss it playfully around my neck several times and pull it tight. I smile as my Adam's apple grows ripe for the picking.

The doctor said we can try again, tonight if we want. Said that the last four months were just a fluke. Said that everything looks normal now. Said that we shouldn't worry.

If only it were that easy.

"Do you want to try again?" I ask, laying my hand across her thin fingers on the car seat, twisting the silver band round her finger.

"Do *you* want to try again?" she volleys back skillfully. The score remaining love to love.

The air is thin and I roll down the window crank with my other hand in hopes of catching the breath that left with that yearning, unspoken 'til now, question.

She tucks her big, black feathers behind her ears, knowing full well they will not stay.

Naturally, all possibilities are running through my mind. If "everything looks fine" with her, wouldn't that theoretically make *me* the problem? The question proves too self-deprecating to consider, but I suppose there's

only one way to truly know for sure.

“Yes, let’s try again.”

“R-really?” she says, caught off guard by the decidedly assertive decision.

My smile is genuine.

The water rolls down my chest like millions of tears and I turn the shower knob towards warmth. It burns my skin as it cleanses, my chest flushing red. I close my eyes, dreaming of some magnificent world where everyone is friendly and I like it that way.

In reality, the friendliness is beginning to feel insincere. The sorry’s are too often. People don’t *really* care, but it makes them feel good to pretend they do.

But we both know they’re pretending.

A hand on my shoulder causes me to start, but I soon recognize the touch as four sharp fingernails stroke the back of my neck. Of course it’s Helena. Who did I expect?

I turn around and pull her curves flat against me. Her fingernails dig into my back and I gasp. I pull us back into the water, longing to see her dark hair even darker wet.

“Ow!” she cries in my ear, jumping back out from the waterfall. “Too hot!” She makes the executive decision to turn the water cool, and I have to fight my mind for a moment to keep the mood dirty and sexy.

Her fingertips run, ever so gently across my ribs as she bites my lip, *as* gently at first, but it’s not long before I am almost sure I can taste blood. She sucks on it so I don’t have to and I close my eyes, lost in the moment. These moments don’t usually last, and I usually find myself wasting the time I *do* have thinking that they don’t.

Not this time, no. I want to be here, in the moment. Not somewhere in the future where it’s just some hot memory, depressing me.

Suddenly, as if she senses my waning, she bites harder and I gasp some sort of pained

expression which drags into pleasure as her fingers follow the contours of my ear and her tongue slips between my teeth. Her breath is cool and refreshing. It's surprising that these strawberries *are* still so refreshing – she always chews the same gum. Surprising that after some five years together, she can still make me feel this way. Surprising that I'm thinking about any of this while her fingers move further and further south.

Her tongue slides heavy into the back of my mouth. I watch her eyelashes, like dark waves, crashing into me. Her perfect mascara is smeared now as black freckled tears run down her face and stain her pale complexion. They seem to spell, like black ink on white paper, “kiss me, kiss me, kiss me” and that romantic tune plays in my head, as I do. “The Cure” they called themselves, and they were. Still are.

Her tongue never recoils, only driving deeper and deeper into my throat until my shallow breaths become increasingly sporadic

and I no longer feel like I'm fighting a winning battle to catch them.

As she teases her fingernails across the small of my back, I imagine myself choking on her tongue, heavy as death now. And on the shower wall, I think I can see it, my shadow, being chased away by the brightening light.

Helena does not recognize me dead in her arms.

I'd like to say I'm still in love with her. I'd like to feel like I'm not lying every time I return a half-hearted "I love you too." I'd like to think she knows me well enough to see through the façade I put on each and every morning.

It's an uncomfortable feeling to hear those words, "I love you," and think "if you really loved me, you'd notice I've changed."

But what would I say to her if she said "you've changed"? I'd like to tell her

“you’re right dear.”

“I wasn’t asking for you to tell me I’m right. I know I’m right.” She kisses me on the cheek and smiles, lifting one foot like a giddy teenage girl in some John Hughes movie.

“You don’t have to *try* to be cute,” I tell her. I’d like to say I still find her little Helenisms charming. I’d like to say I haven’t just conditioned myself to be so sweet. I’d like to say I feel something besides resentment growing inside me as I watch this 30 year-young starlet don her polite schoolgirl costume, complete with pigtails.

“I wasn’t trying to be cute,” she says, frowning. She turns away, kicking her foot up again as she does and her plaid skirt catches short. And do I feel turned on or?

She throws herself down on the bed, offering me a bit of a free show.

I respectfully reject.

“What, you don’t find me attractive anymore?” Her tone dips drastically.

“I’m just not in the mood.” Well, that wasn’t a *blatant* lie.

She flattens down the skirt, ashamedly. “You know, I’ve only got a couple of days left.”

