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Thesis

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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By

Walter Kelly

Fall 2014

THESIS OF WALTER KELLY APPROVED BY

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MASTER'S THESIS

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## **Cedar Falls**

My college football career finally faded out in Cedar Falls, Iowa. The town was one of those bubbles of urbanization that rest on the farmlands. The kind of town that creates the illusion of city amenities, an illusion that is popped upon the realization that if you were to walk five miles in any one direction, you would find yourself in the center of a cornfield. This city, in particular, clung to I-380 just over one hundred miles south of the Minnesota border, a drive upon which you would see more grain elevators than gas stations. Cedar Falls and its sister city Waterloo did not seem to have been founded with a purpose in mind.

It is as though they sprang into existence and endured without ever looking for a reason to exist. It is odd that they never looked because you can see everything from this part of the world. It is a vast and flat expanse of usefulness. Every square inch of land outside of town appears to be employed, to have purpose. Once inside the city and

away from the artifice of a state-supported university, you can see the vacant lots and empty homes that, at least for some, have come to epitomize parts of the city. In a strange reversal it is a city that feels oppressed by the land around it. It is hard to have urban sprawl when you are surrounded on all sides by cultivated near-magic beans that sell for eight dollars a bushel.

This is not a place where the person I am today would have chosen to live, but I was younger and the incentives were in place. At the time I believed that this was my best avenue to the NFL, and I was under contract. A contract I had decided on and committed to when I was seventeen. Seventeen-year-olds are not known for being great decision makers, but at least I had chosen a university that was known for producing professionals. It was a reason I had chosen to sign my letter of intent here rather than in a place that would have been a better academic or cultural fit. And it is sometimes difficult to keep my present self from imagining inflicting great harm upon my younger self for not accepting the offer from Evanston, West Point, or Bloomington.

What I did not realize at the time was that a first team all-state honor and a good ACT score was a golden ticket. I could have jumped to the front of the line at nearly any university, including those that would have, understandably, looked right past me. I had vague awareness of this when Penn contacted me about wrestling, but by then I had signed a letter of intent. From where I am now, I cannot help but see the decision to go to Cedar Falls as anything but a mistake, a huge missed opportunity.

In hindsight I know that I never made it to the NFL, this recruiting window ended up being my only chance to spend the capital that I had built up with early morning weight-room sessions and hours on the practice fields. I would never get another opportunity to translate exercise into money. At the time of my recruitment I imagined the payoff to be an NFL contract. With that in mind I sold those hours for pennies on the dollar so that I could go to Cedar Falls.

All of this seems to paint my former self as capable of engaging in highly complicated cost-benefit analysis. This was not the case. I was a

laissez-faire kind of kid, and the sad truth is that when I was seventeen years old, I was a six-foot-six-inch, three hundred-pound weenie that did not want to be too far from his parents. That played a bigger role in landing me in Cedar Falls than I am comfortable admitting.

It was a peculiar choice, but not one that I spent much time thinking about while I lived there. The structure of college football robs you of choice. Well, that may be a little harsh. Immediately after a football player commits, he is overwhelmed with things to do and places to go. Weight room at 6:15 a.m., breakfast at 8:30 a.m., classes from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., position meetings at 3:45 p.m., practice at 5:00 p.m., and then dinner at 7:45 p.m. You find that you are so breathless after chasing appointments and obligations that you never have a moment to step back and look at the bigger picture. This is compounded by the mental strain that football puts on you: you spend all of your spare mental energy learning defensive fronts and blitz pickup schemes. Had I been able to pull myself out of the minutia and step away during my first few years, I may very well have decided that Cedar Falls was not the city for me. It would have been relatively easy

for me to transfer teams. This became a nonissue in the second half of my career. I have never been good at letting go, and viewing three years of my life as a sunk cost was not something I was capable of at that time. It is not something that I am capable of now. In addition to that I had begun to absorb some of the city's personality. In particular I was beginning to absorb some of the city's identity conflict.

In Cedar Falls the transition between the city and the country is abrupt and jarring. There is a very thin membrane protecting the delusions of the city from the nakedness of the plains. The Northern Iowa football practice field existed directly on this membrane. The fields ran up against a multimillion-dollar locker room and training facility in the south and a cornfield in the north. It is here that I felt the battle over the city's identity the most closely. My teammates and I were conscripted to be the soldiers in this trench warfare between the energy of the city and the encroachment of the country.

On the west side of the far field there was a large creek, just fifteen yards from the back of the end zone. I always expected that

someone would fall in, a long pass or a pancake block sending someone over the edge and out of sight. It never happened during my time there. That was probably for the best because, as far as I could tell, the creek was a place of pilgrimage for dying animals, the persistent cloud of gnats that hung over the edge had me imagining an elephant graveyard, populated by the corpses of aged raccoons and opossums. The mustard gas smell of rot would roll in with the west wind and force us over to the second field, not a problem until the first rainstorm loosened the grass roots enough for our cleats to scrape off some of the world's most expensive topsoil, one three-sixteenths-of-an-inch cleat at a time.

If you were to go to the fields at night—something I rarely did, I already spent enough hours there—depending on which way you turned, you would see both the sparkling foyer of the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center among the rows of streetlights or you would see darkness and distantly scattered lights of quiet farmhouses. Both of the lives those images represent are very worthwhile goals.

It is this juxtaposition that defines the city. This city is under siege by corn because, during the time I was there at least, it was struggling to reconcile the desire to be both a pastoral small town and the home of a state university. The city was in conflict with itself, a metropolitan contradiction.

This is only a problem for the locals. I freely admit that for most of my time in the city, I was only vaguely aware that there were people unaffiliated with the university in the area. I had no intention of staying after graduation. This was not an Austin or a Madison, towns that seem to throw anchors on anyone who passes through them. Initially it did not matter to me. I was going to live in whatever city drafted me. Most of the students appeared to have no intention of staying. In my time there I do not recall ever hearing a student claim to be from Cedar Falls. It is no wonder there was a division between the residents and the students.

To most of the world the town is known, if it is known at all, as the home of Northern Iowa University, a regional football power, a

drinking town. It is easy to imagine the natives uncomfortable with being known for only one thing, even if they are proud of it. I always had the sense that the city was trying very hard to control its image, an idea that to the cities and residents in other parts of the nation may sound ridiculous. But there is something inside the Midwestern mentality that makes a person keen to control the things that they have power over.

