

I am on the bus. I am just born. I am fucking it all up again. I am outside the station, grabbing the handle of the glass door and using my right hand because my left hand is holding a guitar case. I have \$100; the ticket is \$40. I don't drink. \$60 was rich when I drank. Drinking is something to do, and smoking... No. I start smoking again, before that, at the bus station, after buying my ticket. I'm outside trying not to make eye contact. I'm scared of you. You notice me. I am not big. But I look like I might have a gun, or a knife. It's a gun. I look closer, I was wrong about you being scary, but still, I have a gun. Off the bus and at the bar, I smoke enough cigarettes that any one of them isn't significant enough to bother me. I get drunk but it's been years and I don't feel comfortable drunk anymore and I'm not smiling, and some of the more extrospective ones notice I'm alone. Looking around, there are more people with guitars and cigarettes than without, and all of their stories are sad, and I start trying to figure out how to distinguish myself. Finally, it's with stupidity that I stand above them, the other sad ones. Stupidity because I choose this. I want nothing that will make me happy more than nothing. Maybe not this town. Maybe not any. Maybe I can run for mayor of the bus. I'll take a longer trip next time. It takes a long time to make a name for yourself on the bus and most everyone is a felon and can't vote. Or is it only the felons that vote on the bus? Either way, it's a tough campaign. All the old-timers agree, it's the most gruesome fight they've seen. I keep a flask in my inside coat pocket that I drink from when no one is looking. It's whiskey, and it smells, and I have a drink to celebrate the new administration; I lost by a landslide. I grow huge and walk home, or, back to the south where no one asks me in. I don't blame them, I said I was leaving. I keep thinking

somewhere else, somewhere else. It's late and I've been in town a few hours again and I'm sad and I wish that I could travel in time so I sit down outside and catch my reflection in the window of McDonalds and laugh at myself thirty years before that, crossing the street, sure of it all.

I don't like to feel stranded, no one is coming, and I can't just sit here. The gun is digging into my waist, it's cold outside, and I'm supposed to be doing something more important than shivering. A new friend agrees to take me to a cheap motel. He even pays for it. And a few bucks for a trip home. I take what I can get and don't tell him I'm never going home. I just want to be warm. It's hard to find anywhere, so we drive thirty miles in my favorite direction. The sun falls over the horizon and I plead for it to stop and my friend looks worried as we pull into the parking lot and he hands me a couple twenties without saying anything before pulling away. I remember what he thinks of me. It's been since yesterday that I've eaten. Far away isn't what I meant to do, but once I met you and you weren't a stranger, all I could do was want to get away.

Inside and the bed is stained, but I know how to look for bed bugs. I open the flask and take a swig, and the death that it brings starts its slow march back. I hope I don't end up spending a lot of time in the hospital. But the cigarettes are better than ever, and I lay back and pull the cover of smoke and whiskey over my head and hope to regain something. Why else would I be here?

All night long I drink and smoke and write bullshit words on pieces of paper and feel important and pace the floor, and if only they could see me like this! Now! Listen to these words! Wait! I'll sing them. But the woman in the room next to me is hiring and

asks me if I need a job, which I most certainly do, so she gives me one and I get back to work before passing out, briefly stopping the clock for just a moment.

The next day the clock is running twice as fast and my flask is empty, and I don't have any cigarettes. The march of death is unaffected by my poverty induced sobriety, and fourteen people have had my job since I left it last night. The woman next door has her room all week, but she isn't interested in former employees, no matter how hard working, so I gather my guitar and my gun and together we start walking back to town. I think about robbing someone with my gun but that could get me killed early, and I'm not the robbing kind. If people wouldn't take getting mugged so personally. I don't like to be hated. Whiskey is \$7 and cigarettes are about the same. I need somewhere to go, and, shit, I still haven't eaten. I remember the twenties given to me by my new friend. Every store on the street is a liquor store so I pick the first one and head inside to re-stock. It's amazing how much better everything seems almost immediately. My guitar is heavy, and nobody asks me to play which I think is bullshit because if only they would hear me and tell me to be safe. Halfway back to town and every car that passes me honks as if I'm going the wrong way, which is the right way for me so, fuck them.