Yes, I’m aware, I nod.

“And I’d like to spend them with you,” she says.

“You know *I* don’t have any days left. You have to go back to work, but I never got to leave,” I say, pouring myself a paltry glass of vodka from our crystal ware. I seat myself in the armchair across from the bed.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” she says. “Lazy day after lazy day, trying to occupy myself to keep the thoughts away.”

“So, how did you do it?” I ask, genuinely interested.

“Do what?”

“Keep the thoughts away?”

“I didn’t.”

I recognize this opportunity. I didn’t ever expect it to come, but I recognize it here and now. We could have a seriously solemn

conversation. For once, I could say what's truly on my mind. I could get this leech off my chest. I do believe it's been sucking away at my life for far too long.

"I know what you mean," I say, sympathizing; feeling, for once, like my sympathies are justified and sincere. "I can't stop thinking what it would have been like to meet the little guy. To look into his eyes, so full of h—"

"Please Ellie, I don't want to think about it. I don't want to talk about it." Her forehead drops into her hands, and the sobs come like a flash flood.

I stare in utter disbelief for a few moments. I suppose I should've expected this. It's all I've ever gotten, when pursuing all I've ever wanted.

I consider sitting down next to her, wrapping my arms around her, just like I always have.

I consider simply walking out the door and driving away and never looking back.

I feel sick to my stomach having even considered it, and I vomit out the window of my car, having actually done it.

I guess I just finally reached my breaking point.

I guess this is the end.

Oh, quit being so dramatic, Elliot. This is the end of nothing, I think. Helena has always told me I have “a flair for the dramatic.” But I always found myself thinking, if there were a time for the dramatic, that time is now. It’s always been.

And so I drive around for a long time, not really knowing where I’m going.

There’s the elementary school where I was first repelled by women. There’s the movie theater where I first found women were the object of my erotic urges. There’s the motel where I first used a woman satisfy those urges. Women were never mature enough for me. I fell in with Helena, because that’s just what people do. They fall together, and lift each other back up. But this time I’ve fallen

farther than she can reach, I think.

As each memory passes, I'm becoming increasingly conscious of the money I'm wasting on gas. I finally settle on the restaurant in which I first met Helena. I was just out of college, working as a waiter, looking to save my way out of town. She was a church-going, family girl, flying on the wings of angels.

"Just me," I answer the waitress who hasn't yet asked me how many.

We maneuver past crowded tables and past the booth to my left where Helena sat with her family that sunny Sunday afternoon, and on second thought, I wouldn't mind sitting in that specific booth, thank you.

The cocktails provide nothing more than something to sip on and I'm becoming increasingly conscious of the money I'm wasting chasing a buzz that might never come.

I remember the day I first served Helena. It was something about those eyes, and I know

that's what everyone says, but it really was. *What* I actually saw in them that made them different from any other eyes I'd ever seen, I don't know. Nothing really, they were just eyes. Irises and pupils, nothing special at all. I feel dull just thinking about them. Dammit, what did I ever see in her? There must have been something.

I try to immerse myself in that moment long ago, desperately searching for any inkling of interest left to cling on to.

"Nothing for me, thanks," she'd said, almost certainly watching her figure.

It must have been the testosterone in me. She must have just been hot.

And back then, that must have just been enough.

From the window in my booth, I can see my car clearly outside. It's sitting right at the edge of the light from the restaurant's windows and the darkness surrounding.

I can also make out a hooded figure in the dark on the driver's side. He raises his

hand and brings down whatever's heavy in it to a silent crash, drowned out by the bubbly chatter surrounding me. I don't know what he thinks he'll find – I've got nothing left to lose.

After what seems like a solid hour, but which could surely have only have been a minute or two, a maroon 4-door cruises into the parking lot and spooks him. He dematerializes into the shadows as quickly as he'd appeared, leaving the door ajar.

I can clearly make out the blinking red light on my dashboard, still feigning security, but in reality, just a blinking red light and nothing more. Its cover's been blown.

When I return home (some four hours since having left in such a hurry), there is an unfamiliar car parked in the drive. An SUV, rather. The dirt-caked sides seem to indicate an owner not self-conscious about looks.

I park in the road across the way and walk casually alongside the tan/dark brown vehicle, taking a moment to peer inside the driver's window. Several parking tickets

populate the console, and the ashtray is overflowing with half-smoked menthols.

I find nothing else to pique my interest and so I head in the front door.

“Elliot! Didn’t you get my text?!” Helena sits up, startled on the couch. The man next to her seems to have been knocked off-balance by sudden movement and so takes a moment to regain his composure before heading towards me with outstretched hand.

“Hello, I’m Jeffrey-Jeff,” he stammers out. My palm in the air convinces him to return to his seat, no introductions necessary.