If you are not vigilant, the Great Plains can make you feel powerless. This is due almost entirely to the weather. The weather in this area is brutal. In the summer the air temperature routinely hits triple digits with the humidity to nearly match. The initial masochistic invigoration of walking out into the wall of heat and tasting the baked green humidity evaporates quickly. It's dangerous out there.

This is a very poor environment for incoming players. The transition is difficult enough. Not only are they experiencing all of the shocks and stressors of regular college students, they also have to deal with the disillusionment and shattered confidence that happens to

almost every player during their first week. Freshmen are coming from a place where they were monsters—the biggest, fastest, and strongest people out there. Their careers were defined by physical dominance. All of a sudden, for the first time in their life, they are surrounded by peers who are their athletic superiors. This should not have come as a surprise to anyone. There was no deception here. But as an incoming freshman, it is difficult to see college players on TV and not think that you are at least on par.

My career was no different. I came in as a prized recruit and was immediately smashed by men who were bigger, faster, and stronger than I was. I went through a crisis of confidence along with every other first-year player. Most of my peers dealt with this by becoming more social and embracing the status advantages that come with playing football at a university. In the second half of my career I would join them and the jersey chasers at the bars and house parties. But in those first two years I was too socially awkward and shy to join in. I chose to separate myself from the group in a misguided attempt to separate my football life from my nonexistent social life. Instead of hanging out with

teammates, I rode my bike. I spent most of my limited free time on the mountain-biking trails in Ulrich Park; during the times I was not mountain biking, I was exploring the outskirts of town, enjoying the uniquely Midwestern pleasure of a paved bike path between two cornfields. I like to believe that during this time I was thinking deep thoughts and sorting out my place on the team. It is not likely; more likely I was cursing my fear of social interaction or imagining what it would be like to have superpowers. I rode until the weather began to attack the town, subzero winds blowing in from the surrounding fields.

Because I was required to be outside for long periods of time, rain or shine, I developed firsthand knowledge of the power of weather in this area. One August afternoon we were forced to suspend practice because the hundred-plus-degree temperature and 80 percent humidity had caused the heat exhaustion tents to fill up.

Three months later one of our practice team members was frostbitten while filming practice from the skyjack. There were rumors that he was going to lose his nose, but thankfully they were just rumors

and he made a full recovery. In three months the temperature had swung one hundred degrees. It is also not uncommon for daily swings of forty degrees or more. One imagines that this weather must make people in this area exceptionally tough. Good for a football team; after all, “whatever doesn’t kill you, only makes you stronger,” right?

Instead of feeling stronger, most feel powerless, resigned to the fact that some days you are going to have to run your car heater in the morning and the air conditioner in the afternoon. It is a place where a large part of your life is going to be dictated to you. Being so powerless in front of the weather creates a situation where one takes very seriously the thing that he or she does have control over. Both Cedar Falls and I took our complicated images very seriously.

This is one of the reasons that I do not blame the city council for exercising what power they did have. In an effort to have it both ways, to embody the energy of the university and the wholesomeness of the country, the city employed a strategy of containment and separation. All new construction for the university seemed to be taking place in the

heart of campus. The university improved, but did not spread. It gave the rest of the town a chance to compete. This turned the city into a place of extreme juxtaposition, a collection of art museums next to bean fields and elementary schools across from remote parking lots. This is something that I only noticed in my fifth and final year. Long after I had dumped my delusions of playing professionally and right as I was beginning to associate myself more with the residents than the students. This type of city planning led to some very strange juxtapositions.

There is one in particular that has always stuck with me. On highway 2, halfway between the athletic center and the airport was a several-acre fenced-in area. It belonged to an Amish company that handcrafted backyard storage sheds. They kept costs low by hiring football players in the summer. One year a couple of my friends, Jeff and Luke, had worked there. I had asked them why a shed-making company needed fences. Was there a shed theft epidemic that I was unaware of? The answer was quite a bit stranger. It was put in place solely to keep the goat in. The owner of the company had gotten a jump-start on the green revolution and was using a goat to cut his lawn.

From what I remember, originally the owner had built a short picket fence. The day after it was built, the goat vanished. It was eventually found and a four-foot chain-link fence was erected: no luck. A six-foot fence was then erected and, in a moment I find both frustrating and funny, the owner found that a six-foot fence was no obstacle for a billy goat. I had no idea that goats could jump that high, or why someone would spend money building three fences rather than get rid of one goat. Regardless, the problem was solved when the owner added a few lady goats that were able to calm down the billy and create the herd of living lawn mowers that the owner had envisioned. I probably would have just added barbed wire. After hearing this story I always looked for the goats, and would often see them lazily grazing as the charter drove us past their enclosure and to our private plane.

This goat enclosure is an image that has never left me. Other memories and experiences from that time have faded away, but this stupid goat story has persisted in my memory. I am not sure why this image stayed while other more exciting ones have left me, but I am glad that it did. It is a near-perfect representation of how Cedar Falls uses

isolation and containment as a way to safely keep two seemingly contradictory ideas next to each other. This worked much better than I would have expected, by creating self-contained little bubbles, the city is able to quarantine the energies of the university. The fast-paced and violent world of football is separated from the slower, gentler pace of rural Iowa. I tried to mimic this strategy by attempting to keep my football life separate from my social life. My football career was energetic and dangerous; my social life was the opposite.

The idea of separation is seen most clearly in the city's only landmark, the UNI-Dome stadium—a \$30 million eyeball of a structure with corrugated steel sclera, a flattened blue steel iris, and a white fabric pupil—it can contain twenty thousand-plus people. It was built in the late seventies. In 1994 the roof was changed from pressurized fabric to metal rigging after a large snowstorm caused the roof to collapse. It is imposing. It is well made. It also has the effect of subconsciously forcing everyone who enters to develop an emergency escape plan should the metal paneling start tumbling down, remembering, of course, that the closest exits may be behind them. During my final home game I

remember standing on the sidelines as the cheers and rattling keys of the spectators filled the space with enough noise to flex the fiberglass windows of the luxury suites and press boxes. I watched as they wobbled back and forth, and wondered how the stadium did not pop when faced with such a force of energy. But it held. And while my mind was being scrambled by sound waves echoing off the railings and metal rafters, someone passing the stadium thirty feet away, on Hudson Road, would have had no idea that football was being played at all.

