WARNING, YOU ARE HERE

by

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Major Department: English

Traumatic events can provoke introspection in a person's life and possibly cause an existential crisis, or, depression. These conscious thoughts offer a new perception of life as the individual understands that they define their own meaning and purpose to life. This leads to a series of choices. Those choices are often filled with the mundane, "everydayness" of life. Attempting to accept normalcy and navigate the mundane can lead to frustration, even recycling the individual back to a constant search for purpose and meaning. Poetry, as an art form, provides modules that can present mundane moments and use them to create a larger piece that recycles and searches for purpose and meaning, much like an individual.

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A Thesis

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Table of Contents

HOW TO HIDE A DEAD BODY 1
WHY WE MIGHT LAST 2
LAYOVER IN DALLAS 3
I WANT MY BONSAI TREE BACK 4
THE FIVE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE DAY I CONTEMPLATED SUICIDE 5
CLONE 6
SITTING IN THE RECLINER WHILE MOM WATCHES THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS 7
LEARNING TO DRIVE 8
BASEBALL 9
WARNING 10
THAT NIGHT YOUR ROOMMATE MADE YOU DOGSIT AND WE DRANK THREE BOTTLES OF MOSCATO 11
LUNCH POEM FOR CHARLIE, APRIL 16TH, 2017 12
WHAT MY FATHER LEFT BEHIND 13
ARS POETICA 14
VICTORY 15
HOW TO BE THE THIRD BORN AND ONLY BOY 16
WHAT I REALLY WANT 17
MY MOTHER IN 1998 18
THE HAMMER TRICK 19
DISPATCHES 20
SINGING IN THE KITCHEN, YOU TELL ME YOU LOVE ME 21
TO KILL A SKUNK 22
MAYBE, WE'LL WAKE UP AND IT WILL ALL BE A DREAM 23

How to Hide a Dead Body

A half mile from exit 82,
somewhere between endless
fields of soy beans and shadows

cast by Carolina pines, you ask me
if I could get away with murder.
“Of course, I could,” I replied,

sure that disposing a body
was easy enough. You claimed
that if the murder was clean –

something personal, attached,
like strangling, then disposing a body
would be my only challenge.

However, if the murder
was messy (wounds, blood, gore,
real Tarantino type stuff) then I

would have to worry
about a crime scene, too.
I explained how the Cali cartel

would wrap victims tight
in barbwire and dump them into
the river. When their bodies bloated,

the razors burst them to shreds;
fish food, they called it.
We ate sushi that evening

and discussed “what if’s.” Somewhere
between open relationships and celebrity
crushes, I thought about those pieces of flesh

carried by the river, drifting and bobbing
farther from the truth.

Why We Might Last

Because you say things
like *I'm going to stab you*. Because you curse
at your mother after tuning in and out
of her exacting afternoon phone call. Because
when I bump my head on the countertop
you cackle, your eyes
expecting my grin. Because you burnt holes
in the interior of my car door with cigarettes.
Because you grab my ass in public –
then, when I'm no longer startled
my crotch. And the night before our graduation,
when my uncle was struck dead by a bolt of lightning
you ran your fingers through my hair
as I fell asleep to the taste of tears.

Layover in Dallas

Send me the bill and I will pay
no matter how many tiny liquor
bottles we drank out of the mini
bar in Room 202. We laid
in bed studying the tan
wallpaper peeling from
the corners, exposing cherry
red paint beneath.

It reminded you of a barn.
It reminded me of blood.

We watched A Nightmare on Elm Street
and you let me play with your hair.
It smelled like lavender and you said the trick
was dry shampoo and dipping your
brush in perfume.

You fell asleep by the third act, so I
left a note by your luggage
with my number.

I Want My Bonsai Tree Back

the one we planned to plant
deep in the pines,
off the asphalt trail
from D.C. to Purcellville.
It had that twisted trunk
that grew towards stars
and swayed back,
balancing
evergreen clouds.
For years, we trimmed tiny needles
to look like Hiroshima Survivor[1].
Then one passive winter,
we watched it over-
grow the pot
and droop
onto our
apartment floor.

[1] "Hiroshima Survivor" is a Japanese white pine bonsai tree that survived the atomic blast in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

The Five-Year Anniversary of the Day I Contemplated Suicide

I grab the blue jacket out
of my closet. It's clean and I need
to stay warm without any heat.
I see the shotgun in the corner.
I put on my wool socks. It occurs
to me that it had been five years
since I almost offed myself.
You told me that if it happened
again to pick up a phone
instead. I cut on the TV. Packers
game. You make me swear
on our relationship. I can't believe
it's been five years.