“Don’t bother coming home tonight,” I read aloud from my phone.

“Elliot, I think you should—”

“Go?” I finish for Helena. “This is my house.”

“Helen, I uh, really should get going,” the man says, again beginning to rise.

“No, I insist,” I interject for her. I can tell he’s beginning to feel quite uncomfortable.

I like it that way. *I’m* in control.

“So, how’s he fare in the sheets? You know, compared to me,” I ask anyone who’d care to answer.

“Ellie! No! We are *not* sleeping together. I would never—”

“I know, I know. You would never violate the sanctity of our marriage, *right?*”

Helena is at a loss for words. I approach her and raise my hand next to her face, the diamond of my wedding ring nearly touching her cheek. “*Right?!*”

Jeffrey-Jeff jumps up in front of her.


“Elliot, that’s enough! I think you should go.”

I had returned fully intending to patch things up, like we always did. I’d apologize for leaving, explain how strung out I’ve been. She would understand, she’s been strung out too, she’d say.

But his *god damned* breath. It reeks of strawberries.

Author's note: the song referenced in the shower scene is The Cure's "The Kiss" from their 1987 release *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me*.

“If you love me so much then why’d you let me go?”
– Scott Mescudi

A black and white aerial photograph of a city grid, likely Los Angeles, showing a dense network of streets and buildings. The sky is filled with heavy, dramatic clouds. The text is centered over the image.

I FEEL LIKE
I'VE BEEN CHEATED
ON WITH
GOD.

Photo by Jordan Thompson

The Darkness: Temptation



The Darkness: Temptation

He took you from me, it's not hard to see
why I'd be bitter: this religious view.

But I'm not, that's not true. I just *can't* be.

I don't blame Him, no, and I don't blame you.

Please just close your eyes and come back to
me.

The "light" blinding as "salvation" you earn.

Ignorance is bliss, awareness kills me.

Grab my hand and come with. The dark
doesn't burn.

I still love and care, want the best for you
and Maturity from pain does breed. So,

I think I can finally say it true:

"Things could be better." See? Just like we
agreed.

Forgetting you has been no easy task.

I want you back. Is that too much to ask?

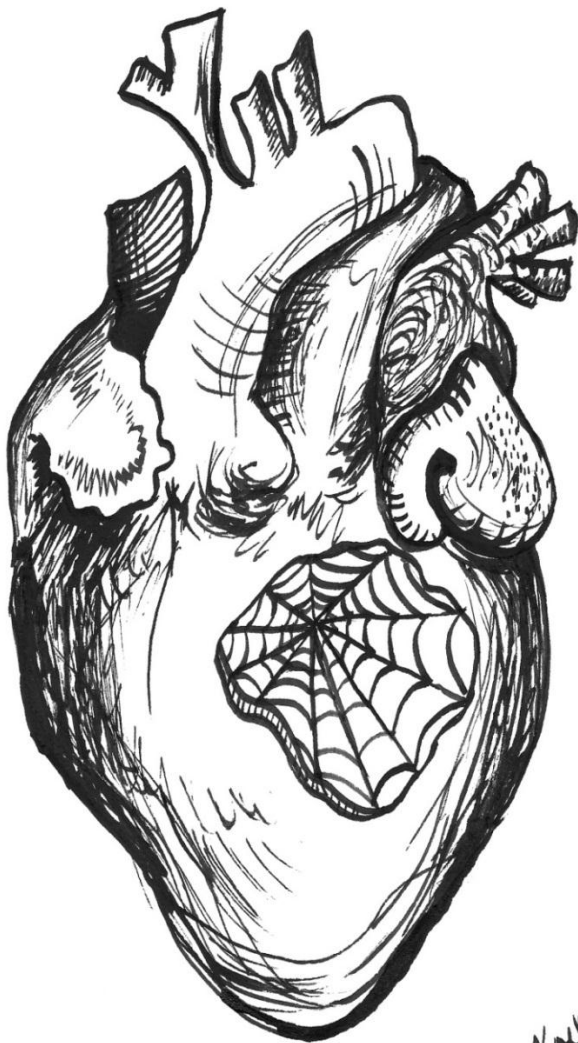
An aerial, black and white photograph of a dense urban landscape. The image shows a grid of streets, numerous buildings of varying heights, and a prominent highway interchange in the upper left. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font with a drop shadow.

These memories are suicide
and standing at the edge,

I'm ready to fall.

