

# ECHO

A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION



ISSUE 09



# **ECHO**

**A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION**

Echo: A Journal of Creative Nonfiction - October 2019

Cover photo courtesy of Keenan Constance via Pexel

Title text set in Farmhand; body text set in Mrs Eaves OT

All authors retain the right to their work. All work that appears in this journal has been published with the author's permission.

ISSN: 2574-4569 (online)

Want to be published? Submit your work on Submittable via [theparagonjournal.com](http://theparagonjournal.com)

# ECHO

EDITOR IN CHIEF SARA STEVENSON

CONSULTANT AUSTIN SHAY

## ABOUT ECHO

A heart echo test, or an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institution of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's veins to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo for our creative nonfiction journal because we expect the work we publish in our monthly issues to come from the heart. In our issues, we aim to publish the best creative nonfiction that we can find.

We accept creative nonfiction submissions for Echo year round, and we would love to read some of your work!



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Passing Judgement .....	Brian Vlasak
Are We Not Runners? .....	Kyle Cochrun
Moni Baba .....	Ziaul Moid Khan
It's Not True that Gum Stays for Seven Years	
Inside of Your Digestive System .....	Mercury Marvin Sutherland
Changes of the Wind .....	Kayla Branstetter
A Bed Bath on TV .....	K. Uwe Dunn

# PASSING JUDGEMENT

“YOU ARE A DAMNED YET EXTRAORDINARY MAN,” said the disability examiner. He looked like Freud – fitting, given his speciality. Balding, bushy beard, sharp nose. Round spectacles. He was even wearing a grey cardigan, though I cannot remember if it had elbow patches. He was the last step in my Social Security certification process; his appraisal of me had taken about an hour and a half.

“Uh, thanks?”

“No, I mean it. I’ve had so many other people come through here, but the majority of them, they’re not as... well, you’re certainly a unique case.” The doctor finished signing a form, and screwed the cap onto his fountain pen. He removed his spectacles and set them on his polished, wooden desk. He crossed his arms. “You *do* know how sick you are, don’t you?”

It was a fair question. I had submitted more than 500 pages of medical documentation, test results, imaging studies, and letters of corroboration to the Social Security Administration; they all pointed toward the same thing: severe chronic pain, high dosages of medications, and a complex psychiatric history had rendered me ‘permanently and wholly disabled.’ I would never be able to work gainfully – full-time – again. It was time to recalibrate.

With the financial backing of Iowa’s vocational rehab program, I had achieved a baccalaureate in English Literature (Creative Writing), and was accepted into several MFA programs around the country. Even still, what that examiner had said continued to resonate: *You are a damned yet extraordinary man*. At the time, I had understood it as some kind of compliment, a sloppy commentary on my perceived resilience. I have survived the intervening five years since – a stomach bleed; the loss of a quarter of my body mass over a three month span; intractable, that is, irreversible, pain; a substance-induced psychotic break – and that act of survival is indeed an extraordinary feat. Yet, I could not shake the thought I had been damned – doomed to live this life and this pain, to be defined by disability. It is an idea that has dogged me for years, always needling me, pricking my brain: *what did you do to deserve it?*

-

“DO YOU BELIEVE IT?” asked Dr. M-, my psychotherapist. “Do you believe you are damned?”

I was unsure how to answer. The years since that comment had been some of the most difficult of my life. I had moved halfway across the country to attend a graduate school I could not afford, one of the main reasons for that move – a relationship of 3.5 years – had collapsed, and my health had reached a point where every doctor I consulted would say “there is nothing more to be done.” Sensing I was in trouble, I had reached out. That was how I had come to meet Dr. M-.

“Aside from damnation, how else could you explain this... punishment?” I asked.

She smoothed her black pencil skirt. “If you’re damned, you’re being judged. What have you done that would make your punishment, as you called it, appropriate?”

I gnawed my lip. I could feel a lump forming in my throat. I shook my head. My insistence on being punished is not masochism from which ecstasy is derived. I take no pleasure receiving in pain. Rather, it feels correct.

“Do you believe in God?” she asked.

*Ah, a change of topic.* The lump dissipated. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Can you talk more about that?” It was her favorite question.

“Why does it matter?”

“If you are being judged, if you are being punished, someone has to be doing it,” she said. She picked up her water glass and took a sip. I thought it over.

“It would be arrogant of me to say there is no God, just as it would be presumptuous for me to say that there is. I have no evidence either way,” I said.

“So if it’s not God judging and punishing you, who could be damning you?” She situated herself in her black upholstered office chair. The lump in my throat that had dissipated, it returned.

“Me,” I said.

-

GROWING UP, THE HOUSEHOLD BUDGET WAS BEYOND TIGHT. We had used an old black-and-white television with rabbit ears through about 1992. Cable? That did not come to our apartment until my senior year in 1997. It was also during this time I came to resent my parents – my stepfather and Mom – as much as our socioeconomic status. To cope, I invented a *doppelgänger*. He had taken etiquette lessons at 12, and his family held stock in several office-supply companies. In reality, I had taught myself etiquette by reading everything I could about becoming well-mannered. And Mom? Sure, she worked in offices *with* office supplies, but that is as far as it went. Everyone knew my *doppelgänger* was a front – they could tell from my shoes, cheap things which fell apart after a couple months. I dreaded every time my parents took me shopping for clothes, because I knew we would, without fail, end our trip with a new pair of flimsy shoes.

College, though, that was chance to write my own narrative, to break free of the constraints placed upon me through no choice of my own. The exaggerations I had once told became less and less frequent; there was no reason to use them. Through the magic of credit cards, I learned about etiquette, fine wine and food and cigars, the bougie lifestyle – I learned about them, and made them my own. The persona I had once built around myself, that permeable sphere of lies, I had made it my reality. A bit Gatsby-esque, I suppose, creating something out of nothing. I hated that person I had been, and did everything possible to become someone else. Plainly? I faked it ’til I made it.

-

“YOU’RE AVOIDING THE QUESTION AGAIN,” said Dr. M-.

“This is the downside of seeing the same therapist for almost two years,” I said.

“So – what of it?” she pressed. “Why do you feel the need to be punished?”

I plucked at the yellow-orange throw pillow clutched tight to my chest. The clock ticked a minute, and then another. I struggled to formulate an answer. This had become our weekly dance – hard interrogation, awkward silence, a more-than-occasional evasion.

“If you don’t want to talk about this, if you’re not ready, we can talk about something else.”

“No...no,” I said. I set the pillow in my lap, and took a long deep breath.

“What is about yourself that you hate so much?” she asked. Another long period of quiet passed. She sipped from her water glass, and set it back down again without a sound.



I centered my thoughts, mindful of my word choice: “I was a mistake.”

She maintained her poker face. “Were you actually a mistake, or did someone tell you that?”

“Both.” I spread my hands across the pillow; it was warm from being squeezed.

“Can you talk about that?”

I pulled a tissue from a box atop the small coffee table next to the couch.

“My dad,” I began, pausing to wipe my nose, “divorced Mom when I was three, given custody for awhile, maybe six months, while she was in the psych ward.” I fidgeted with the tissue. “At some point, I had done something to upset him. I wish I could remember what it was... I remember his response, though: ‘You were a mistake.’”

“That’s a hard thing to hear, especially for a three year old.” Her expression did not change.

“It is what it is,” I said with a shrug.

“True, but would you tell that to someone? To a child?”

“Of course not.”

“So, why is it acceptable here, to you?”

I knew my visceral response: *it’s not*. To tell anyone, let alone a child, they were a mistake is as heartless as it is damaging. But something deeper prevented me from denouncing the way I, personally, had been treated. “I mean, look – when other people say that same thing, over and over, you start to believe it,” I said. At this, Dr. M– ran her fingers through her hair. I volunteered the answer to her unasked question: “Mom. Partners. The babysitter...”

“Do you truly believe them? Why?”

I twisted the tissue round my finger. “How could they all have been wrong?”

–

WHEN I WAS 20, I was in the depths of one of the blackest depressions of my life. My mind, it hurt – physically ached – like a headache, only centralized deep in my brain. Psychic pain, the pain of memory. I self-harmed, though I could never bring myself to cut. I had no desire to clean up the inevitable mess, to bear scars, to get an infection from a dirty razor. I chose something far cleaner and more sanitary: bone-breaking.