Now that I am removed from the energy and self-importance of college athletics, I feel as though I can empathize with the city. It sucks to be known only for one thing; I imagine that the longtime residents and I share similar feelings when asked about the university. I have been hearing the same question for the past decade, from doctors to homeless gentleman, and everyone in between. Their first question, after some comment about my height, is almost always "Did/do you play ball somewhere?" I always answer "in another life," which admittedly is probably a little coy than it needs to be. These people are just being polite, and it is still at least a little flattering that a total

stranger shows an interest. And though I cut the conversation off after my stock reply, I am sometimes tempted to follow up with “let me tell you what else I do.”

Predictably, the farther I get away from football, the more nostalgic I become. With that comes the temptation to misremember the experience as a string of glory days, a temptation that if indulged, would begin to define me and have me starting every other sentence with “back when I played ball,” or “When I was playing D1 football.” When those temptations come, it is useful to think of the Dome and remember how important containment is. I am thankful that the final nail in the coffin of my football career happened while I was cutting through the stadium on my way to class.

After my final season, but before graduation, I received a phone call from New Orleans. They had seen my Wonderlic score, my forty time, and my vertical, and they imagined an NFL player. In a moment very fitting of my fifteen-year career I told them that yes, those were my numbers; yes, I was very proud of them, but there was more to the

story, in this particular case it was game film. My game film was not good enough. I had turned out to be nothing more than a serviceable player, a solid starter and a good stopgap, but not NFL material.

I find it both fitting and tragic that my career ended in this town. I think that part of the reason I never reached my potential is that I adopted the city's isolationist strategy. This manifested in a desire to have a social life separate from football. This led to a two-year period in which I distanced myself from the team and pushed back against all football activities. This worked counter to my goal of maximizing my football abilities. Part of the reason I never reached my potential is because I wasted too much time. In this regard the ending is very fitting: I adopted the persona of the city, yet I was unable to use its strategies as effectively. As I look back, it is difficult for me to not return to the beginning and imagine what my experience would have been had I chosen to play ball for a different team. I imagine that in another place I would have flourished and reached my potential. When I am in this head space, the fact that my career fizzled out in Cedar Falls seems like a tragedy. My emotions circle back on themselves. My original dislike of

Cedar Falls in the early years gave way to a respect in the later years; however, that respect no longer exists as my distance from the city has reaffirmed my original read.

This entire exploration seems to be distilling itself down to one question: How does my home affect me? Unfortunately, I do not have a clean answer for this. I want to be able to blame Cedar Falls for all of my shortcomings as a player, but that feels too easy. I am left wondering how much influence that besieged and segregated city has had over me, how much of it has gone unnoticed.

## August

I was given three gifts at the end of my football career: a commemorative ball, a game jersey, and an additional month. In the years that followed I threw away both the football and the jersey. This almost certainly happened during one of my reinvention frenzies, mini-midlife crises that seem to come up about every five years. They are defined by a manic cutting of ties to the past when every artifact and piece of memorabilia from a particular period is sold, deleted, or thrown out. I would have thrown out the month as well, if it were possible to throw out abstracts.

There are times when I regret that I have thrown out the gifts of my past. Their absence raises their value, and I have noticed that it also intensifies the nostalgia that I feel when I think of them. Logic seems to dictate that I should have developed a strong appreciation for the month I could not throw out. It is one of the last artifacts from a specific period in my past. I feel like I should value it more; it was a unique and useful gift. But even now that I am approaching a decade removed from

the experience, I still find that my feelings toward the month of August have not changed.

I hate the month of August. Not because of the searing heat or the marauding mosquitos. Rather, because every year it rolls in and reminds me of missed campfires, the times I did not go tubing, and lost sunsets on the lake. These are memories that I want, but never had the opportunity to make. For most of my adolescent and adult life the month of August did not exist. It was replaced by the time warp of two-a-day practices, a seemingly never-ending slide show of practice fields, film study, training rooms, and dorm ceilings. For nine years, while the rest of the world enjoyed nights on the river and backyard barbecues, I was hunkered down, counting the days until September.

Admittedly there are many worse fates than spending a month developing a skill and getting in shape. But as an upper-middle-class white kid from Iowa, I was just sheltered enough to imagine this experience as closer to a gulag than the extended dental visit that it was. My summers during that time were planned, knowing that August was

coming, which meant the football practices, which meant heat and misery. It became a month to fear: a skull and crossbones on the calendar, an X on August 1. For nine years of my life, August was a blur of uncomfortable memories like those of the Oklahoma drill, of passing my apartment on the way to spend the night in the twin beds of the dorms, of the chill and sour-milk smell of still-wet shoulder pads, of moleskin-covered blisters and the beginnings of bruises that would be in place until past Christmas, and of the sound that results from mixing a dorm mate's snoring and the clicking of an oscillating fan. I can forgive myself for feeling the way I did at that time; my hatred and fear of the month was justified, overstated maybe, but justified.

What I find interesting is that I still do not like the month. I am closing in on a decade removed from the initial onslaught of these feelings, and still they persist. Initially I explained this away by conceding to the truth that I hold grudges. That explains some of the story, but not all of it. Somewhere along the way there has been a change in how I remember the events. The further I get from that experience, the softer my memories become. I am concerned that my

mind's eye is losing what little objectivity it had. When I look back on the month, I no longer see the discomfort that I know was there; I see post-practice smiles, the chaos of the annual July 31 party, my friends and me rolling our eyes at the marching band when they complained and talked of mutiny, the true freshman studying the fight song, myself un-ironically watching *American Gladiators* in the dorm commons. This does nothing to change my feelings of August. The only difference is that the hatred is built on the back of wistful nostalgia and not on discomfort and dread.

What irks me is that I find myself becoming a masochist. When I was younger, I wanted to take advantage of the leisure I felt I was being denied. Now that I am older, part of me wishes that I could go back to the sunrise practices that I spent my youth cursing. I suppose that nostalgia squirms its way into everything. It is at least somewhat intriguing that the influence of nostalgia is enough to change my opinion so dramatically, but I do not feel equipped to explore a topic that I have not lived long enough to become an expert on. Besides, I will eventually get far enough away, and this experience will fade into

background noise. Sometime in the future, when the details of this experience finally melt away, I will be in a position to examine the nostalgic value. Until that happens I will focus on more concrete experiences.

What I am interested in is not the nostalgia itself but rather the moment where the motivation of my hatred turned from fear to nostalgia. I am interested in the window between when I was done with the discomfort and before the nostalgia set in.