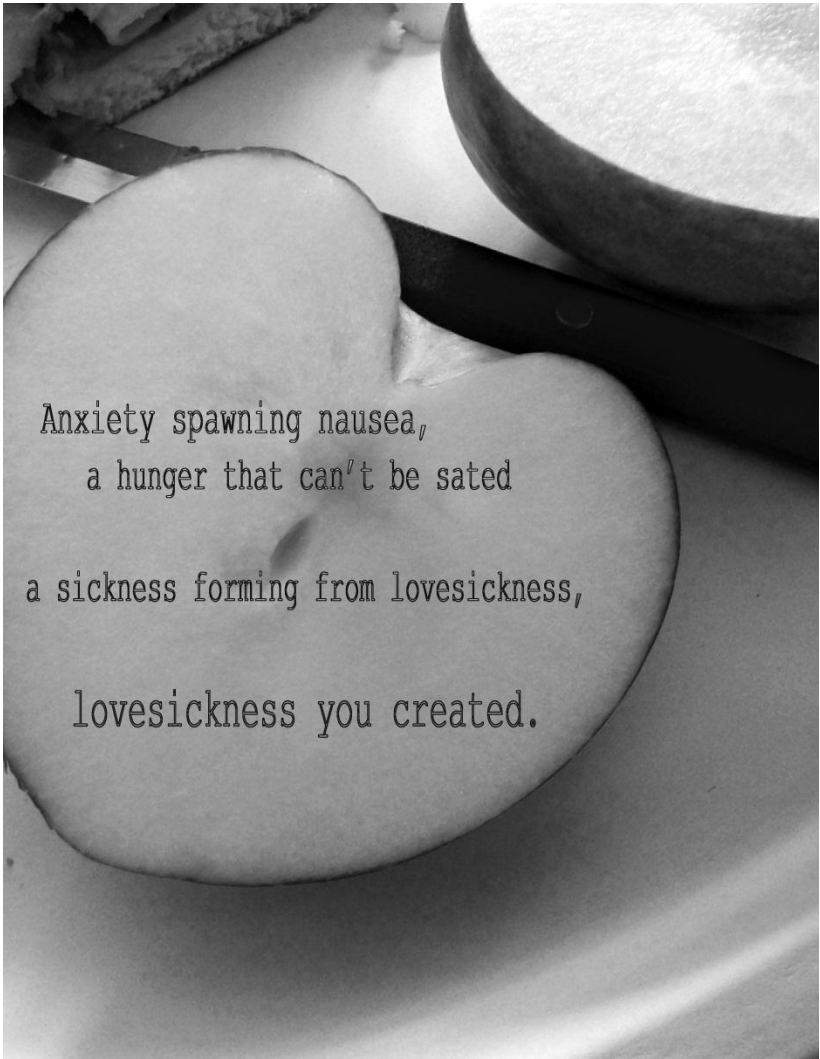
Photo by Jordan Thompson

The Darkness: Denial



The Darkness: Denial

You said it yourself, “God give me the
strength
to do what is right, not what is easy” –
never considering it could be *both*;
Shit, you’re right. It really does sound cheesy.
See, these memories are so full shit.
I only remember the best of us.
That we were ever *off*, I won’t admit.
See, memories are *fucked*, just like my trust.
When we were solid, me you’d never hurt.
Though we both know that’s not really right,
no.
Did you stick my heart? The blood on my
shirt,
it’s impossible to wash out, you know.
But I guess “Let go and let God,” they say.
I just don’t think *God* would do this today.



Anxiety spawning nausea,
a hunger that can't be sated
a sickness forming from lovesickness,
lovesickness you created.

Photo by Jordan Thompson

Return To Routine



Return To Routine

“Move on,” they tell me. “It’s all you can do.”
They don’t tell me how. What do they expect?
I *can’t* be the only one who’s seen this through,
so why do I feel like some test subject?
Everyone around me, each relation
observing me, all stepping carefully
like some unusual situation.
I need a return to some normalcy.
Instead of giving my fuel for the fire,
I need someone to show me this isn’t hell.
I feel like this death is on some level higher.
Most days it feels like it, so I can’t tell.
All this “fiction” is uncomfortably true,
and by now I’m *sick* of rhyming with “you.”



Don't get me wrong,
the inspiration
is **nice.** ;)

Photo by Jordan Thompson

III: An Imperfect Study

Introduction:

As I walk across the crowded sidewalks, I can feel them around me, always pushing closer, suffocating me. I feel as though I'll never catch my breath, always panting in the muggy air, contaminated by the rot and decay of their meals that will never fully decompose. They surround me and I can't see around them. But they keep moving, so I guess it doesn't bother me so much.

I can see my feet, step after step, crack after crack in the sidewalk. I used to be superstitious about stepping on the cracks until one of *them* talked some sense into me. "That'll be the day," they said. Which I took sarcastically to mean: destiny is not mine to control. It didn't make any more sense as they repeated it. I look up to the sky and see the planets scattered throughout and I think, if I could only reach them, I would line them up and things would be different. But like

everything else around me, they seem to be just out of range. I try to tell *them* about the planets – *they* could reach them, but *they* just don't seem to understand.