St. Patrick’s Day, 2000: Binghamton, New York; a dive bar. Rachel, my partner, had decided to ditch me, and go home with someone she had just met. I was understandably angry. I went into the men’s washroom, and punched the wall three times. Interestingly, it was not pain that caused me to stop – everything was numb at first – but the sharp, hollow sound of bones cracking. I think I was more surprised than anything. I stared at my hand. One of the knuckles, my pinky, was depressed. A rush of endorphins flooded my brain. There was no pain. My anger melted; I felt no antipathy toward Rachel or her hook-up. For a few seconds, I forgot where I was. And then the crash, the realization that, yes, I had broken two knuckles in my right hand – a boxer’s fracture. It hurt like hell. Even still, there were no tears, nor was there regret. Instead, a feeling of accomplishment overswept me – even while I had failed as a partner, I had successfully punished myself for that failure. In my estimation, the physical punishment was not only deserved, it *worked*.

My reliance on self-harm only intensified over the next few months. I had found Rachel in a pool of her own watery vomit, overdosed on clonazepam. She survived, but was institutionalized

halfway across the country. At that point, I believed my failure was no longer limited to my relationships; rather, it had compromised my ability to be present for someone in need. Even as I recognized that her mental illness was not my fault, it was my inability to help her when she had been most desperate that led me to the point of emotional immobilization, of despair. That paralysis, it led to judgement, which inevitably delivered me to punishment. A cycle of self-hatred had been established. As the weeks progressed, I injured myself more and more often. What had once been an occasional outlet – perhaps twice a month – ballooned into a daily habit. The experience had evolved, too. I needed the pain as much as I needed the rush, a distressing development. There were many times I rubbed the side of my hand along the blue-painted plaster of my bedroom, imagining the impact, weeping. As much as I fought the desire to harm myself, the moments I had experienced that summer almost always ended in the same fashion: shame toward my blossoming addiction, and pounding the wall a few times to help me forget about it. I knew the toll it was taking on my body, just as I knew my joints needed to heal. I could no longer type, my job as a server working the graveyard shift at a 24-hour diner was difficult at best, and, most notably, the act itself had reached the point of diminishing returns. Despite the compounding issues, I did not seek treatment. Instead, I had decided to try something different, bashing my right wrist against hard edges.

As can happen with addiction issues, it came to a head at work. That sticky August night before everything changed, I went binge-drinking, lost some time, and passed out in my bed. When I awoke the next morning, my wrist was swollen, purple, angry. I remember being concerned, not because I had hurt myself – that was to be expected – but because I had hurt myself *so badly*. I taped my wrist and took some Advil, but it still throbbed.

The diner was slammed that night. There were two of us serving, and the manager was in the kitchen, assisting the cooks. Our post-midnight crowd of regulars began to thicken. Someone asked for coffee. I needed to grab some creamer. I pressed my palm flat against the kitchen door, just as I had done on countless other occasions. A sickening crunch, slow and sharp and loud, cut through the chatter of the patrons. The coffeecup fell from my hand, and shattered on the floor. The people stopped talking. They stared. I eased my hand back from the door, working my fingers. A series of audible crunches. Nausea. I began to sweat. I could feel my face pale. My ears were ringing. The manager pulled me into the kitchen. Something was wrong, very wrong. The usual payout of euphoric numbness did not flow through me. Clearly, this was not the path to rectification, to forgetting. I needed something different, something more.

–

“I E-MAILED DR. P-. He needs to know about your drinking. You’re taking benzos,” said Dr. M-, referring to my sedatives. I was not surprised; we had discussed my bourbon habit during our last session. My psychiatrist needed to know. “You know how dangerous that is.”

“I saw him last week,” I said without acknowledging her warning.

“He already spoke to you about it, then?”

“No. We spent last week talking about my sleep paralysis.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Is that new, the sleep paralysis?”

“No... I mean, the paralysis alone is not the issue.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve dealt with this for, like, 30 years.”

“How often? Most people experience it two or three times during their lifetime.”

“Monthly. At least.”

She frowned and made a few notes. “Drinking affects sleep, you know.”

“I do not drink during the work week, and yet...” I said, shrugging. I refocused my deflection: “I have had this problem since I was a kid.” Neither of us spoke. I knew she was waiting for me to continue, yet I could not articulate my thoughts. I stared at the floor, its grayness suddenly of immense interest.

“Is it possible someone could have hurt you in your sleep?” she asked after awhile.

“That’s when my babysitter would come in, sure,” I said. Dad had used the same babysitter for years; the fact she had molested me and he had done nothing about it was one of the primary reasons I had cut our biweekly visits out of my life. “Why don’t you like it?” or “She’s cute.” or “You’re lucky.” – those were his responses. To his credit, it was partially true: she was a cute, blonde cheerleader, the type of girl my awkward 13-year-old self would have wanted to date, if dating was a priority. A seemingly popular, older high school cheerleader liked me – is that not every teenage boy’s fantasy? As an adolescent male in our cultural paradigm, I *should* have felt lucky. But I did not. No, every time she would leave my bedroom, every time she kissed my forehead, every time she said “Night, cutie...”, I felt guilty, dirty. Like I had done something bad.

“How did you act?” asked Dr. M-. She clarified: “When it was happening, what would you do?”

“I just lay there. If I got scared and tried to speak, or if I was crying too loud, she’d just ... just smother me. I couldn’t breathe. So I lay there. I *let* her do those things to me.”

“That’s a survival mechanism,” said Dr. M-. She leaned forward. “What would have happened if you had tried to push her away, or said ‘no’?”

I bit my lip. “She would have told my dad I misbehaved.”

“And then you would have been punished, right? Twice – once by her, once by him.”

“But still...” I sniffled a couple of times. “I kind of liked it, doing that stuff. It made me feel special, I guess? I was special to her. She told me that. I mean, God, she would even wipe my eyes for me when she left the room.”

She sat back. “Think about what you just told me. She wiped your tears away.”

“She was just cleaning up,” I said, “taking care of me – that’s all.”

“Is that really all?”

OF COURSE THAT WAS NOT REALLY ALL. Beneath her seemingly benevolent act – the drying of a child’s tears – lay something sinister: displays of negative emotion are wrong. The fact that I had, indeed, enjoyed it to a degree only complicated the matter. An association had been formed between negative emotion and performing oral sex: ...*it is wrong, it is dirty, but...* That *but...* was always a sticking point. I must have wanted it. Yes, I had told myself long ago, I must have been dirty, and I must have been doing something wrong. Wrongful acts must be punished.

And then, of course, the simplest truth:

*I was raped.*

My rapist most likely did not consider the impact she would have on my life: her

physiognomy, her build, her personality, they had imbued the basic metric to which I would compare future partners with something insidious. It should be of no surprise my first serious relationship was an abusive one.

Even though she was extraordinarily similar to my babysitter, Jacqueline differed in one key way: she was physically violent, something I would not discover until after we had been involved for several months. When paired with her manipulative and explosive natures, disaster was imminent. After Dad had done nothing to address the issue with my rapist, I decided to keep it to myself, and bury it. But as Jacqueline and I drew closer, memories of the abuse began to resurface. I needed to confide in someone, so I confided in her. Her response? “Exposure therapy.” By the time this idea, exposure therapy, had entered our discourse, we had already been together and sexually active for a few months; it was as though she thought she could steer my desires through her will. Seeing as how our relationship had begun at the point of a knife against her wrist, it was not unexpected that she should have suggested such a thing. I should have taken her suicidal gesture as a red flag, but I saw it as something else entirely – I saw a person who needed help, and I wanted to help that person. It would not be a few months into our relationship that I would realize how troubled, how truly disturbed she was.

Valentine’s Day, 1998: Potsdam, New York; a dorm room. I had planned a night of stereotypical romance. A bouquet of carnations, an *a cappella* serenade, dinner at Ponderosa, you know – Valentine’s Day things for a poor college freshman. Jacqueline had different ideas, however. When I picked her up for dinner, she was not dressed. Clearly, she had something else in mind. She pushed me onto the bed, and flopped on top of me: it was time to expose me to the demons of my past. I said no. I was not ready. She proceeded to question my sexuality. Still I refused. Her verbal assault only intensified. “What kind of man are you,” she snarled at one point. Shaking, I crawled down from the bed and into a corner. Jacqueline got up. She stood over me. She spit on me. I started to cry. She slapped my face. And then she kicked me four times in the ribs. I pissed myself. Blood dripped from my split lip, pattering to the ecru tile floor, mixing with the urine. She pushed me down into the puddle. She got dressed and went to leave. “Clean it up,” she said. She shut the door. I lay on the cold, wet tile for several minutes, unable to move. Eventually, I stood, dried my eyes, and did as she had instructed. My ribs throbbed; I would tape them for about a month afterward. She would go on to break up with me that summer, but not before flaunting the fact she was having sex with another man.