Every two-a-day practice that I experienced ended with the same unfulfilled promise. The graduating seniors would all swear up and down the rows of lockers that on August 1 they were going to show up to the morning practice with coolers and lawn chairs. They were going to drink forties and watch that year's conditioning test. They were going to bask in the feeling of being day-drunk and done with two-a-days.

No one ever showed up. Four years in a row I went out to run my cross fields and saw an empty parking lot. This did not keep me from

making the same promise when I left, and when I made it, I had fully intended to go. But I didn't.

When that August after graduation came around, I felt the weight of historical inertia. I imagine this is a weight felt to some degree or another by all retirees. Where a mill worker might feel an understandable force compelling her to return to work, I felt disoriented and confused. In the years immediately following my retirement, I felt no desire to return. Nor did I know what to do with the time I had been given. The perception that your calendar has jumped from eleven to twelve months is quite a disorienting experience. It is a too-good-to-be-true moment. Right now, I would wager that the most wanted resource is time, or it might be a 1a-1b situation with money.

I had been given a gift that felt as if it were impossible. I spent the next several Augusts living like a character in a horror movie. I was always waiting for something to go wrong. Part of this stems from my built-up hatred of the month. In those years I imagine myself unable to see the month as anything other than a tormentor or, at best, it was a

back-alley grifter trying to sell me knockoff Rolexes, ones that could easily be taken back by the authorities.

I did not realize this at the time, but it may have been part of the reason I did not go back to watch the conditioning tests. If I avoided the field and the other trappings of two-a-days, I could dodge the reality that they were done for me. This is not to say that I wanted to go back; this was a time before nostalgia set in, and the memories of the previous year had not softened. I had lived so long with the specter of August that I imagine I wanted to hold on to it for a little longer.

I regret not going back. I should have gone and drank in the parking lot, and it might have been cathartic. At the very least it would have added to my legend among my friends still on the team, while simultaneously demonstrating that the coaches no longer had any power over me. If I had, I might have been able to avoid the unsettled Augusts that followed. In some ways I feel now like it would have acted as closure for me at the time. In the years that followed I often toyed with the idea of going, but this was not a repeatable situation. The event

repeated, but my window to interact with it had closed. I cannot show up in Cedar Falls, Iowa, on the first of August and get wasted in the parking lot. The idea sounds ridiculous and pathetic, and it has sounded that way since the second two-a-day that I missed. My potential window for a clean break is closed. Now, I am left to come to terms with my conflicted feelings on my own so that I might someday be able to forgive August for making me nostalgic about an experience I did not enjoy.

## **The Importance of Proper Hydration**

I have found that the lessons I learned from athletics are not the ones that I expected. The further I get away from organized sports, the more surprised I become by the things that my brain decided to incorporate into my personality. I would have loved for my brain to absorb the predictable athletic toolbox of teamwork, perseverance, goal setting, and discipline—the skills that could have made a great leader or, at the very least, a compelling résumé. That did not happen for me. The lesson that I find has most firmly lodged itself into my brain is the importance of proper hydration.

Athletics on all levels are played under the coaches' chants of "drink, drink, drink," even if you are not thirsty, you drink. (I have often wondered if this mental conditioning is partially responsible for the alarmingly high levels of binge drinking among male athletes.) This is all done for a very good reason: performance and safety are tied to hydration.

In a way, I suppose, I should be thankful that I gained any lasting life lessons from athletics. I should quit lamenting the fact that I am not Tom Brady and appreciate that I am aware of an important health metric. I am undoubtedly a healthier person because my brain is so focused on hydration. Yet, I still feel cheated, and even though it may not be justified, I am frustrated and annoyed that this is the thing that I most clearly take away from several decades of experience. I devoted my energy to hydration monitoring rather than more worthwhile expenditures such as motivation or confidence building. To make matters worse, I am reminded of this wasted mental energy several times a day, every time I take a leak.

I cannot help but self-diagnose myself after seeing the color of my urine. The urine color chart is deeply ingrained in my psyche. The chart is an easy way to monitor how hydrated you are; it works in the same way as the Wong-Baker pain scale. Pale yellow means hydration and a happy face; dark brown means dehydration and X-ed-out eyes. If I see anything other than a very pale yellow staring up at me from the bowl, I

feel compelled to drink water. And God help me if I see dark amber or brown, it is about enough to send me into a panic attack. I do not know when this strange compulsion took hold in my brain, but I do know when I was first introduced to the idea.

I was introduced to the hydration color chart during my first collegiate two-a-day session. The color charts were posted above every urinal and next to the weigh-in chart, above the locker-room scale. In an effort to force hydration, each player was required to list his weight both before and after the morning and afternoon practices. It would be an understatement to say that posting the weigh-in chart backfired. In that setting, anything that could be turned into a competition was. It became a challenge to see who could lose the most weight during a practice. Players overhydrated to gain weight before, and then refused to drink during practice; the winner lost twenty-eight pounds in three and half hours. I was never able to lose more than twenty pounds of water in a practice and therefore never had any bragging rights. In an effort to curb the drastic weight loss, the coaches added a forty-five-

minute conditioning drill to the end of the afternoon practice. After that, all the players lied on the chart.

After the weigh-in was compromised, but before I began examining the color of my urine, I witnessed my first serious dehydration injury. During a morning practice in late August a friend of mine named Brian Cutwright experienced a full-body cramp. It happened in the middle of PAT protection. His body, starved of electrolytes, seized up; all of the muscles in his body, including his jaw, tightened up, and he fell back, his body locked out in a living rigor mortis. I do not remember if he moaned or screamed as he went down. It was a moot point once his jaw locked; all he could do was groan. The team moved fields. Brian and a trainer waited for an ambulance. He missed one practice. The training room began stocking pickle juice, on the recommendation of some lost old wives' tale, and surprisingly it seemed to work.

I am tempted to say that this is the moment where my brain decided to prioritize hydration monitoring. It would make sense. In the

moment I am sure I thought I was watching a man die in a horrible way from something that was entirely preventable. It seems like this is the exact kind of experience that would prioritize hydration in my brain. I am sure that it did for Brian. As easy and understandable as it would be to claim that this moment began my peculiar noticing, I do not think that it is a full explanation.