There's no way to walk but straight ahead. No destination other than what I originally set out to do, which come to think of it, I can't remember what that was... No veering off the path either. Sometimes I feel like I have no control over the direction I'm headed, but then I don't think that's truly true. Something about free will versus destiny... I don't want to get into it now because I don't know what I believe. I only know what I know. And what I know is that I could turn back if I wanted to, but then what would be the point? There's no progress in that. I don't often feel like I'm making any progress anyway. So I just keep walking this same direction because that's what *they're* all doing.

We're all walking this same direction. We've always walked this same direction – for as long as I can remember at least, which is

something like 8 months I guess.

Now I know what you're thinking, and the answer is yes. I *have* considered stepping off the safety of the sidewalk many times, stepping into the road and seeing where it leads. I've even done it on more than one occasion.

But the road is busy with other people going other directions, and if you don't know where you're going like me, you'll end up lost and in the same pitiable pothole. And then I have to crawl back up to the sidewalk to keep moving. And I'm right back where I started. Because the sidewalk is just a moving point in time – nothing else about it ever changes.

The surrounding forests are something nice to look at, but situated right in the middle of the sidewalk as I am, they too are always just out of reach. I once found a daisy growing in a crease in the speckled cement, and I plucked it from the sidewalk and carried it with me – and for a long time too. But like everything else on the sidewalk eventually

does, it dried up and the petals fell off and the seeds fell out. And then the planets presented me with water, too late to save the dying flower, but just in time to sow the remaining seeds. And not knowing any better, I did water them and each seed lying on the ground grew rapidly into another one of *them*.

I'm sure by now you're wondering who *they* are, and unfortunately for us both, I don't have a definitive answer. But I'll tell you what I do know.

Physical Characteristics:

They look a lot like me in ways. Same crooked smile, same gangly limbs, same wrinkled skin. Same empty look in their eyes – like you can tell there's nothing behind them. It's like looking into a mirror opposite another mirror and I can stand in the middle and see myself reflected in the infinite. And I get lost in it and come out dizzy and confused.

Four dirty, foot-long claws adorn each of four weedy fingers sprouting from hands the

size of dinner plates, and they're filed sharp from grinding across the pavement day in and day out. Always walking.

And their snouts protrude much farther than my own. They use them to scavenge the path for anything of value, which to them is anything they can feed on, and they snort and sniff and breathe their foul breath. The plants at the edge of the path, usually protected by some sort of mystical barrier, wilt in the presence of said breath and the color drains from the air around it. And in that way, I can see the chill they exhale, in the blacks and the grays and the whites.

Their mouths are caves of razor-sharp stalactite and stalagmite teeth throatily scattered throughout. Instead of uniform lines though, the bottom of the mouth resembles a pit of spikes and there's no end to them in sight. A thick layer of acidic saliva coats the floor, always dripping from the ceiling and it burns my skin when they spit. The back of the cave is not visible from the outside, only

inexorable darkness. I can only imagine it's as deep as those dark eyes.

Their chest is about as big around as my own and their ribs protrude sharply, though they do not seem to be starving by any means. Their thick fur seems to be plenty warm too, as they remain lively even in the most detrimental conditions. I'll delve further into what I mean by “detrimental conditions” in the following sections.

Behavior:

Their teeth are much sharper than my own and they tear into the flesh of those who cross my path. I do not walk alone. You may not be able to see them, these creatures; no, not like I can, but they are ever-present around me. You can only feel their bite in the words that I speak. I'm fine, thanks for asking.

They vocalize in broken English, but each seems to only know a phrase or two. And they repeat them endlessly. “I will bring you flowers,” one says. “And I will do for you most

anything you want me to,” adds another.

“When you wake up in the darkness, I will put my arms around you,” claims a third. And I know that they speak the truth, no matter how much I wish they didn't. You see, it's not in their nature to deceive. I guess they just don't see the benefits of it – they only speak in fact, and because of that there are never miscommunications among them.

They are a savage bunch. I do think they're just trying to have fun, roughhousing with me, but I have a hard time explaining to them that I am not so accustomed to the violence. I have a hard time explaining it because I can feel the bruises and scars for days on end, but there's no physical evidence to document or show. They'd simply have to take my word for it – if only they could understand.

The Cyanerates, as I've come to call them (in a combination of some more offending terms), are comforting in a way, I guess, with their constant presence. I can

always count on them to be around. Figures it would be these creatures I have a chip on my shoulder for that would've made their homes within me. It's just the way of the world I guess.