I went back to school – sophomore year. By the spring semester, my sleep pattern had inverted; Jacqueline’s actions, her taunts, they replayed nightly. Long repressed memories of my babysitter continued to flood back, though I still cannot remember her name. I slipped into an anorexic state. My grades fell precipitously. I dropped out of college. I met Rachel. I hurt myself. Despite these things, I do not recall crying. No, I kept that mess, that sickness, to myself for almost 20 years. Some entities, regardless of their age, can appear too frightening to confront.

-

“IT’S NOT UNCOMMON FOR SURVIVORS OF ASSAULT TO FEEL SHAME,” said Dr. M.-.

“Is that what this is?” I asked. “Shame?”

She folded her hands neatly in her lap. “You just told me you were complicit in your own rape, that you let it happen. Think about that.”

I looked off to the side. Another minute ticked past. “Is that possible? Complicity, I mean.”

“What do you think?”

I cleared my throat: “...no.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because...”

“Why were you not complicit?”

“Because I didn’t *want* it,” I said, voice breaking. “I was a fucking kid.”

The sun slipped behind a building. The ambient light dwindled, and the room darkened. I grabbed a tissue from the box, dabbed at my eyes, and let myself breathe.

“You’re right,” she said. I glanced up at her. She let her stoic façade slip for just a moment; her grey eyes, warm with empathy, met my own. “You couldn’t stop her. There was nothing lucky about it, good or bad. But it happened; it happened to you.”

“There was no good reason, was there?”

The question, like so many others, hung in the air.

Even now, a year on, my legacy of self-hatred causes me to stumble from time-to-time. As extraordinary as some may believe me to be, it is a title I have yet to embrace. How can self-actualization occur when a person, who has so often been defeatist, lacks a personal model upon which to base their forward trajectory? I continue to examine my life, identifying the self-destructive behaviors that I had embraced so many years ago only to see how they keep repeating, how they continue to hold me back, how they still thwart my progress. One addiction has morphed into another, into another – pain, damaging interpersonal relationships, substance abuse – and yet, here I am, standing at the precipice of my invented self, asking if I am worth the promise of my own future. The fact I am even asking this question tells me that I am. And I want to say yes. I can feel that word in my chest, desperate to be spoken. I want to say yes. More than anything, I want to say yes.

# ARE WE NOT RUNNERS?

I awoke, as I had countless times before, on a sunken couch in a destroyed room. I was an island in a sea of Genesee cans (the Unofficial Beer of the University of Akron Men's Cross-Country Team) and drained longnecks of sorority-blitz vodka. Terrance the Baby Doll, naked and armless, smiled down on the disarray from his spot on the wall, above the five-foot speaker tower and to the right of the American flag intricately fashioned from beer cans by a guy who stayed in college for six years.

I stood up, stripped, slipped on the split shorts with just enough tangerine-colored mesh to conceal my groin. I changed into my evergreen Nike singlet. My New Balance racing flats were a shade or two brighter than the red, four-tiered energy dome I'd be wearing within the hour.

It's not often anymore I wake up wondering which slight movement will set my brain sloshing around and bumping against the hard casing of my skull. This was one of those mornings. Graduate school and failed stabs at maturity had kept me from partying much with my college running buddies since my NCAA eligibility expired with a fourteenth-place Great Lakes Regional finish in the mid-November murk of Madison, Wisconsin over two-and-a-half years ago. But now here I was, the morning after my return to dumb shit. A hangover was imminent.

Except it never arrived. I walked out to a blue July morning and started on my warm-up jog towards downtown, descending through campus, feeling refreshed. The lush grass plots, used mostly for ad-hoc games of Ultimate Frisbee, were unperturbed, an optimistic green. I neared King James Way, the stretch of Main St. renamed two years earlier, just after LeBron smushed Iguodala's textbook layup against plexiglass and won the region its first professional sports title in fifty-two years. I listened closely for (yes, there it was!) the music of Akron's own Devo, perky synth tones bouncing between multistory brick. No, they don't get their own street. They do get a dedicated 5K, though. One that brings hordes of spuds out from their crevices, most of them wearing complimentary red t-shirts with "Devo" popping across the chest, one letter per vibrant cartoon explosion. Some wore rubber Booji Boy masks celebrating the band's baby-faced mascot who's even creepier than Terrance.

Time to defend my title.

As a toddler, fifteen years after Devo performed "Whip It" in black muscle shirts and their energy domes (which resemble an exoskeletal torpedo sprouting from the brain) for a group of beer-drinking farmhands at a dude ranch, I could run a mile. I graduated fast from the purple aerodynamic baby jogger my mom would push me around in while I daydreamed that bikers cruising past on the crushed limestone trail were stormtroopers on Star Wars speeder bikes decked with laser blasters. I'd shuffle alongside my mom for one mile, from a parking lot beside the Cuyahoga River to an aluminum-encased tunnel dug under a bridge surrounded by woods. Inside, I'd curl my lips into an "O" and hum as loud as I could, getting a kick out of reverberation.

The tunnel is where my dad would jog past us, same time every day, our family trio of runners in near-perfect sync. He'd be in short shorts, shirtless and hairy, doused in sweat. My dad is

the sweatiest person I know. He couldn't have been wetter had he jumped into the river. I'd be so excited to wave to him, cheer him on for a few seconds as he ran by, a scene that flipped in middle school when I would be the one dashing out from the woods on a cross-country course, trailed by a cluster of other gawky teens, and pass him shouting over the rest of the parental mob.

My family weren't hardcore Devo fans, though living in the suburbs of Akron, Ohio fostered in us an almost inherent appreciation for their small-time celebrity status and obscure cult following.

Akronites are proud of Devo, even if they don't understand them. The band's 1978 debut record, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* was dissonant art rock grounded by their theory that humans were "de-volving," as explained in the song "Jocko Homo": "They tell us that / We lost our tails / Evolving up / From little snails / I say it's all / Just wind in sails / Are we not men? / We are Devo." Rock critic Robert Christgau wrote that "in small doses" the record was "as good as novelty music ever gets." Moving through the early 80's, the band welcomed more and more the futurist squelch of synthesizers and electronic drums. Outside of Akron, I assume they are probably remembered by the masses as a one-hit wonder, courtesy of the MTV airing of "Whip It" solidifying into a staple of 80's new-wave music video nostalgia, but I can't accurately report from the inside.

Packet and t-shirt pickup for "5K Devo" was at a booth inside the running shop where I sell shoes to the folks of Akron's flourishing running scene. You best believe I rolled through their discography on the store iPod, awarding multiple plays to "Through Being Cool," the nerds' battle cry against ninnies, twits, evil spuds, and some poor fellow named Mr. Hinky-Dink. Some of the sign-ups were Devotees, people in town for the annual Devo convention in Cleveland who decided to sign up for the 5K held the following day in Akron, despite never before attempting one. Most of them, though, were the same people who run all the local races. General opinion I gleaned: all of them Devo supporters who might not be able to recognize more than a song or two besides "Whip It," but who admire Devo as a cultural force, a band that to them is clearly not a one-hit-wonder (despite them only knowing the one hit), but an idiosyncratic cult phenomenon deserving of local pride.

I became friends in college with a curly-haired 800-meter-dash specialist named Sean "Dr. P." Poholski, who ran for my high school's rival track and cross-country team. Between bouts of oxygen deprivation and lung-burn, Dr. P. and I discovered that we shared an affinity for certain bands Robert Christgau had been celebrating in his *Village Voice* Consumer Guides since the 1970's. Among them was Devo, though what was an unfulfilled curiosity for me was a childhood fascination for Sean. He was reared on De-Evolution.