Oddly enough I believe that a great amount of the blame can be placed on a particular drug test that I took sometime in the mid-2000s. The NCAA has a very strict and consistent drug-testing regiment. It works like this: Three times a year a random sample of players is taken. Their names are posted on the training room bulletin board. The random sample seems to repeatedly hit the players most likely to pass—how lucky. A person on the list shows up to the VIP room in the stadium at 6:00 a.m., he or she meets with the NCAA representatives—there is always at least one man and one woman. My experience with this process took place before the Onterrio Smith Whizzinator scandal, but even then the NCAA was aware of the real, or more likely

imagined, threat that rubber penises, heaters, and powdered urine posed to the competitive balance of college athletics. As a safety measure, male athletes are asked to remove their shirts and produce a sample in front of the urinalysis proctor. The next step is to sit and wait for your turn with a tester. Of course none of this would have been legal if not for the consent form, a piece of paper easily overlooked in the tome of contracts that each athlete signed at the beginning of the academic year. The final step is to look at the urine through a handheld spectrometer to ensure that it is not too diluted.

I nearly failed my first NCAA drug test, but not for the reason you might expect. I was not using any banned substances. That idea was laughable: I was not a smoker, and my vices of choice were out of my system within hours. In fact, at the time of this test I was running a surprisingly brisk small business that traded clean urine for twenty dollars or a case of beer. It turns out that it is very easy to pawn off someone else's clean urine to a non-NCAA tester. I was never going to

fail because of drugs; I was going to be nearly failed because of my hydration level.

I had gone into the testing area, produced a sample in front of the male tester. The sample was capped, and I lined up behind the other athletes who were unlucky enough to see their names on the bulletin board. After about fifteen minutes I was seated in front of the urinalysis proctor. She examined my sample with her spectrometer, a device that looks like a medical-grade kaleidoscope, and told me that the sample was unusable. It was too dilute. She gave me a look that suggested she thought I had done it on purpose in an effort to game the system. My only option was to sit in the corner and suck down as many complimentary Capri Suns as possible in an attempt to produce another sample before the testers left and the test was failed. I imagine that it was about an hour and a baker's dozen of Capri Suns later before I was told that the testers were leaving. I had one last chance to produce or I would be marked a failure. I spent what felt like ten minutes in a bathroom, with the male tester standing over my shoulder, before I

produced a sample that could be used. That was a very stressful ten minutes. At the time I believed that if I failed, I would lose thousands of dollars in scholarship money. I distinctly remember thinking that the tester had the worst job in America, but that was before I gained an appreciation for health insurance. I produced a usable sample and never had any trouble in subsequent drug tests.

Looking back on the experience, I find that it is hard to dredge up the feelings of fear that I had at the time. This is because I would find out later that there were no real stakes; I would not have lost my scholarship over an inconclusive drug test. What I can still feel is the strange sense of betrayal that came with this experience. I felt that I was being punished for doing the right thing by staying hydrated and healthy. This is ridiculous, of course. There was never an agenda here. The sample I produced just lacked enough sugars to be tested. I can see that now, but for years I carried some bitterness, not a ton but some. I think that this bitterness is what made me constantly aware of my hydration level. This drug test combined with the image of Brian locked

out of his own body and the years of subliminal manipulation by coaches combined to make it impossible for me to not notice what color my urine is.

Admittedly this is not a real problem. In actuality it is likely a boon. I am constantly aware of my health. The reason that I am bothered by these intrusive thoughts, as useful as they might be, is that they remind me that this is where my brain decided to allocate its subconscious energy. I feel a little cheated that I never have intrusive thoughts that remind me to be positive, to stay motivated, or to be more active, even though those were all possibilities from my background. My brain rarely jumps in to say "keep up the good work." But it never misses an opportunity to say "your urine looks a little dark. You should start freaking out about it."

**Z**

A decade ago I cheered the death of a man I hardly knew. Or maybe I did not know him at all. He was no one you are likely to know; a single soul I knew of only as Z and with whom I crossed paths briefly.

I had my face split open by this dead man. At the time of the assault he was very much alive, and very drunk. Within a few days he was dead on the side of the road, the victim of a hit-and-run. Or at least I think it was him. At the very least it was someone who could have been him.

The fight that links Z and I together was not particularly noteworthy. It started, like most do, with an errant insult. I was walking by a house party when I overheard someone denigrating the football team I played for. It was not particularly biting or hard-hitting. I threw a random “fuck you” into the din and considered the matter closed. Unfortunately for me, there was someone at the party who was looking for a fight.

The details of the time immediately before, during, and after the fight are a bit blurred, probably due to some combination of alcohol and brain trauma. I know that the man who beat me up was nicknamed Z. That much I am confident in, he constantly referred to himself in the third person, as Z. He was not a tall man. He was not a particularly large man. His clothing was unremarkable.

I remember being involved in an insult arms race: families got involved, looks were attacked, and girlfriends were thrown under buses. All the while people were flooding out of the house party. They formed a cheering section behind Z, egging him on, likely cracking their knuckles menacingly. In an attempt to release the pressure of the situation, I said "Fuck it," threw my hands up in the universal sign for "I don't want trouble," and started walking away, my back to Z. The hope was that he was mostly talk, or that he would be honorable enough to not hit a man in the back.

I have no memory of the next five minutes.

When my brain returned online, I was sitting on a porch three houses up from where the fight took place. An unfamiliar couple was

asking me if I was okay. It is from this couple that I found out what happened. I had been punched in the back of the head and then beaten while I was dazed. While I was with the couple, the police showed up. They asked for my side of the story. I must have been very articulate because they did not press me when I refused the ambulance. The couple corroborated my story. I guess it was really their story. I just added the authority. I pressed assault charges and the police raided the house party. Z and the cheering section had fled out the back door. In the years that followed I would always call in a noise complaint when I saw that particular house was having a get-together.

I went home. My roommate took me to the hospital to get stitches. I must have had my full faculties by this point since I remembered to lay a towel over my pillow before bed. I did not want my face to heal to the fabric overnight.

When I woke up the next day, my face had swollen up and was stiff with healing. I looked like I was suffering from a severe allergic reaction. I had no desire to go out in public. Unfortunately, I had a

weight-room appointment, one that I could not miss without jeopardizing my football scholarship.

I did not get any lifting done. I spent two hours retelling the story of the fight. Everyone who heard it had an opinion on what they would have done, what I should have done. Fifty people left the room confused and slightly ashamed that I had not fought back. Apparently, losing the fight reflected badly on the entire football team. I found out a few years later that some of the linebackers organized a posse and went after Z. Of course they had no way of finding him and so the lynching party failed. By the end of the weight-lifting session I had been made to feel embarrassed.