Back in town and I don't want to take my eyes off anyone, so I walk backwards carrying my guitar. I stop for a shot, and it's good, so I pull out my guitar and stick a lit cigarette into the strings at the top and start singing. Fourteen others sit down next to me and do the same, only less crooked, and with more faith in God. Thirteen get signed by the majors and one OD's, leaving me alone before the second verse. Somewhere, something happened. It was gradual, my change, which makes it all the more

permanent. I mourn for a second before packing up my guitar. Who am I kidding?  
Mediocrity is a burden. I try to be a better failure, but I just can't commit.

Of course, put a little money in my pocket and everything is changed. The bus station blows away with my unpunched ticket and I'm a private investigator...Stiff Armadillo, PI. And my bladder is always full. There I am, hiding on the side of the road, waiting. The devil gives me a guitar small enough to play in the truck. But playing guitar on surveillance is like watching a movie on a plane, I can't concentrate. Music, phone, pissing in a jug, and thirty-minute video entries. Whose side am I on anyway? When I was younger, there was no question. I was on the side of the right. And then I got older and worked in the psych ward, washed dishes, rode the bus, slept on the stairs, bought drugs, went undercover, lived without electricity, ate beans cold from the can, prayed by the river, and found too many sides to choose from. Plan on things never going as planned and they always will. Now that everyone has turned from God, maybe there's room at the altar. Every once in a while, I feel halfway decent and want someone to thank. BUT I CAN'T, because I don't want to pray to a God who knows I don't believe in him, or that I'm pissed at him. So, I start. "Thank you, God..." And then stop, because he knows I'm being insincere.

The footage from my camera is blurry and I talk too much. I've got to get the shot. I wouldn't be doing this if they weren't trying to starve me. Well, not me, but the kids. I don't eat very much. So, I hide behind a windshield cover and play the mercenary. Every once in a while, I can convince myself that what I do is meaningful, but it isn't. I want to get locked in an old mansion on a rainy night and try to figure out

whodunnit, but instead, I'm locked inside my car, or digging through your trash, finding liquor bottles and embarrassing receipts. My hair thins, the further I go, and I wonder why it's so easy for me to be all these things I'm not. I just can't get into the Aristotelian habit. I close my eyes and pray each time that this will be the one. But the check bounces and I swear. The kids are still hungry and I'm out of a job. This PI life is shit. But what? The bus station again? No, this time, a motorcycle. The motion is light. There's love at the end of the line. And my family doesn't get hurt. But I start to play it out and I'm sad for them because I think they want me around, but sometimes I don't know why, and I fear it's a convenience, which is absurd because I'm about as convenient as a punch in the face.

Every star is her sun and I am in love with one. It takes 12,000,000,000,000 years but it's worth it. Her planet orbits two stars and I love to watch them set, holding hands with my love. I ask her what I should be, and she tells me I already am. But I get anxious about Being and Time and suddenly I'm falling through space at the speed of light and it takes four years to make it back to earth before I need something to do. I'd start a revolution if I thought it would help but folks are categorically confused. Nobody knows themselves and the distractions are more and more numerous. Who am I kidding? I just want to be liked; however, I assume from the silence, that I am not. To be is to what? Not to exist, that is something on its own. Everything that describes it misses the mark. What thinks? I read Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus, Sarte, and an article by Ernesto Che Guevarra on what he thinks were his early mistakes in the

agricultural diversification of Cuba shortly after the revolution; forsaking cane, for the sake of it...

The phone rings and I'm back in the truck wearing a baseball cap with an American flag on it. I'm parked at a church by a graveyard full of former parishioners who I imagine filling the sanctuary to overflow. The faith of the old-timers inspires the living. The truck breaks down and I ride in a tow truck back to the nearest town. I rent a car that smells like smoke and has a greasy steering wheel. The brakes squeal, so I take it back and the agent tells me her boss is an asshole, that he won't let her go to the doctor. I care so she gives me a deal on a new rental, a big black one, one that isn't broken down. It has a greasy steering wheel and smells like prom. Recently I've reduced by a large majority the amount of people I'm willing to care about. It used to be all of them. It isn't anymore; a couple of them I was surprised to see go.