They are a loyal bunch, despite my continued efforts to bring them harm. Again, I think they just don't understand my motives or actions. I take a little pill every morning with a little "10" imprint and a little score to split it (though I never do, split it). And for whatever reason, the pill mildly inhibits some of the creatures. They must struggle to keep up on the path, and their constant blows to me soften and become less constant. But they still hurt. They knock the wind out of me, leave my stomach warped and aching. I used to swing back, but the Cyanerates are agile, always jumping just out of arm's reach. I always ended up just wearing myself out, and it's for that reason that I've mostly stopped trying.

Diet:

Feeding time is the most unpleasant of all and when their ferocity gets to be most unbearable. They feed on misery, you see. They are hungriest when the sun goes down, and I can feel their hunger deep within myself. It makes me nauseous so that I can't even eat to ease my own hunger. And theirs is never sated, the demand for misery only growing as the supply does.

They enjoy their meals but do not savor them. They simply can't get enough. Sometimes I feel like some sort of sadomasochist for keeping them around, but then I remember it's not exactly my choice to make. For alone, I am mostly powerless against them. Their females lurk under trapdoors in the dark and when I step too close they wrap their claws around my legs and pull me in. They drag me deeper and deeper into their holes, where the stale air fills my lungs heavy and it gets so that I can't pull

myself out because it's so heavy and I'm so weak from the hunger. And just when I think I've reached the bottom, another Cyanerate, long forgotten by me cries out in the dark and pulls me into an adjoining tunnel which goes and goes for what seems like forever and it's so dark so that we could just be making loops and I'd never know. And then sometimes I can't dig myself out in the morning light, so that I just stay there for days.

I have since tried to stop presenting them with so much available food, naively thinking that without it they may begin to weaken and starve. They're resilient little fuckers though. They've built up plenty of fat reserve to surely outlast me. I've tried freezing them out – sat still so long and cold that I've become numb, thinking maybe they too would slow and sometime maybe just close their eyes and stop. But they never do. They're always walking. Always hunting. Always picking clean whatever they find, leaving just some bare exoskeleton of a man – empty inside. It is

in these most dismal situations that the Cyanerates seem to flourish and multiply.

Mating Habits (Speculated):

Their numbers are ever-increasing, and it's for this reason that I've considered various forms of population control. Yes, there have been times when I've truly considered offing them in some way... forcing them off the sidewalk into oncoming traffic or something. But they can sense my hostility, and so they caress the back of my neck and hiss/whisper in my ear. "I want you." "I need you." "I love you." And I remember that I've never wanted to kill anything in my life. I think I simply haven't got it in me. Or I've got a soft spot for them. Shit, I don't know anymore.

I've also heard you can drown them, though to be honest I haven't got around to trying. I think I've got a better plan.

Though I've yet to successfully implement it, I believe the key to leading a happy existence, despite the Cyanerates, is to

find somebody else whose creatures might entertain my own. Man, woman, it doesn't matter, so long as our creatures get along.

I can imagine it clearly: their claws intertwining with one another, and the scratching noise is drowned out as Chopin's Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 9, No. 2 plays on the loudspeaker. Mine might whisper: "Something in the way you move attracts me like no other lover" in the other's ear. And theirs might reply: "Somewhere in your smile, you know, that I don't need no other lover," as their feet align. And they move together, swaying back and forth, limbs mirroring one another in perfect pirouette, softly and smoothly to the music. A tear forms in the pit of mine's eye that has so long been dry and I understand then that this is all he's ever wanted, all he's ever needed. I no longer despise him, because I understand now what it must have been like to travel day in and day out down life's ever-looping, haunted path, alone. I no longer fear him.

Conclusion:

They arrived when you left, saying the things you used to say. They moved in to take the then vacant place in my bed and they've called it home ever since. I'm learning to embrace them, but I will not waste a minute sulking if when I finally do come to terms with them, a new owner has them evicted and moves in to take their place. And then I might be able to quit guessing. And take control.

It's time I take control...

Author's notes: The creature's quote in the "Introduction" section alludes to The Crickets' 1957 single "That'll Be The Day." The creatures' quotes in the "Behavior" section allude to Johnny Cash's 1970 single "Cause I Love You." The creatures' quotes in the "Mating Habits (Speculated)" section allude to Elvis Presley's 1956 single "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" and The Beatles' 1969 single "Something" respectively.