The embarrassment caused me to concoct elaborate revenge fantasies. In my mind I ran into Z everywhere, and every time I saw him, I stomped him into the ground. His beaten body was shoved into the walk-in cooler of Sharky's Bar, thrown off the top floor of Sabin Hall, buried in a Dumpster behind the Mexican grocery store on Hudson, among many others. My anger peaked after two days. My face

was healing well and I was coming to terms with the idea that I would never see or hear of Z again.

Z popped unexpectedly back into my life on the Monday eight days after the assault. One of my teammates stole my imaginary revenge from me. He informed me that there had been a hit-and-run accident the weekend before. A man on a motorcycle had been hit and killed by a drunk driver. The victim was known to his friends as Z.

My revenge fantasies turned to morbid imaginings. What had the accident been like? Had Z died instantly? Was he wearing a helmet? Was he crushed under the car with the satisfying crunch of smashed cockroach carapace? Maybe he was hit by a truck. And if that was the case, maybe it steamrolled him from his feet up, turning him into a tube of organ toothpaste.

You often hear the cliché: "I would not wish that on my worst enemy." This experience showed me just how ridiculous that saying is: you can wish a lot on an enemy. My imaginings of Z's death became more and more horrific. They often ended at his funeral, closed casket of course, his cheering section from that night wailing in the front row.

These imaginings never brought any sympathy from me. At the time I considered it karmic retribution. After all, I had to get almost thirty stitches because of this guy. At the time I could easily have thought that warranted death.

The word of this got around the team, and before long the joke was that you did not fuck with Walt, the universe had his back.

I wish that the story had ended here. I would have made sense of this. I could have rationalized it as an example of the recklessness of youth, or the dangers of alcohol. There are plenty of clichés that could be applied for this. Every one of them would have made this easy to digest and easy to forget. Unfortunately for my psyche, this story gets a little more complicated.

Two months after his death Z came back from the grave and into my life one last time. A female friend of a roommate cornered me at a party and asked me to tell her what happened with Z. It seemed like an odd request, but she was persistent, and good-looking. So I told her the story. She told me I had to be wrong, that there was no way Rodney would do something like that. I had no idea who Rodney was. It turns

out that this woman had been very close with the man who had been killed. She had been to the funeral. She knew the woman who replaced the flowers on the street-side grave marker. She was convinced that her friend was not the man who had assaulted me. I explained that most of the details of that encounter had been beaten out of me. We compared notes anyway. The ones that I had did not seem consistent with the man she was describing. But that was not conclusive enough because it was hard to imagine that there had been two twentysomethings in Cedar Falls who had adopted the same one-letter nickname. In the end we both agreed that it was possible that the Z who kicked my ass and the Z who was killed by the drunk driver might not be the same person. We could not be sure.

What I find interesting is how I reacted in that moment. I had no response. The idea that I may have spent the last several months wishing a horrible death on an innocent man did not really faze me. Even more than that, I vividly remember thinking, "Well, he probably deserved it." Whoa! That is psychopathic. A thought I am now ashamed to have had. I like to think that the man I am today would never

respond in such a flippant way. But when I was in college, I did. The question I ask now is: Why did I respond that way when I was younger?

The simplest answer could be that I am a bit psychopathic. I considered that I might just lack empathy for other people. I am sure that this accounts for part of the explanation. I certainly mark some boxes on the Cleckley checklist, but not too many. if anything, I think I have a healthy level of both psychopathy and narcissism. I also think that if I were a psychopath, I would know and not be ashamed of it. At a baseline I consider myself to be a kind and empathetic man, but I would have told you the same thing right before I got the news of the death of the man called Z. That said, I do not think that my lack of reaction in this particular case is an indicator of how I interact with the world. I think this was an anomaly.

Unfortunately, this complicates things further. It would have been easier if I could just put a “turns out I am a monster” bow on this experience. But I cannot do that honestly and so I need to try and answer the question: What is it about this experience that makes it so

affecting? I need to figure out what about this experience warped my college self's response.

The logical place to start was with the fight itself. It makes some sense that such a traumatic experience could have caused me to go into a temporary insanity of some kind. This explanation does not work for me. I had been in several fights before this. In all of them I had taken more physical damage. I moved past those cases without any real trouble.

There might be something important about the moment when I received the news of his death. That moment should have forced the narrative in my head to reverse: the villain becomes an innocent. However, the narrative never flipped. It remained a bad guy on a motorcycle getting what he deserved. I think that the image stuck for two reasons. The first was the obvious ambiguity of the situation. I do not know who this Z was. There was still a chance that there had never been another Z to begin with. The second reason requires that I create a space where the Z who was killed was definitely a man I never knew. I would have expected this to drastically change how I felt about the

news. It did not. It is simply because I never knew this person. He was one more statistic, no different than a starving African child, a tragedy that I have become somewhat desensitized to. This is not a revelation that I am proud of. Remember, I don't think I am a psychopath. It was while trying to come to terms with that sad realization that I figured out what was so special about the experience with Z.

What made this experience so impactful was the period of time between the fight and receiving the news that a man by the name of Z was killed on a motorcycle. It was the period of time when I was constructing revenge fantasies. It was not the fantasies themselves that were important. It was the feeling that spurred their creation. I was embarrassed. But more than that, I was embarrassed that I had to go into the weight room with a busted-up face and tell my teammates that I got beaten up.

The important word here is *teammates*, but not for the reason that you might think. There is a common misconception that everyone is friendly on a large team. There seems to be the idea that it is one big unified circle. A football team is more like a corporation. The entity

itself has a common goal, but the vast majority of your time will be spent working in your small group on very specific goals. I was on friendly terms with all the men in my small position group. Oddly, it was not their reaction that worried me. Our relationships were solid enough to not be changed by a handful of stiches. The embarrassment that changed my actions stemmed from the thin connection that I had with every other member of the team. People whose names I knew, but not people I hung out with or talked to.

It is a very thin connection. But it was enough to move all of them from the neutral section of my brain into the “friend” section of my brain. It had me asking the question: How little do you have to share with someone before you value their opinion? This must vary from person to person. But for me there is a shockingly small margin.

Teammates, classmates, Washingtonians, Iowans, writers, runners, lifters, fans of the Chicago Bears, fans of the Seattle Seahawks, and many more—you are all instantly a “friend” until proven wrong.