I decide to see a movie, so I drive to the mall. It's abandoned. My school friend is there with his mom, floating by the shuttered frozen orange juice stand, and I ask him what he's doing. Dumb question. I'm too excited. Of course, they're shopping. He doesn't like me very much. The stores are all closed and mold grows on damp floors outside shops where I spent my school years sneaking peaks at nudie mags and smoking cigarettes at the arcade. I'm in and out of the past. The movie theater has a few seats left that haven't been torn out and there's some popcorn in the popper. The Coke is flat, and the movie is Rodney Dangerfield's "Back to School." I brush the cracked ceiling out of my chair and sit down to watch the movie. Margaret is there and we kiss the entire movie. We see the same movie three times in a week, and I can't

quite get used to the texture of her tongue, so strong and searching. I tell her we need to break up. She cries and I feel bad. The movie ends and starts again. I'm in the lobby, the Coke machine is making a funny noise and popcorn pops in the machine. I head into the theater and find my seat. Margaret is there. I'm stuck. Shit.

Looping back around I come to my backyard, thinking about breathing and how unnecessary it is to think about, but controllable, unlike the heart beating which has no manual override. Because life goes on. Automatic. Suddenly Margaret is gone, and I leave the mall, stepping over rotted wood and broken signage and make my way back to the rental car. I hate a greasy steering wheel.

Today is no different except my mind is blank. It's someone else's turn and I'm waiting for a check in the mail. I called the dog "good" a couple weeks ago and ever since he's been making me look like a fool. In the morning I stand with him in the yard and we wait, for God knows what, until he does his business. Back inside and he sits in my lap. God damnit. He used to be an outside dog, but he figured out how to get under the house and out of the fence and started terrorizing the neighborhood so now he's an inside bastard, terrorizing me. Still, he barks at strangers and at the end of the day, that's why he works here.

The sun, the sun, so bright, warm. We may be too close to look behind our own but look up at night and you can see behind thousands. I walk around the back of the sun and there's a dumpster with employees smoking cigarettes and standing in puddles of trash juice. My side hurts. My goddamn side. I keep a bottle of pain pills in my pocket. I always take one too many. There's two left. I usually take four. This is one of those

days. I leave the back of the store and make my way down the street. How did I get here? I think of David Byrne. This is not my beautiful life. But it is. It is. And it was written in the great book before the first spin. And I change nothing. Every turn. And why should I? I wonder if between runs there's a great ball where we laugh like Gods at the game of being human.

But illness. Illness is a trick. Some say all experience is equal. Pain and pleasure. I'm working on it but I'd still rather laugh than throw up. Whenever I'm sick I try to separate the mind from the body. I look hardest for a part of me that is unaffected by the feelings of sickness and draw it forward. Looking for the soul is easier when you are sick because it stands out more -- being that it can't get sick.

I come to the corner and sit down at the bus stop. The bus appears and I climb on. There are two people in the back and the driver. The rest of the bus is empty. I climb out on the roof and ride the rest of the way home. The bus drops me off in front of my house and the kids are calling me from the back yard. The bus pulls away and I walk around back. The boy opens the gate and the dog hauls ass by me. I look at the boy, he shrugs. I pick him up and we walk back in the house, the girls following behind. "Where ya been, dad?" I think back. "I don't know kids. Let me get it down on paper and I'll let you know." I sit down at my desk. The wife comes in with coffee. I look up at her. "You've been in here awhile." I open the desk drawer, another bottle of pain pills. I take two more. "I'll be out in a minute, babe, and we'll cook dinner." It's okay, dear, I ordered Chinese."

-Interlude-

June 5, 2019

Inside the tornado, in a chair, by the fire, I sit confidently; the rocks glass in my hand, the fire in the fireplace, and my countenance – evidence of my self- assuredness. My body, though, lies outside the tempest: a chain smoking, alcoholic, cancer patient, that's been called "psychologically unemployable" by the devil himself, and blows spastically in the wind like the shame of a defeated army. I wonder how many days I'm buying with my celibacy - dry days spent watching the young and becoming more and more pre-occupied with death. My castration silent, complete. A shivering wet paper bag of bone and organ. Afraid to be hated. Afraid to be judged. A man wades before me in all of his bloated glory, smoking cigarettes in the surf and scaring the mothers back to to the beach and I want to be him and not me, quietly hiding my mistakes, swimming with my shirt on.