*It's not the people with Cyanerates that scare me.
It's the people without.*

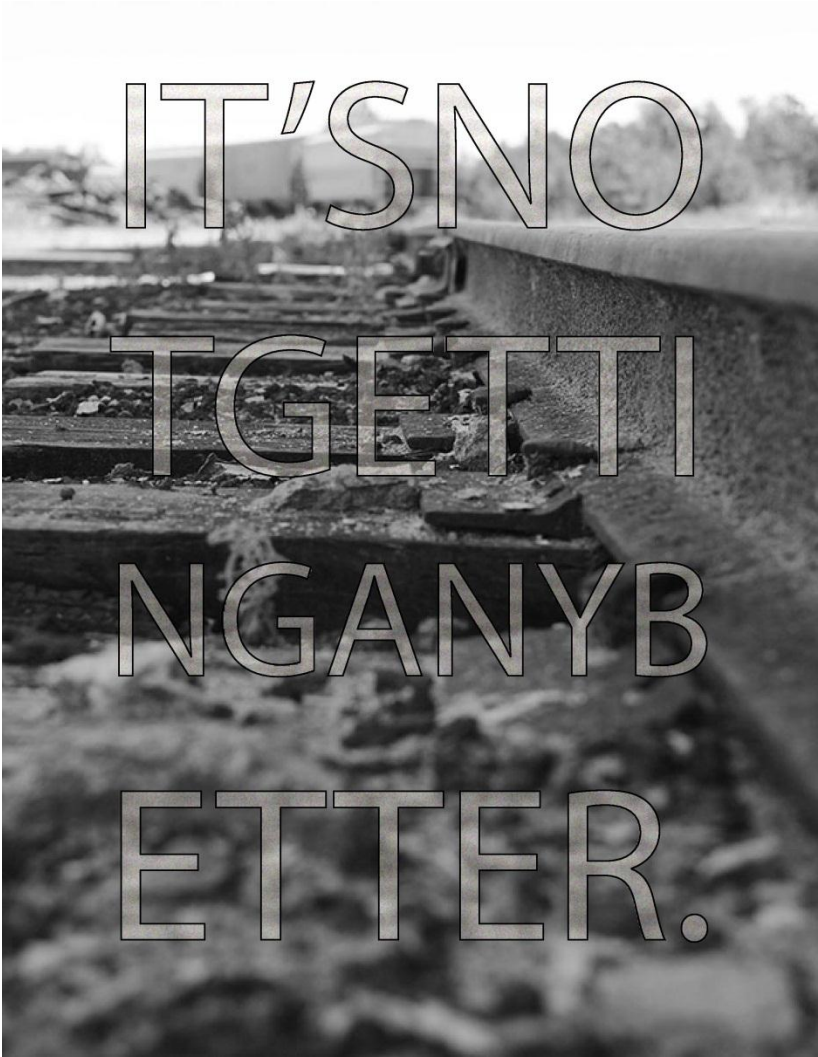


Photo by Jordan Thompson

The Flood (Denial, Pt. 2)



The Flood (Denial, Pt. 2)

I know the tears you keep in that locket,
become so heavy now, dragging you down.
Let it go, let the sadness pour toxic.
Watch in the waves as all your torments
drown.

See, I've been building in all my free time
a boat that will take us far away.
We'll escape the sadness, fleeing – a crime.
Make our getaway, sailing towards brighter
days.

The ghosts crying “STAY,” so convincingly.
Outlaws of life's prescribed drag, we'll be.
There's no time for the dead while we're still
living,
a just burial, give them to the sea.
It's a lie – “better to've loved and lost.”
Can't we be the exceptions, just this once?



IN MY DREAMS
WE'RE STILL TOGETHER
AND IF I COULD I WOULD
NEVER WAKE UP.