Clone

I look like a clone of my father, which
I don't like to admit since I've tried
my whole life not to be one
or both of my parents. I impersonated
a good kid, graduated college.
I moved away, but visited
more than just on holidays.
I found someone I love
and we don't fight
often. Yet when I brush my teeth,
I see my father's face dripping
with toothpaste. His face
on my driver's license, in my rearview
mirror, and in the reflection
of my phone as I set my alarm
and fall asleep worrying
that I look too much
like my father.

Sitting in the Recliner while Mom Watches the Six O'clock News

Always, Dad and I have the same
conversation about where
his glasses are.
Mom chides,
"They're on his head."
But, it looks as if
there is nothing
there but silver streaks
lost in dark waves that rise
and fall into half curls.
I imagine them grabbing
at the roots, burrowing
through sawdust and skull
towards his brain, hiding away
those thick charcoal frames.
When he feels them,
he brushes those streaks back,
slides on his reading glasses, and
opens his beekeeper's bible.

Learning to Drive

My mother, the same woman who left
her car in neutral at the laundry mat
causing it to roll into a parked car,
taught me how to drive a stick.

I stalled at every stop
and grinded the clutch until I was certain
I heard the transmission beg
for mercy. Then she assured me

that I was anxious and it took time
to be proficient. Like Michelangelo who
stared at blocks of stone, knowing one
day he would carve muscle and beauty,
I would one day make it out of the parking lot.

Baseball

It was boring. But I would rather pick
four leaf clovers in left field and
bat ninth, ducking curve balls,
than be that boy
who didn’t like baseball.

I doubt I would like to play now,
too. Waiting to run in circles. Waiting
to be the reason some line drive
finds its alley. However,

I sometimes miss those uniforms
with my number, matching knee-high
socks, the ping when the ball ricochets off
the bat. The clouds of red
dirt which left permanent stains.

Warning

I’m the asshole your father

warned you about. The one

who will forget your birthday

and daydream during conversations.

I won’t defeat dragons or wake

you from a curse with a single

kiss, but I

listen

when

you whisper

the reasons

you are here.

That Night Your Roommate Made You Dogsit and We Drank Three Bottles of Moscato

I had just been fired from Target and couldn't keep from thinking about how much life sucks.

You were starving and wanted me to pick up Hibachi on my way. Two sets of chopsticks, white sauce, and enough noodles to feed a Dickensian orphanage. You poured the white sauce over your noodles. I dipped the veggies in mine.

We finished a bottle of Moscato and you asked if I could walk to the store and buy another, but remembered that the dog needed exercise so we all left together. You wore those thigh-high boots that kept my focus on your legs. Then let me unzip the boots when we returned with two more bottles.

We drank the second bottle on the porch to escape the dog farts. I broke the arm of the wooden deck chair, and you dropped a cigarette on the seat cushion. We opened the last bottle.

You were reminded of that time when your ex nearly burnt down your apartment with a stovetop fire and how you were upset because your cat, Sabrina, would have been trapped. Fuck him, you said. Fuck that almost cat killer.

We went back inside and had sex in the kitchen.

Lunch Poem for Charlie, April 16th, 2017

I've spent all morning convincing
my girlfriend that her hair
looks fine. Some call this Easter.
I pray for the resurrection
of Charlie Chaplin on his birthday.
For communion, I want to watch
A King in New York. Search Hulu:
none found. It suggests *Robo Cop,*
American Meth, clips of *Khloe and Kim*
Take New York. Search Prime: none found.
The Great Dictator $6.99 rent or buy;
countless shorts. Search Netflix:
none found. Like films: *Compulsion,*
Orson Welles, courts, one star;
Laura, Noir classic, two and a half stars;
To Catch a Thief, my father's favorite
Hitchcock film, three stars.
I opt for Roku's Charlie Chaplin channel
and watch the short where Charlie lives
in a cabin out in the snowy tundra,
wakes up one morning and makes tea
as three women gang up on another
in a snowball fight outside. Charlie hears
one explode against the door
and opens it.
He's greeted by a snowball to the face.
Wiping the powder from his eyes,
he looks up, frozen, struck
by the beautiful woman at his doorstep –
then struck once more by a snowball.

What My Father Left Behind

Gravel spewed from the growling
sound of pistons pushing their limits.