At age eight, Sean was sketching energy domes and the radioactive chemical drum he'd caught in the "It Takes a Worried Man" video. His father took him and his brother on a field trip to the very same staircase that Booji Boy sprinted up (bad form, dude!) to deliver papers detailing the concept of De-Evolution to his own father, General Boy, in the group's first video, "In the Beginning was the End: The Truth about De-Evolution." The staircase is attached to a building on Front St. in Cuyahoga Falls, the Akron suburb where I sat on the carpet watching *Rugrats*, my favorite cartoon, the theme song to which was created by Devo frontman Mark Mothersbaugh. For years, Devo's sounds flitted over my barely-developing mongoloid brain, whereas Sean's brother would eventually get a Booji Boy tattoo and Sean would grow up to be offended when I innocently

posited, via text message, that Devo was “a gimmick band.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” was his reply.

I redeemed this faux-pas by enlisting for the first-ever 5K Devo in 2017 in hopes of winning an energy dome. Well, the top-three finishers in each age group won a dome, but I’m an ambitious spudboy. I’ve come to realize that each local road-race is a chance for me to chip away at the constant disappointment I feel for having just barely missed qualifying for the national cross-country championship meet during my final semester of college. Over the years, I’ve discovered this sort of dissatisfaction festers in most serious runners, no matter how successful. All of us have unwillingly abandoned scraps of ourselves on race courses. For me, it’s the frigid, hardened dirt of Madison, Wisconsin on a day when every aspect of running felt natural but still wasn’t enough to reach the Big One, the pinnacle collegiate meet. In an alternate universe, maybe I am satisfied, capable of finally letting go of competitive running. But in this mortal coil I am, in some small but gnawing way, unresolved.

Every race still brings full-body jitters, even when I step to the starting line in the same cardboard glasses with long, flimsy black lenses that Devo wore for a photo shoot with nothing else on but fake plastic breasts and boxer briefs (is Mark in split shorts?) while topless women caressed their groins. In the last half mile of the first-ever 5K Devo, the lead biker directing me pedaled off to the side of the course, leaving me by my lonesome. I was a minute ahead of second place, and a bit disoriented wearing those tinted shades, which absorbed my temple sweat and felt as if they were melting off my face. I missed a turn, flew right past it, revving up to my finishing kick speed toward where I thought the race might end, til a regular customer from the running store popped out from the crowd and pointed in the other direction.

“That way, Kyle!” he screamed.

Good looking out, Ray.

Devo’s Gerald Casale, looking dapper in a black suit and energy dome, shook my hand and awarded me my very own funky red exoskeletal torpedo headwear. I stood on the elevated stage and saluted the crowd of sticky, barely-dressed spudboys and spudgirls. Grandma Millie was proud, announcing over Facebook that I had placed first overall in the “Devo 5K half marathon.” Never a runner, Millie, but I love her so.

The following year, I stepped to the line more confident in myself than I had ever felt before a race. My brain was still remarkably clear despite the previous night’s celebratory booze assault against its neurotransmitters. With possible front-page photos for tomorrow’s news spooling through my head, I shouted over to Jim, the race director, asking him to let me wear his energy dome. He handed it over, announcing to the crowd of racers in matching t-shirts behind me that, should they get lost, “just look for the guy in the energy dome.” He’d apparently forgotten the short-circuit that had occurred in my alcohol-free brain during last year’s race, but no worries. I was already imagining quotes to nonchalantly offer journalists who’d be waiting anxiously for me to cross the finish line, as if anyone gave a rotten potato about who would win this 5K. Before Casale declared to the mass of runners that “We are all Devo” and fired the starting pistol, I had settled on my line.

“It’s really no big deal,” I’d say. “You see, I’m only a spudboy, looking for that real tomato.”

I bolted from the throng at the familiar crack of blank pistol fire, opting for the uncomplicated racing tactic I developed in college: lead from the gun and mentally batter the competition



until either they submit or I physically break apart.

Of course, I understood how ridiculous and non-serious this race was, hence the part where I crushed cans of Genesee to ACDC's "Thunderstruck" the night before. But the five minutes leading up to any race bring an intoxicating level of focus, and I at least become convinced every time that this is the most important moment of my life, no matter what the stakes. In college, this pre-race tunnel-vision was the apex of a day's worth of slow-drip anxiety. Before races, I used to sit for hours on locker room benches, alone, staring at the floor. Or I'd lie on my back, eyes fixed to industrial fluorescent light fixtures dangling from fieldhouse ceilings. Waiting in hotel rooms for the bus to leave was the worst. In preparation for the 5K at the Mount San Antonio Relays, I sat in bed from nine in the morning til seven at night, getting up to pee every fifteen minutes, leaving my room only for a Subway footlong and a two-mile shakeout jog. The shades were drawn, hiding me from the energy-zapping sunshine of gorgeous Pomona, California. I persuaded myself that this self-inflicted bedridden state would keep my muscles fresh and hone focus through what was essentially sensory deprivation, hours spent alone so I could visualize the big moves in the race, dreaming up different scenarios and plotting how I'd react to each one. Right before a race, this anxiety converts to something akin to fear, a source of energy.

Probably the best moment of my college career was racing the 3K at the indoor Mid-American Conference meet on the home track of our rivals down the road, the Golden Flashes of "Can't Read, Can't Write, Kent State." Coach Labadie, a croaky-voiced sexagenarian prone to bragging about breaking the four-minute-mile and his ability to feel the globe revolve during meditation, walked over minutes before the race with his head down. This was the second-to-last event, and I knew Kent was up on us, that our team might not have a chance to win.

"You have to win the 3K," Labadie said in a flat, matter-of-fact tone, something like a mechanic reminding you to clean the carburetor. "That's the only way we can win the meet."

I went through my embarrassing skip drills, which hadn't changed much since middle school, when my team lined up and practiced the same routine every day beside a boombox blaring a CD that has since caused me to loathe hearing "Funkytown" and the theme from *Ghostbusters*. I ran a few stride-outs. I probably pissed my pants and left a puddle on the track, covering it with my Adidas racing spikes, a habit that became worse through each season. I led from the gun, letting an Easter Michigan runner pass me halfway through the race and pace out a few laps before I swallowed him on the backstretch. My high school coach used to encourage us to find opportunities during races to break people's spirits, a strategy I fashioned into my modus operandi in college.

During the final laps, looping around Kent's track (the circumference of which measures 292 meters instead of the universally standard 300, an apparent computation boo-boo that's no surprise because "Can't Read, Can't Write," etc...), the collective roar of gristle-throated screams was as loud as an arena-sized rock concert with the band cranking their guitars into the red to fill every inch of audio space in the room. Teammates I barely talked to were leaning into the lane and screaming hot muddles of noise into my left ear. The atmosphere at the after-MAC party would be decided by this race. I pumped my scrawny arms at waist-height and sprinted in my damp gold uniform top and probably-piss-soaked, navy-blue split shorts from a fading pack of other lanky dudes while hundreds of fans forged the constructive roar. Devo knew how to make a room whoop like this, whereas I was just trying to transfigure panic into a kind of confidence. Or

maybe there is no transfiguration. Maybe all these years I've been bullshitting myself.

My dad was somewhere in the crowd.

I run because I love it, and I race because I'm competitive, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that sometimes I'm still that mop-topped toddler enamored with dad as he comes chugging along through the shadow of that cool metal tunnel on the Towpath Trail.

After I won the 3K and hauled off the MAC MVP trophy, sending the Golden Flashes knuckle-dragging back to their caves defeated, he met me on the track. Now, I know how proud he is of me. It shows all the time, was always easy to discern when he'd drive me to high school and mention how someone he knows wanted to congratulate me on some race they read about in the paper. But he's never been one for ecstasies, rarely loses control and abandons his cool (unless, of course, you turn the thermostat above sixty-five or forget to do the dishes, which triggers a scowl worthy of a WWF pre-match staredown). I handed him the trophy, offered some post-race chit-chat, tried to act nonplussed, as if I wasn't exploding all over inside. He gave me a "good job," returned the small talk, waved goodbye when I jogged off for a cool-down. He offered to take the trophy home, so I didn't break it on the bus, which I was apt to do. I realize he was probably exploding all over inside too, but was holding it together, and it was like we were getting coffee after a run on a Sunday morning instead of living out the denouement of the greatest race of my life in a sport I grew to love because of the years I spent wanting to be like him.