The reverse is likely true. There must be groups that instantly sort into the “foe” category. I know for me there is at least one. I am not

going to like you if you happen to share a nickname with a man who recently beat me up. I almost certainly have many more groups like this. I have not found them because it is uncomfortable to look for them. I have no incentive to make myself feel bad.

I think I can safely say that embarrassment is the reason that this experience stuck with me. But the nature of the embarrassment has changed. In that moment my embarrassment stemmed from losing face among my peers. Today, I am still embarrassed. But it is because I made an unfair snap judgment about an innocent man. The key was when I learned that the second Z shared a nickname with someone I did not like. Sadly, I think that this was enough to sort him into the "foe" section of my brain. I am very aware of how fucked up that is. He was instantly judged by someone he never knew, because of something he never did.

One surprising revelation was how much my reaction to a person changes once I move him from neutral to the "foe" category. Thankfully, the overwhelming majority of people who I meet are sorted as neutral or "friend." Another surprise was learning how shitty I end

up feeling if I unfairly apply a negative label to someone. It is interesting because it does not go both ways. I do not get hung up on past moments of misplaced kindness.

While I find both of these conclusions interesting, I do not think they are the takeaway from this experience. The important lesson that I grasp from this is the ease in which we make impactful judgments. I may have condemned a man because he had the same nickname as someone I did not like. I not sure I would not have done it for less. There is something about these snap judgments that bypass the logic circuit in the brain. I think this happens to everyone, and I don't think anyone is comfortable with it.

## Looking for Comfort Food

In the winter of 2012 I tried to cure my anxiety disorder with meatloaf. I was coming off my first serious panic attack. I had spent the evening convinced that I was having a heart attack. A trip to the ER sorted it out for me, but it was still a very destabilizing experience, one that fellow sufferers will agree leaves you feeling very vulnerable. On my way out of the Emergency Room, the doctor had given me a prescription for a mood-altering medication named Ativan. I filled it, but as is often my habit, I thought I could get by without it. I would control my mood using a more natural, and, I thought, more proven, technique. I would use food.

I came to this conclusion partly because I am weak in the face of cultural pressure. The media that I consume fluctuates between live sporting events and throw-away reality shows on TLC. Both of these programs are loaded with advertisements extolling the psychosomatic effects of food. I allowed myself to be bombarded with images of Gatorade gels leading to championships and three pints of Ben and

Jerry's healing the emotional damage of a broken relationship. With this idea in mind I went looking for a food that would cure anxiety.

I went for comfort food. A term that evokes feelings of warmth and security, a culinary bear hug, food with the power to transport you back to a safer, more familiar time. This is a subcategory of food that I rarely venture into. I am more comfortable with mass-producing meals based on macros and baking. Those would be of no use to me here, and in my vulnerable state I convinced myself that what I wanted was comfort. I wanted nostalgia on a fork. For a white middle-class man that meant a menu of American classics, consisting of, but not limited to, chicken pot pie, tomato soup, and ice cream.

With that in mind I pulled up a recipe from my past, a meal I had often asked my mother to cook for me on my birthday (after I got old enough to stop demanding McDonalds). The most homey, nostalgic, and safe dish I could think of. I made mashed potatoes and meatloaf. As far as I was concerned, this was Plato's form of comfort food. I spent the better part of an evening creating what I hoped would be the perfect

dinner, the panacea I needed to get back to normal. I do not remember the shopping list, but I imagine that during this period my pantry lacked butter and bacon since they are two pleasures I rarely allow myself. I do remember that I spared no expense.

I smashed together hand-ground sirloin, homemade bread crumbs, and fresh eggs. I created a sticky glaze of ketchup and dark molasses. I served it alongside potatoes whipped in a stand mixer, blended with a stick of melted butter. The potatoes could not absorb all of the butter, and every ladle indent into the pot would quickly fill with a golden reservoir. I cooked off some thick-cut bacon, sautéed a handful of the shallots in bacon grease, and mixed the shallots and now crumbled bacon with a bag of frozen peas (they were not in season). I plated the meal and for a change I ate at the dining room table rather than the couch in front of the TV. I even lit a candle.

I sat back and waited for the wave of salty saturated fat and over-maintenance calories to wash over me. It never came. I do not remember the exact details, but I imagine I kept shoveling meatloaf and

mashed potatoes into my face in an attempt to catch the comfort that I thought had been promised. Nothing happened. I do distinctly remember having a fear that I had done something wrong, that I had messed up the recipe, that I had failed myself when I needed myself the most. It made some sense this was not in my cooking comfort zone, but I had carefully followed the recipe and measured. Precision cooking is something I can handle. Regardless of the reason for the failure, the stress I created and subsequently put myself under nearly triggered another panic attack. It was only avoided with the help of Ativan.

Meatloaf had betrayed me. It had not been the panacea that I was looking for. It had been an anxiety trigger disguised as comfort food. This strikes me as a particularly nefarious betrayal. I had opened my life back up to comfort food and meatloaf, and it had left me feeling more vulnerable than ever. Having the Ativan soar in and save the day helped me to come to the realization that by skipping the Ativan and relying on food, I had entirely missed the point. I had wanted food to cure me; I wanted food to work as medicine. Looking back, it's hard not

to feel foolish here. After all, I had medicine. Somehow I had convinced myself that I was skipping the middleman, when instead I was creating it.

Part of the reason for this confusion was ignorance. I had never seriously looked at my relationship to food. It is something that I have only recently begun to understand. A little personal introspection has helped me come to the understanding that I see food nearly exclusively as fuel and as medicine.

This is a mindset that developed partially out of my history in athletics. I have firsthand knowledge of the differences that a diet can make on physical performance. This is not some magical insight unique to me. Of course diet affects performance. The reason it has been so instrumental in my personal development has more to do with how often I had to be aware of the connection, how many times I have had to make diet choices based on performance potential. You begin to measure food in a very empirical way. I found out quickly that a half cup of oatmeal and a hundred gram scoop of protein powder will fend

off weakness for six hours at the desk or two hours at the gym. This mindset extends across all food groups and puts you into a place where you are constantly asking what food will do for you. This is part of why I see food the way I do, but it does not fully explain the story.

A larger part of the reason that I am so far into the food-as-medicine camp has to do with body image. I am a member of the former fat kids' club. Like many others in that club, I have used food for body modification. When I was in my early twenties I lost one hundred pounds over the course of four months. One hundred pounds of fat contained approximately enough energy to walk from Los Angeles to New York. That would have been an interesting and adventurous way to drop the pounds. I did not do that. I instead relied on thermodynamics, or more precisely, I starved myself. I cut calories, hard, dropping from six thousand a day to around fifteen hundred. I became a six-and-a-half-foot-tall 320-pound anorexic. It was stupid, unhealthy, and dangerous.