Photo by Jordan Thompson

The Darkness

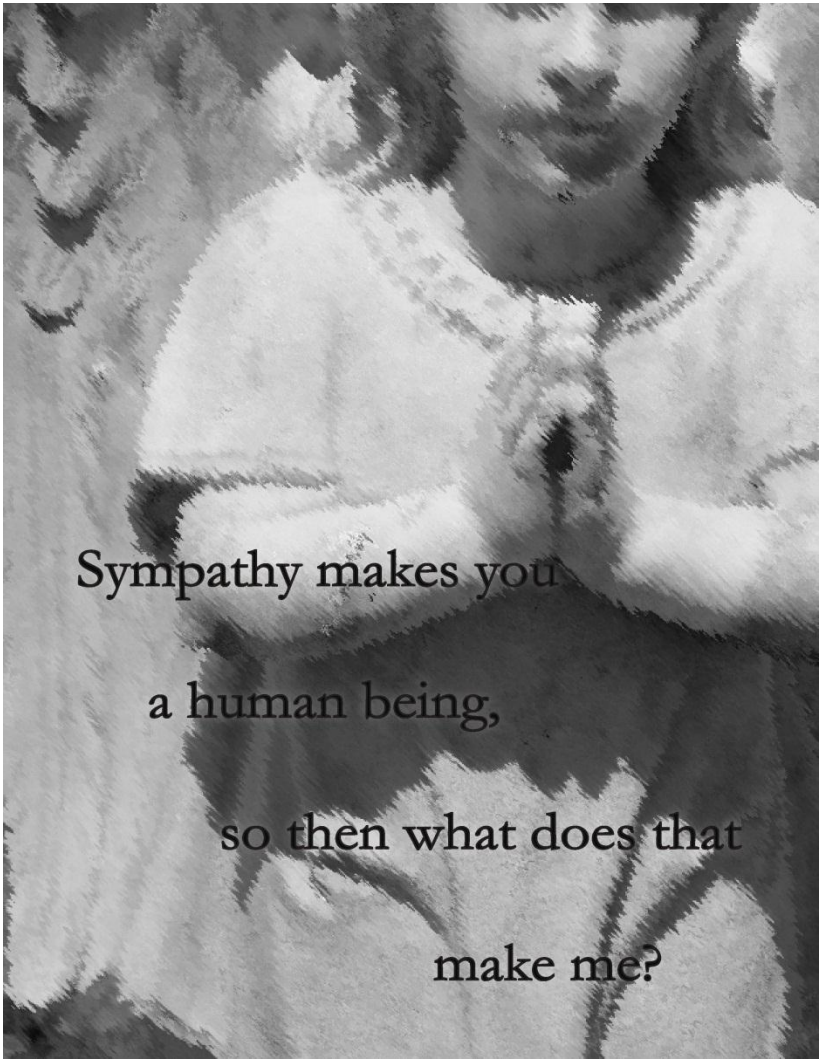


The Darkness

Oceans apart from the girl next door
and the waves are colder this December.
Collecting shattered dreams as they wash
 ashore,
the fire of love now drowned to ember.
You were my eyes toward heartbreak in the
 world,
when I could still see things would come full
 circle.

But now I'm at the end of a dead end.
My heart's beaten and bruised Royal Purple.
You can't possibly know how you haunt me;
can't count on one hand the times that I've
 cried.

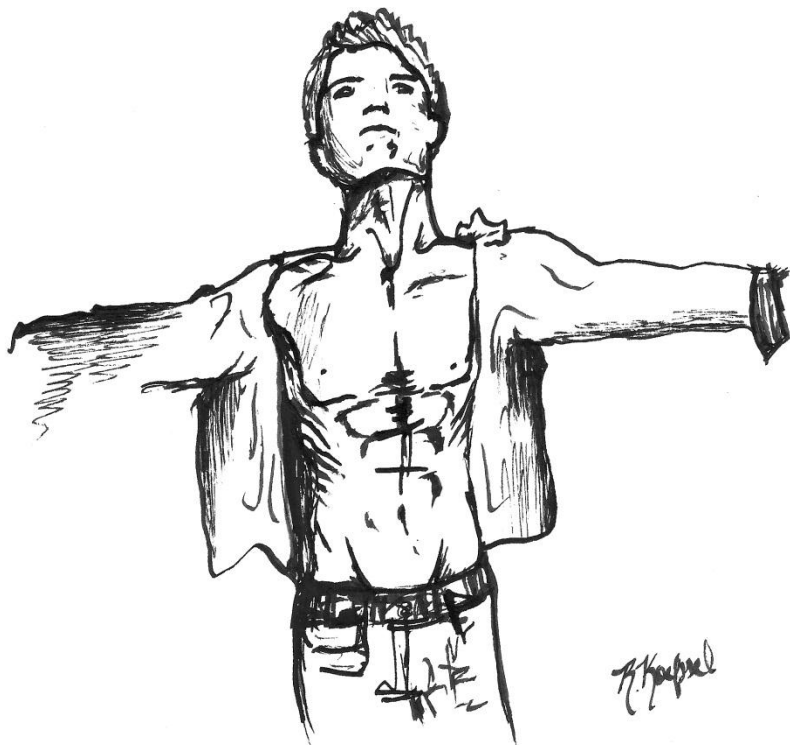
Because physically my heart's still beating,
but inside I believe I've already died.
Your comedown won't be beautiful like you –
it'll be honest – a notion you're new to.



Sympathy makes you
a human being,
so then what does that
make me?

Photo by Jordan Thompson

The End.



The End.

So, I get it that you're above all this.

I'm just saying that *I* could use your help.

Didn't they teach you somewhere in life's bliss
that not everything is about yourself?

By the time you get to understanding,
by the time you see – when my words get
through,

that life is simply put *more* demanding,
it will likely be too late for you.

I shouldn't keep waiting around to see,
though it's with open arms that I extend;

I pray that one day you'll come back to me.

This is just to say, I have faith in The End.

One tear as I go is all I'll allow.

I guess it's time I say goodbye,

for now...

Epilogue

The title, tailored early on in the project, was written with the intention of providing room for a sequel, “Darkness Rising,” though at this time, a potential release date is unforeseeable.

“Find what you love and let the rest go.”

– James “Buddy” Nielsen

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End.