Maybe I'm still racing to keep alive my hope that one day I'll do something that will shatter his cool, that I'll have a moment to roll my eyes as he hugs me with both arms, to act all embarrassed over my pops getting gushy.

For now, I'd have to settle for an energy dome.

***Clankety-clank! Clankety-clank!*** I do not feel guilty about essentially cheating by racing in the dome and letting its power spread from my head down to my taut calf muscles, because the sound of hard plastic snapping against my skull nearly drives me to madness. It's a trade-off. Plus it's a hit with the diehard spuds who are still walking the first mile when I pass them in the opposite direction, headed for the finish, holding up my fist in solidarity.

We are here to go!

# MONI BABA

A working man suddenly turns to spiritualism and abruptly stops speaking. His holy faith, in God, ends the drought in his village and makes him a hermit in people's eyes in the neighborhood. But his sudden death surprises many including the author.

Once upon a time in North India countryside, there lived a working man. What was his real name, hardly anybody knew; but they'd call him Moni Baba, the silent saint. He had a clerical job in Delhi Development Authority. One day, he suddenly turned to spirituality and abruptly stopped speaking. His family was thunder-struck with his this bizarre decision and they tried their level best to bring him back to his sense, but to no use.

Now, the family locked him up inside a room, and there he was given a good thrashing, beaten black and blue. He was tethered in his chair for hours without food and water. Still, he was adamant at his decision and did not speak. Only indicated through gestures and body language that now his path was solemnly different, for he was no longer interested in the mundane world of speaking and noisy people. His family had to give way and Moni Baba embarked upon a spiritual journey.

His office at ITO in New Delhi pressed him to resign from his post, but he scribbled a slip and handed over to the concerned official. It read: "I regard the office rules, but God wants my presence elsewhere, so I'd be on indefinite leave". The officials put the matter under consideration with the higher authorities; and after a while, they buried it in a cold file.

\*\*\*\*

Moni Baba stopped going to his office altogether. Put on a white-attire and made his *ku-tiya*, a hermitage, facing west at Johripuram, a countryside. This place was under a banyan tree surrounded by two ponds en-route to the village. There, he would meditate and smoke joints. Soon, the village-youngsters--inclined to marijuana--took a keen interest in Moni Baba and kept his place buzzing.

Moni Baba was extremely punctual and wore spotless dresses. He would wake up at four in the morning, showered and worshiped for hours to Lord Shiva. He had dark complexion, sharp features and long black tresses that fell on his shoulders. His lean and thin frame of body with a good height made him an impressive persona.

That year, the village experienced no thunder shower. The monsoon season was almost over, but the weather largely remained dry. The sun-god was spreading his fury and peasants were worried about their crops of sugarcane, cauliflower, green-chilly, *bhindi* and *lauki*, the bottle gourd.

The village youngsters discussed this serious matter with Moni Baba, who gestured them to have *bhandara*, a public feast. Then he blew his *shankh*, the conch; for it was his time for the evening prayer. And the boys, his disciples, went door to door to give away his message among the

masses.

The village elders were taken into confidence: each family was to contribute a little amount to have the bhandara. The charity was willingly given, the date was fixed and the feast was served.

Eventually on the auspicious day, all the arrangements were made. For transparency of the donation, a villager named Surya kept on announcing, on the microphone through a loudspeaker, the name of each and every donor, and the amount donated. The underprivileged and beggars were fed to their-hearts'-content.

The same night, there was heavy rain and downpour in the entire vicinity. People developed their faith and trust in Moni Baba and from-here-onwards, he got extremely popular becoming a household name in and around the countryside.

Henceforth, Moni Baba made it a point to proactively organize a feast every summer for a good rain both for the village and the adjoining area. His trust was unshakable, and Almighty favored him. Men, women and children loved this silent saint. He'd use a sign language to make his point across. His name reached far and wide and in seven years he had a large following.

It was when his silent avatar was purely accepted, one fine morning he suddenly exclaimed, "Jai ho!" People were taken aback. In a little while, it was a rumor rife in the entire region, and people reached his kutiya in thousands to listen to him. Here, Moni Baba delivered his first sermon under the old banyan tree.

Surprisingly, the same year his office in New Delhi issued his pending seven years' salary to his bank account. And a verbal pact was agreed upon: once in a fortnight, he'd visit his office just to sign his attendance. To it he gave his word. Moni Baba utilized a portion of the fund he received in the construction of a statue of Lord Shiva, upkeep of the hut and giving rest of the sum to his family.

\*\*\*\*\*

Right from the day one, when Moni Baba had stopped speaking to seven years later, when he'd suddenly resumed talking, I had a fleeting desire to have a personal interview with him. His Kutiya was at a stone's throw from my residence, and I could easily walk to him in seven minutes, but for it I could never take time out.

Though, I passed by the hermit's hut several times and greeted him Jai ho, that he responded with vigor and enthusiasm, yet I thought that I should come to visit him well prepared with a diary and a pen. So, such a day never came that we could ever sit together. He knew my writing interest and had a high opinion of it. This thing, I came to know through people who frequently visited him.

Precisely speaking, I wanted to write a full project on his life and for it I needed a few meetings, a couple of sittings with him. Those days, I was working on a poetry collection; so I kept on postponing this conclave with the legend.

In 2015, I got married and settled in a metro-city with Mona, my wife, and entirely lost my link with the village. Still, deep down somewhere, Moni Baba remained active in some compartment of my brain.

The wish to have a heart-to-heart chat with him to jot down and expose his tale, the higher

cause that had made him a holy-man out of an ordinary human soul, was always there in me.

\*\*\*\*

On June 20, 2019, I got a routine-call from the village. It was Shuja, my elder brother and we had just general exchanges and pleasantries, when suddenly I asked him, “How’s Moni Baba?”

“Moni Baba is no more,” he said.

“HOW?” I asked him, shell-shocked.

“Nobody knows. He was mysteriously found dead in his room. Though, no police complaint was registered.”

“To respect the departed soul there was no bhandara this year,” he added further, “Strangely, however, the village had a good pre-monsoon rain.”

I was hung up on the phone. I don’t know why, but I felt my guts wrenching, my throat dry and want of words. The regret of not having an interview with this pious soul will forever remain in my heart. For, I still remorse to my muses: I could not tell the world a detailed story of Moni Baba, the weird saint.

# IT'S NOT TRUE THAT GUM STAYS FOR SEVEN YEARS INSIDE OF YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

I'm chewing gum right now, but I'm not doing a very good job of it. I've chomped down on the side of my mouth at least thrice this morning. It really hurts. I keep on chomping on anyway. Even when the flavor goes away and I barely have the motivation to chew. I've swallowed countless pieces of gum past the flavor for as long as I can remember. My little brother has always had to deal with me being his annoying big brother of chewing the entire packet of gum meant to be shared on road trips. He hates it. Often my mouth has been so filled with gum that I had to spit it out because I couldn't breathe otherwise.

Gum is a fun thing to chew, but your words are not. And I'm tired of being chewed as gum underneath your teeth, grinding me into your methods of consumption. It's not true that gum stays for seven years inside of your digestive system. But a lifetime of your cisgender bullshit stays there forever, dissolving my insides from your bliss. Chewing gum never comes at the cost of freedom, it's always costing a wee bit of capitalism and I am coming at the cost of the wee bit of my dignity. I have the flavor of "you have an interesting perspective," but never the flavor of, "oh, I'm sorry, I'll actually change my behavior." You think that saying I have an interesting perspective is the same thing as actually listening when I tell you that that thing you said or did was transphobic. When I'm around other trans people, I don't worry about being ground under teeth, and we speak in the terminology of our freedom, whereas cis people speak in the terms of transphobic slurs and stereotypes. I don't care if you think that's harsh. Because, the truth is, every cisgender person does and believes transphobic things no matter how much they think otherwise. It's impossible for a person who lives in a transphobic society to not internalize the hatred around them. And when a transphobic society creates this division, there are going to be very different speaking methods for either side.