In seconds the black sedan, tagged
Playboy, vanished into the horizon.

I picked up the basketball he left me and tried
to remember his directions. *Set your feet, bend*

your knees and follow through with your
shot. I drew a breath, exhaled as it released,

arching in the air, sinking inside
the orange cylinder.

Ars Poetica

Poetry is naan bread dough slapped
on the walls of a clay pot, cooked til' air
pocket bubbles begin to crisp: scooped out
and painted in butter, garlic and parsley,
torn and dipped in curry sauce.

Victory

When I was twelve, my sister made me promise
not to tell our parents she kissed girls.
I wasn't sure what to do with such a secret,
so I planted it in the backyard near the deer femur
our dog buried the previous fall.
I kissed girls, too.

I kept the secret safe until my sister
came home from high school,
dumped by her girlfriend.
We sobbed together.
When my father found us, he sobbed too.
Then he laughed, punched her in the arm,
told her, "I knew."

How to Be the Third Born and Only Boy

Be the favorite at all times. You don’t have to do much;
smile when your candy stash gets busted. It helps

to be pitiful, too. Be sure to cry while splinters
are removed from your big toe, even though you

were warned to put on shoes. It’s okay
to play with Barbies, but there should always

be conflict. Chew with your mouth open.
Get worse grades than your sisters and beat them at Scrabble, but

be there when they need someone to hear how their
date left them in the parking lot and all they want is revenge.

Listen more than you talk. Don’t be afraid to be afraid.
Yell if you need help, like that time when the horse

kicked you in the leg and it was swollen and bruised
and so heavy you shouted the birds from the trees.

What I Really Want

is to cry again.
I want you to
grin at my corny jokes,
chortling when I accidently say
something genuinely funny.
We could run away together, you know?
We would probably
make it harder than it needs to be.
We're such perfectionists. Okay,
more like overdoers who over
think and do more than they should,
like say *I love you* too early in
the relationship and spend years
proving it to one another,
hoping that we're right.

My Mother in 1998

would rub my hair
every night before bedtime.
Her thumb and fingertips glided
from my neck, over my cranium,
towards my temple,
then back again, swerving
around and dodging
my ears. I could

never think straight
while lying there,
fluttering between
the light
and the dark,
moving
from one day
into another.

The Hammer Trick

My father learned the trick nailing
plywood to A frames, when those
hands were thin, before jelly
smashed fingernails and
dislocations. Before they
discovered how to exchange
lost teeth with dollar bills
between pillows and mattresses.
I envied those hands that showed
off by placing a nail between
the claw of a hammer,
one swing -
bang,
the nail a quarter way
driven into the two by four.
With a flick of the wrist, he spun
the hammer around,
one swing -
bang
the nail was flush.

Dispatches

I.

I wrote a poem for the sky
but it evaporated
to gas, seeping through cracks
in the atmosphere
drifting towards Jupiter.

II.

I wrote a poem for my mother,
but she said lilies aren't pretty.
Suggested I choose lilacs
instead.

III.

I wrote another poem for the sky
and it sent back instructions
for how to stay dry
during typhoons.

IV.

I wrote another poem for my mother.
She claimed I wasn't a poet.
She suggested that I get a job
fighting fires or writing headlines.

Singing in the Kitchen, You Tell Me You Love Me

Over “Tracks of My Tears,” you uttered,

I love you.

We nearly forgot the crackling bacon

popping grease, which singed

your bicep.

Goddamnit, you said.

I laughed and you began to cry.

To Kill a Skunk

It's a cat in the manure pile: no.
It's a skunk: yes.

Digging for worms.

Dad is holding a stick: no.
Dad has a rifle: yes.

Can't wash a horse
with tomato juice.

Bang!

It's dead: no,
        it's twitching.

Bang!

It's dead: yes.

Grab a shovel. Bury it: no,
        the dog will find it.

Put it in a trash bag: no,
        dump is closed on Sundays.

Toss it on the burning brush pile: no,
        yes.

Maybe, We'll Wake Up and It Will All Be a Dream

but until then, let's save the bees
and hear ghosts whisper through walls.

Allow wind chimes to warn our sofa-sitting
hearts of undead rednecks pursuing flesh
so we can drop our popcorn
and embrace each other.

Let the heat from our bodies
combust and turn to space dust
dancing around what can't really
be explained

like that tattoo below
your waistband, where the half-moon
hides behind cursive letters
I never quite learned to fashion.