And why do I feel this way? If only I could boast of understanding the quiet march of the triumphant soldier. Knowing only defeat I convince myself I am re- grouping for the next offensive. The others, them, "they," don't seem bothered by it (sure some of them are, I am not the only one hung up on this post, by these strings). The wheel, the blind steps, the last shred of paper skin plucked from my bones, having been long cleaned of their meat. I would say, "The worst of it is..." but it's all bad. I am all bad.

We stand on the seashore, ten years old, in a circle of peers. She waits, smiling, for me to ask. I know she will say yes. Everybody knows. But I am frozen. My back, sun-burned, leans sticky against the tiny beached sail-boat abandoned by its pilot. The kids around us begin to lose patience, some pleading, others scoffing. She peers at me through the blinding white light of the sun. I ask. She says yes. The crowd breathes a sigh of relief and claps me on the back. I ask her if she wants to hold hands and walk down the beach. We do. The crowd leaves us alone, to figure out our new roles. I have no idea how to act. We walk back. I want to take another turn; she wants to get back to her friends. Things get awkward under my grotesque idea of what it means to be together. I have no model for people in love. I think they hold hands.

I have jumped, straight into the abyss, and there's always a thud before off I go, limping in a new direction, battered, a delusional gleam in my eye. Ultimately, I know I will be defeated. But it makes no difference because, for now, I can still put up a decent fight, so I do. But it's not a fight. It's a slippery slide off to the side, a bail-out while the car is still rolling.

We stand in the garden watching Papa. He wants us to get the pumpkin seeds from his car. Six years old, I'm the youngest and I never do anything right. I leap from my place in the dirt and dart toward the old blue Pontiac parked at the top of the driveway, half-way down the hill from the garden. My brother and his friend run past me, reaching the car first before flinging open the passenger side doors and climbing inside. I reach the driver's side door and slide in next to my brother, his friend smiling in the

back seat. A handle sticks out between the two front seats and I grab it tightly, feeling the tension of the entire car in my hands. The button on the end of the lever presses in easily and the car gives a jolt before beginning to roll downhill. I jump out of the driver's side door, leaving the older boys dumfounded and racing toward the street in the now free-wheeling machine. The tire barely misses my foot as I maneuver out of the way of the open door and watch as the car builds speed. Adults from all around suddenly appear and begin running toward us. The car reaches the bottom of the hill and plows through the mailbox, the open driver's side door bends backwards on the hinge and every mother but my own screams helplessly at the melee. I am unsure how to feel. I certainly was proud of my escape, but my mother is angry. My great-grandfather is trying to take the blame. The car has rolled to a stop in the yard across the street. The only damage done is to our mailbox and the driver's side door. The now ghost-white boys run up the hill at me but are stopped in their assault by relieved adults who hug them senselessly. I never figured out why my brother and his friend didn't just jump. Weeks later, Papa would fall out of the broken driver's side door and lose all his teeth on the street, replacing them with false ones. After that, I thought it was funny when he would take them out, close one eye, and pretend to be Popeye the Sailor man.

I don't remember anything else about the garden that year. I imagine it grew but I don't have any memories of fresh produce. The thing I remember most as a kid is eating peanut butter and jelly on toast and drinking chocolate milk while the air conditioner hums comfortingly over the din of cartoon television: my mother at work and my brother

at practice for whichever sport is seasonably appropriate. And Jesus. I am in and out of Jesus the whole time.

Jesus was handed over to me as someone who wouldn't approve of my thoughts. It's hard to live when every thought feels like a crime against God. Going to Hell was something I feared, like I feared booster shots and finger sticks. TO HELL WITH ME! MY THOUGHTS ARE NOT GOOD THOUGHTS. My prayers became obsessive chants.

DEAR GOD, PLEASE DON'T LET ME GO TO HELL.

PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR ALL OF MY SINS.

I LOVE YOU, GOD.

GOODNIGHT.

WAIT!

P.S. PLEASE LET ME DIE OF OLD AGE, GOD.

I LOVE YOU. GOODNIGHT