I don't actually know a lot of other trans people. And most cis people think they've never met a trans person before (even though that's very much not true). It is true, however, that for me as a trans person, it's easier to find other trans people than a cis person would, because of the connection to be made. We stick easily under the table. And when I find myself there, I can point at Toad from *Super Mario*, one very specific edge of Norway, or a Lay's potato chip, and say, "that's my gender." We trans people have lived a much more complicated life of gender than cis people have and thus have a much higher knowledge of the vast world of gender and the absurdity of gender roles. We often make jokes about how arbitrary things are an expression of our genders -- hence, trans people are often found making "that's my gender" jokes, which are pretty much the trans equivalent of the more common joke of saying, "same," or, "me," to other strange people,

places, or things that we feel express ourselves. While there is a vast array of trans-specific jokes, often ones like these come up in our language and often aren't understood by cisgender people. For example, if I am asked if I would like some tea, I might snicker a bit to myself and say yes. A cis person might find that odd, but another trans person would probably make the connection that it sounds like "T," the slang term for testosterone injections that would help me, a transgender man, feel more comfortable in my body. Other jokes also include calling Barry B. Benson from *The Bee Movie* nonbinary (or non-bee-nary) or other silly trans takes on media, because we still currently have an incredibly low representation there. There's a long list of flavors that trans jokes come in, but those are just a few.

The problem is, often when I am around cisgender people, I don't feel the sort of freedom and joking behavior that I do around other trans people. Cis people don't "get" why I start laughing uncontrollably when I see the word "trans" on a backpack or jacket or the side of a truck, even after I explain it to them. When they do believe that they "get" it, they really don't - and they think my jokes are an excuse to start making transphobic jokes at my expense. If a cis person starts laughing when they see the word "trans" on a backpack or jacket or the side of a truck, they're not laughing at their own experiences -- they're laughing at people they've always been able to marginalize. They aren't laughing in solidarity -- one can't really laugh in solidarity if it's at our expense.

Furthermore, I find myself constantly having to explain my existence to them -- and a lot of terminology they don't understand -- and pretty much refuse to. Whereas other trans people (usually) comprehend easily how they/them pronouns work and what pronoun pins mean and what it means when someone states their pronouns on their social media bio, cis people often don't -- and get huffy with me when I try to explain it to them. I've dealt with random strangers on the street and Metro bus drivers and passengers using my trans presentation with pronoun pins and other trans-specific clothing as an excuse to physically attack and berate me. I've received shoulder-grabbing and I've been scolded and pushed and thrown back and so much more just for solely existing as a trans person on the street or bus. Other trans people don't find my pronoun pins intimidating like that. I've tried to explain to cisgender people I know why equating genitals to gender is transphobic by definition, why trans isn't really anything in relation to sexuality, and why my genitals aren't their business, and they still refuse to listen. Saying that vaginas are equivalent to women is an erasure of women who don't have vaginas -- and to vagina-owners who aren't women (cry me a river, cisgender white women's march). Cisgender people use my transness as an excuse to constantly talk about my genitals despite me telling them numerous times to please stop sexually harassing me.

Here's an example of a conversation I've had with a cisgender person:

"Yeah, when I was a sophomore in high school, I almost died of blood loss because I was on my period every day for the entire year."

"Wow, that's the ultimate women's problem."

"Hey, can you not say that? Because I'm not a woman."

"Oh. Was that before you got the --"

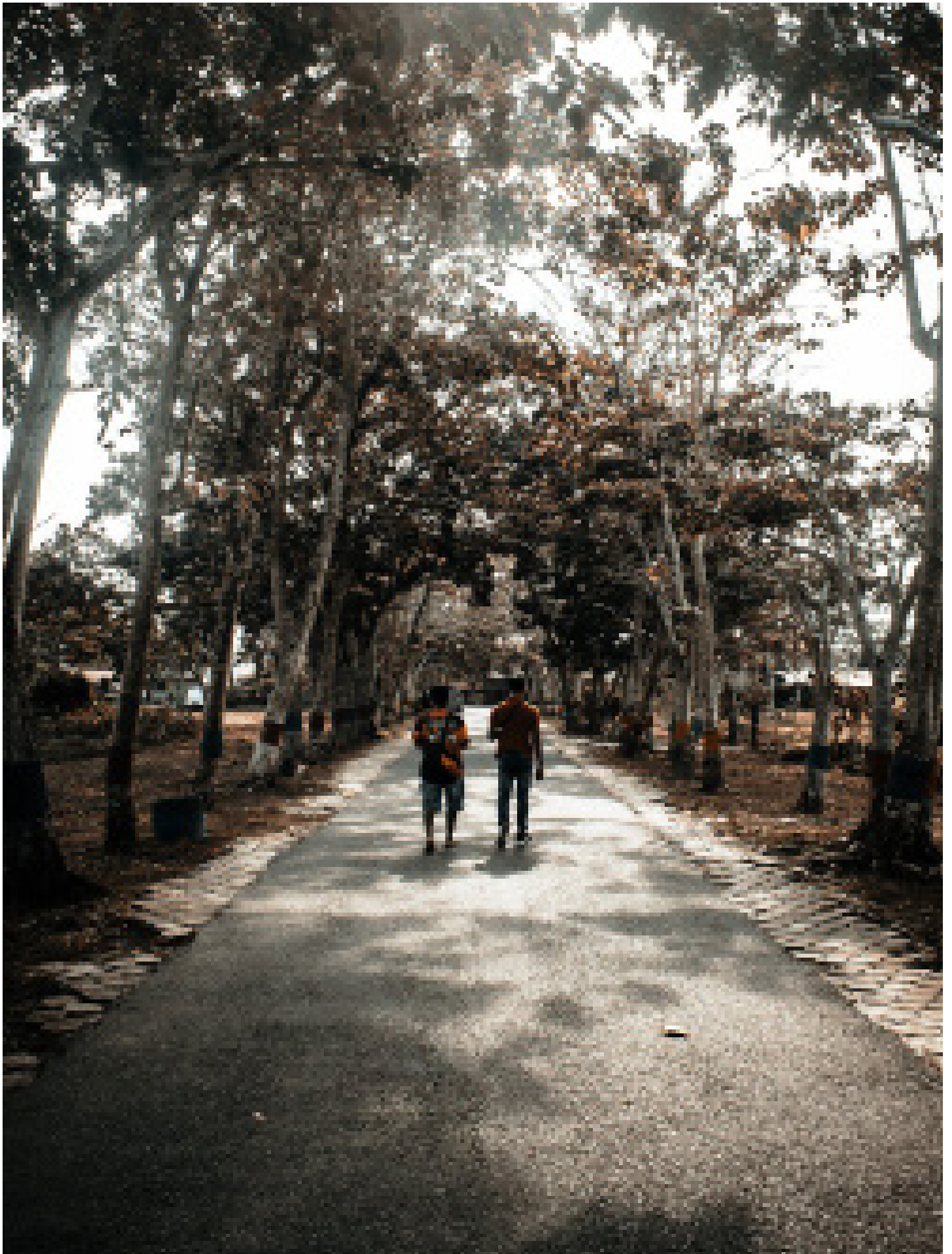
She pointed at her crotch.

Cis people say "sex-change operation," we say "sex reassignment surgery." Cis people say, "transgendered," or "transsexual," or "crossdresser," but we just say, "trans people," or "transge-

ndered people.” Cis people think that “straight” and “normal” and “natural-born women” and “natural-born men” are synonyms for what we call “cisgender people” -- despite the fact that the ideology of a natural-born gender is extremely transphobic and that trans isn’t in relation to sexual orientation, and that cisgender gay people are still just as transphobic as cisgender straight people, and that straight trans people exist. But of course, whenever I try to explain these things, all they do is get extremely angry with me and try to worm out how what they said wasn’t transphobic. Cis people love to try to educate me on my own life experiences that they have never had. I live a linguistically nomadic life of constantly jumping from home to exhaustion.

Because I constantly find myself in a limbo of having to explain and defend my existence, I tend to be much quieter around cis people. And I don’t usually have the energy to try to tell a cisgender person why their behavior was transphobic. Because it so often goes unheard whenever I do. I make fewer jokes around an easily offended people who hold a societal power over me that they’ll never understand. Around other trans people, I feel more easy and free, and I make the jokes I always want to make, and I don’t have to constantly explain basic words. I’ve grown very tired of the way that cisgender people chew me like gum and spit me under their feet with their linguistic butchering of my existence. Other trans people don’t treat me that way. Because of that, I talk very differently around both groups, and both groups talk very differently.





# THE CHANGES OF THE WIND

The warmth holds hands with the wind.  
The grass and flowers rejoice as they  
dance for the sun's jubilant grin.

This is the recipe for a Missouri spring.  
The seeds we plant  
in the garden each fall  
teaches us  
to dance in the light  
after sleeping in darkness.

Wild winds and tumultuous thunderstorms are the first signs of spring in Missouri. There is always something deeply exciting about change. April mornings are crisp, clear, and calm. Wind arrives with the afternoon bringing a storm with it. At times, these storms may transform into a tornado—a violent and dark dance that reminds us of the force of Mother Nature. The mornings, therefore, are a sweet reminder of the calm and new. Before beginning my day, I caress my warm thermal of coffee, facing the sunrise—some mornings the sun greets me with a soft watercolor of light blues and yellows. Other mornings the sun hugs me with vibrant oranges and purples.

For many Missourians, spring offers hope—the farmers fertilize and plow the ground in advance for a new growing season; cows give birth to their young; trees bud, and the hills remove their scratchy wintery blankets to dress in their luscious green attire. With the first hint of spring, I stroll through the fields and hills of our farm, and I find myself standing with my young daughter and husband next to one of two creeks flowing through our land. We gather rocks and throw or skip them across the creek.

“Momma, more. Momma, more,” my daughter yells with delight.

“You want momma to skip more?” I ask as I position myself to skip the rock, “Alright. You ready? One. Two. Three.” I release the rock from my hand as it glides through the air before touching the water—one, two, three, four times before diving into the dark creek bed below.

“Yay! Momma more!” My daughter screams with glee.

“Ok, Berlin. One more time,” I respond. As we search for the perfect flat and smooth skipping rock. After a moment's pause, we find two rocks—smooth and flat—optimal for skipping.

Crisp clouds, whimsical chirping  
of light mornings;  
and this is something good.

The bright  
beams pass  
from the flower  
onto the trickling creek.

“Momma, I try,” Berlin demands as she grabs the rocks from my hand and throws them into the trickling creek. Perhaps this is the loveliest moment of the day. My daughter playing outdoors after months of being cooped indoors. The birds, returning from wherever they visit during the winter, seem to share our optimism. The blue birds, gregarious and erratic, fly from one tree to the next. In the background, robins begin their overture into spring. A woodpecker hammers a tree. The stage is set for a prosperous season.

But is it? The more I study and the more I know about Missouri’s history, the more I realize that prosperity is not quite what it seems. Far removed from this scene rests an entirely different culture—the Missouri Native Americans—an ancient history erased with time. Here and there we find evidence of their existence—an Indian burial site, an arrowhead or two, pottery, and tools—which so deeply stir the facts of history that Indians once existed and thrived.

This is the journey of  
a lost culture surviving.

This is the blood,  
sweat,  
tears  
of centuries lost.

This is the legend.

This is  
the myth,  
the hurt,  
the sacrifice,  
the disappearance,  
of innocence.

The Indians roam these lands centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, and today, they work to keep their culture alive. Nonetheless, the removal and destruction of Indians reminds us how the birth of one nation comes at the expense of another. However, unlike ancient cultures in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Central and South America little survives from this ancient culture—outside of city names and the name of our state (which her name originates from a tribe of the Sioux Indians—*the Missouris*). Many of the people themselves—their descendants—remain with us. And many, many artifacts and art exist, but when the Indians begin their exodus to Oklahoma, most evidence of their existence is severely damaged like the debris left from the tornado of western expansion.

I stand,  
my daughter stands,  
my husband stands,  
on the sacrifices  
of a nation of people before us.

Thinking,  
what can we do

to make their presence known?

So my daughter  
can see farther  
to better understand  
the land.

I live for the changing of the seasons. When spring storms roll in from the west, I sit on my covered deck next to my husband with welcoming arms. I hear the thunder and lightning clashing in the distance as the rain flirts with the flowers causing them to blush and giggle. The trees sway to the wind's rhythm. My daughter chases our dog up and down the deck, laughing and yelling, "Magnum, chase me. Momma, Magnum chase me." Our dog chases Berlin. Occasionally he nips her leg resulting in tears and a, "no, no, Magnum."

Upon the storm's arrival, our deck becomes a place of force—the wind silences us, the pounding of the rain blinds us. The trees bend to the wind's demands, but their anchors go deep, and they stand strong. We find ourselves seeking shelter in our house. Before being forced to take shelter, I capture a glimpse of our adolescent pear tree—struggling to withstand the storm. These storms have a reputation for being quick-tempered and emotional, but I know the tree is strong enough to survive the storm.

We want to know the reasons for  
the transgression of the past.  
But history books teach us  
it was all for prosperity.  
The Indians have beautiful stories.  
Their silence streams into us,  
for we are as hushed as we can be.

The winning side records the facts. History offers the illusion that we can somehow ignore our past transgressions through highlighting our accomplishments. I'm not critical here of history itself, but the way we often think of ourselves in relation to it. Do we ever wonder about the past inhabitants?

The land does not belong to one person; every person is a piece of this continent, a part of the elaborate quilt of history. I don't agree with the only remembrance of the Indians coming in the form of a mascots and casinos, because like my adolescent pear tree withstanding a spring storm, their roots run deep in this land. Let us all hope and join hands during the dark clouds of history and let the fog of our misunderstanding lift from our fear and naïveté to new knowledge.

It was a place of hatred --  
the storm gagging their mouths with violence,  
removing their voices, and land.  
Blinding them with lies,  
lies that led to many deaths.

They tasted the malignity of their removal,  
its piercing sound,  
the extreme exertion of the threats.  
An extravagance that tortured.

There was only one place left to go to  
and the paths narrowed into their new location.

Learning to honor the Indians—learning to acknowledge their history, struggles, and culture—means striving for self-consciousness in our actions. It means remembrance and gratitude for the Indians' contributions to our history. All human beings are equal, we say, half-wishing that sometimes in private it isn't true. But what if we made it true? We are obliged to spread the truth, the stories, their myths, their folklore, their traditions, their news, and as bitter and difficult it may be for some to hear, all Americans deserve to be heard.

It isn't history  
that scares me.  
It's what we could've built  
had we listened.

In spring, the redbud and dogwood bloom, inspiring me, my husband, and my daughter to hike in the grove of trees nestled in between the hills and Shoal Creek. We walk in this world because we love it. I do not like what happened to the Native Americans and I am frightened by our unwillingness to listen to history. Storms are apart of the changing of the seasons—one cannot enjoy the gregarious and erratic birds, the howls of the coyotes, and *who-hooting* of the owl without experiencing the wrath of the storm. In Missouri, storms are a sign of change—good or bad. Storms may bring relief or destruction. At one-point, Native Americans hunted and foraged on this land. Elk, deer, and bison roamed and were harvested, providing food, clothing, and tools for the people. At the first sign of spring, when the land sheds her winter coat, revealing her new sleek and vibrant look, and when April's rains and winds calm, the earth warms the ground giving birth to flowers. Under May's Flower Moon, the blooms flourish and dance to honor her. With the fertile ground, the Native Americans prepare the land for growing food. They tell stories, practice their religion, celebrate, and care for their young, so I wonder why, in all the years as a nation, we never come forth to recognize our faults and acknowledge the Native American culture? Well, some of us have, but many of us haven't.

# A BED BATH ON TV

*(Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.)*

It was time for Barb's bed bath.

She sat watching TV with the sheets crumpled up around her body. Her bedside table was covered in magazines, tissues, cough drops, soda, and candy. Her light was still on because she was waiting for me.

I didn't have to say anything. This was part of the routine. She got two bed baths a week, on Monday and Thursday, and today was Thursday.

The nursing home was halfway up the mountain and the south side had a gorgeous view of the city, clear down to the river. One could spot the old shoe factory, the community college, even the little league baseball field.

But Barb was on the north side and her view was of the parking lot. Cars went in. Cars went out. Staff smoked by the steps. It wasn't that bad but it was worse knowing what she didn't have.

I shut the blinds, pulled the curtain, and turned up the heat.

No one was using the bathroom. I ran the water till it turned hot, filled the basin halfway, and dropped in a couple of wash rags.

I tried to untie the dirty gown at the neck but it was in a knot. I had no nails and was reduced to rubbing the strings until they loosened.

The gown dropped away and she was naked other than her brief, which I unfastened.

She was four hundred pounds and her form was impressive and curious. Nothing was where it would typically be found or shaped the way one would think. Her breasts were so large they curved down below the stomach, hiding the nipples. Her navel was lost, buried somewhere in the groin area. The crotch, too, was out of sight.

It was wild to have a naked body in front of me and not see anything sexual.

Her legs seemed to begin at the knees, of which there appeared to be at least four, as if each knee had a conjoined twin or a double. They looked knotted, folded, multiplied, as if they could go on and on exponentially if permitted.

While there were many knees, the legs were one united appendage, with no space between. And her feet were tilted, soft, almost cute, like there was no memory of a use.

Her head was so tiny, it didn't seem to fit with the rest. I half-expected the non-existent neck to devour it and send it rolling all the way down to her stomach.

As I took it all in, I thought of Lucian Freud's "Benefits Supervisor Sleeping," a painting of an overweight woman lying on a couch. I remembered the subject, Sue Tilley, and how her face was scrunched up against the armrest, her black hair, a mess, her right arm cupping her right breast, and her left arm draped over the back of the seat. The fat rolls, far from hidden, were the focus of the work, laid out in thick brush strokes, with a big splash of white right next to the dark hole of her navel. The browns in the curtain, the couch, and the hardwood floor complimented the brown in her skin. It was one of my favorite images.

I thought if Freud were to paint Barb, he'd have to use more pink and white, as she hadn't been out in the sun in ages. But the paleness of her skin would go harmoniously with the beige walls, the white sheets and the cream-colored laminate flooring.

She would be an easy subject: she was always in the same spot and didn't move much. Unlike many live drawing models who get antsy or feel the need to readjust, she could sit there for hours upon hours with no issue. She was the perfect model.

My guess was he'd render her sitting up, her angular bottom as a natural seat, her short arms resting over her stomach, her head tilted back, perhaps, mouth open, and, like Sue, asleep. It wouldn't be difficult to catch her napping.

Barb washed her face and hands. Then I squirted some of the generic, facility-provided soap in the basin and squeezed the rags, enjoying the feeling of warm water on my hands, until they were covered in suds.

I began with the top of her back and worked my way down, pressing firmly, with intent, like they taught in class. "If you're unsure, they will be too," I remembered the teacher saying. "Touch with confidence."

It was at this moment I glanced at the television, caught off guard by what I saw: Someone in scrubs giving an obese naked black woman a bed bath. She was a nurse aide. She had two wash basins by her side. Hers were pink. Mine was grey. She was wearing blue scrubs with flowers and butterflies. I was wearing Star Wars scrubs with Storm Trooper masks in a wallpaper pattern. She was black and in her forties or fifties. I was white and in my thirties.

"What is this show?" I said.

"My 600-lb. Life," Barb said.

I watched it as I bathed my four-hundred-pound resident.

I thought she must find comfort in seeing the daily struggles of other people who were obese.

In a way, she saw herself on TV.

And I saw myself on TV.

It was a strange moment.

The six-hundred-pound woman was named Liz.

She was in bed with her legs spread, fuzzy black blurs covering her breasts and bottom.

Despite the small TV and the censoring, one could still feel her bigness through the screen. Lumps like tumors populated her skin, clustering on every appendage.

It was something that not too long ago no one would have expected to see on TV: a six-hundred-pound woman, naked, in bed, getting a bath.

But reality TV had paved the way for the artless, for entertainment to be less of a production and more of a mirror.

Like many people I'd taken care of, Liz couldn't get out of bed. She had eaten and eaten until she couldn't get up anymore.

I imagined making that decision: to give in to compulsion, to gorge on everything in sight -- donuts, cinnamon buns, pizza, french fries, cheesesteaks -- to sink into the bed, to become a fixture.

Whenever my mind went down this path, I remembered the story of the woman in Kansas who sat on her boyfriend's toilet for two years.

Her skin broke down and actually grew around the seat. When the EMTs arrived, they couldn't pry her from the cushion. They had to break it off the bowl and leave it attached to her body as they took her to the ER, where they removed it surgically.

She had sat so long she became one with the object.

Left unchecked, the same thing could happen to Liz and Barb. If they stayed in bed long enough in one position, red spots resembling a rash or mild burn would form. At first, they'd be "blanchable," "blanch" coming from the French word for white, "blanc," and would turn white to the touch, signalling a healthy blood flow momentarily obstructed. But soon, they'd stay red, remain blocked, and sprout a little hole the size of a seed, which would grow, revealing a layer of fat and potentially bone. It would be a circle within a circle within a circle like op art or the rings of a tree and give off the putrid odor of a carrion flower, repelling people and attracting flies. It would be an open wound like the mouth of a demon -- I had even seen one with a black tongue -- ready to swallow the person whole.

But back to the TV.

Liz's room was well lit but cluttered with diapers, bags, and other belongings. Clothes hung from a walker standing in the background of the scene. A family photo of two adults and a child in a gold frame sat next to a television and a DVD player on the bureau. I could only see part of the TV but imagined it reflected a shadow version of the scene.

The aide, her aunt, wearing a neon green headband and pink gloves to match the pink basins, crawled across the bed to wash the other side of Liz's body. She grimaced and grunted but couldn't lift Liz enough to get underneath. One more inch and Liz would've fallen on the floor. Her aunt called for help.

Another family member, a cousin, came in to assist. Together, they were able to do it, but barely.

I pushed Barb's breasts up with my left hand and washed with my right.

"Oooh, that's cold," she said.

Distracted by the television, I had moved too slowly. I dumped out the basin and replenished it with fresh, hot water to finish.

I lifted her stomach fold and washed deep in the crease, where I saw some red skin.

"I'll have to get some powder for that," I said. We didn't want any fungus growing in the moisture and heat, a common affliction among the morbidly obese.

At first the sadness on the TV felt more real than the sadness in reality. They flashed pictures of Liz's dad who had passed away, of her mother who had her own health struggles, crying, of her aunt talking about the toll it took on her body. Everyone was sad about Liz, sad about the situation.

The aunt limped down the hall holding her back as I'd seen many aides and nurses do before.

The mother served Liz Chinese food -- sweet and sour chicken and noodles -- and ate a platter herself.

"It feels as though my life is wasting away," Liz said. "I can't even go outside to sit on my porch. Can't do nothing. If it wasn't for my aunt, I don't know how I'd even survive."

She dipped the fried chicken in the sweet red sauce and took a bite. Then she twirled the teriyaki noodles on her fork.



Everyone discussed “the problem” but no one, other than Liz, admitted their role in it. If Liz couldn’t get out of bed, she couldn’t get food, so someone had to be bringing it to her. It was a cycle of sadness feeding itself. Why didn’t they simply stop bringing her so much junk? The only reason presented by the family was “When Liz doesn’t get food, things get bad,” as if a temper tantrum was enough to keep helping her kill herself.

I wondered if they all wouldn’t be more at peace if they simply accepted the situation as it was and enjoyed their time with Liz, took pleasure in the feasts without guilt, and let it all run its course.

But they hoped for something more. They demanded change and it came: Liz worked up enough motivation to call the bariatric surgeon. She made an appointment. She had a chance.

Things were different for Barb. She was on hospice. There would be no turnaround, no rebound, no rally, no weight loss, no surgery. This was it, drifting to sleep every couple of minutes in bed at a nursing home.

She didn’t seem to mind it, really, and to tell the truth, it didn’t seem so bad: lying there, being waited on, snacking, sleeping, watching TV, until one day, she didn’t wake up again. It was as if she had found the peace Liz could have had if she had wholly and completely submitted.

Lucky for me, when Barb rolled, she made it without too much difficulty. I washed her crotch, bottom, and legs. Then I toweled her off, put on the new brief and hospital gown, and set her up again. I grabbed the bed control, raised her head, got fresh covers, and made sure she had her call bell.

“Thanks,” she said.

“No problem,” I said.

I watched the TV one last time. Liz had made it to the hospital and was meeting with the doctor, a man with a heavy brow and a serious manner. He spoke firmly with her.

“There’s nothing magical about weight loss surgery,” he said. “You have to put in the work. You have to change your eating habits. You have to decide enough is enough and change the way you live your life. If you don’t, we’re all wasting our time here. It has to start with you.”

Barb looked at me and said, “Do you have any cookies?”