Along with the fat I lost muscle mass and aerobic capacity that had taken years to develop. I also gained sympathy for long-term sufferers of eating disorders. During this moment I likely imagined food as poison rather than medicine. But once I straightened my thinking out, it was easy to see that food was a variable that could be controlled to great success. It is easy to become intoxicated by results.

I have been on the other side of this as well. Almost immediately after I realized how much damage I had done to myself, I decided to put some of the cannibalized muscle back on. This is not much different from anorexic behavior. The only real difference is that the pressures put on a male, in particular the drive to be muscular and lean, can only be achieved naturally with a moderately healthy lifestyle, which is a double standard that has almost certainly cost lives.

I spent the next year eating a diet consisting of things that could barely be called food. I became a protein powder connoisseur. I knew which brands had the best ratio of protein to calories, which ones mixed in with cooked oatmeal the smoothest, and which ones tasted the least

like turned yogurt when shaken with water. For a year of my life my most consistent food came from a clear red plastic tub the size of a spare tire. One year of eating from chemistry labs helped me add forty pounds of lean body mass.

I am not entirely sure if these experiences are the cause of my food-as-medicine mentality or the product of it. What I am sure of is that I am not alone in seeing the world this way. This type of behavior is very easy to see in the body-building community. The specialized language and supplement advertisements are a giveaway.

The community ingests these supplements by the shovelful. Reading the back of a Creatine Monohydrate container will show just how little respect is paid to whole food. A multimillion-dollar enterprise has been set up to sell what is essentially a fruit punch-flavored amino acid that has been milled to the point of bioavailability. You realize very quickly that you do not recognize any of the ingredients in this “food.” I used to go through a tub a month.

All of this makes me a nightmare to go grocery shopping with. Where someone else will notice that the cinnamon rolls have just been pulled, that the avocados look overripe, and that the deli ham looks shockingly pink, I only see the calories and nutrients in the products. I look only at components. I have become an expert at this. I can effortlessly pull up the amount of calories in an apple: 80; a mini-bag of Doritos, 290; and a roll of Necco Wafers, 210. A trip to the grocery store is not a chance for meal planning. It is an exercise in Excel, an act of balancing columns of macronutrients. I look at the colorful displays and see only the numbers that make them up. I am the Neo of grocery shoppers.

It freaking sucks. This kind of relationship with food robs it of its pleasure. It links food with work. It makes it impossible to see a cookie and not think of the two-mile jog that it represents. This connection happens in the same way as an intrusive thought, like an imaginary Pillsbury Doughboy whispering in your ear. However, I can enjoy a delicious bite. And I do have favorite foods. But the pleasure ceiling of

the experience is much lower for me. A surprising effect of fastidious calorie counting is that it changes your relationship with restaurants. When I can afford it, I prefer to eat out. This way I never have to see how much butter is used or wonder if the recipe would have worked if they had cut some of the flour. It takes a little control out of my hands.

I guess I should not find it surprising that the seeds for all of the previous personal revelation were sown after a meal in a great restaurant. In the days after the failed meatloaf experiment, but before I began looking for the cause, I sat down to a meal of combination pho.

It was a bowl of beef broth, loaded with white noodles, beef shank, tendon, tripe, and meatballs. It was served with a side of Thai basil, chili peppers, and bean sprouts. On the table were the condiments, fish sauce, and two different kinds of chili paste, hoisin sauce, and coriander. Like I had done before, I blended the sides into the broth before adding all of the condiments: 10 ml of fish sauce and chili oil, 15 g of each chili paste, and enough hoisin to transform the clear broth into a purple tincture. When I was done, the surface of my

soup looked like an alien landscape, an expanse of purple punctuated by red globules of chili oil that had escaped emulsification. I used a fork to tear and pestle the ingredients until all that remained was a delicious particulate of nutritious debris. The dish I ended up with was totally unrecognizable from the one that had been given to me originally. I made it so spicy that I had to keep a napkin in my other hand to wipe the beads of sweat off my forehead and to clear the tendrils of snot out of my nose before they got heavy enough to fall into the bowl. I slurped up my bowl and left beaming, and confused.

Why had a bowl of noodles had an effect on me when my home cuisine from the Great Plains had not? I was unprepared to be affected by a dish of the jungles, of a place I have never been. A dish I could never make at home. Where do you buy beef tendon? My experience with this meal seems to attack the notion that comfort food exists. Exploring the differences between the meals helped me come to the understanding that I see food as a transformational force rather than a

manipulating force. This ties in very neatly with the idea of food as a tool, as medicine and building blocks.

The way that I see it, people fall on a spectrum. On one extreme you have those who use food exclusively for transformation. Body builders and elite athletes would fall on the far edge of this, people who use food exclusively for what it can do for them. On the other end you have people who use food exclusively for how it makes them feel. The extremes of this group are harder for me to identify, though I expect that many professional chefs fall into this category. The extremes are drawn by people who use food for transformation and those who use it for manipulation, in this case manipulation of feelings. For the sake of simplicity I think of it as a distinction of flavor versus function. Neither one of these extremes is better than the other; both are problematic. Thankfully, most people fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

Once I became aware of this idea, I tried to apply it retroactively. I have found that in my experience, it holds up. I have worked as a bartender for almost a decade now, and I cannot think of a place that

exemplifies this idea better than a bar. You can oversimplify a bar into two easily identifiable groups of patrons. There are people who are there for the fun and the flavor, and those who are there for the alcohol. The first group's drinks are defined by colorful martinis, craft beers, and extra maraschino cherries. The second group is defined by questions such as "What is your cheapest shot?" and "Can I get a heavier pour?" and orders like "I will have a Michelob Ultra." I fall into this second category. Coincidentally the vast majority of problem patrons come from the group that favors function over flavor. Thinking about the kind of drinker you are seems like an easy way to self-diagnose, noticing which way you lean on my imagined spectrum.

A side advantage to spending hours in bars is that I have become friends with many cooks. People who value flavor and mood manipulation very highly among that group the following question is often asked, "If you were on death row, what would your final meal be?"

The cooks would conjure up images of things like salt-crusted leg of lamb, sautéed fiddlehead ferns, and parsnip puree, all lovingly prepared and served on a neon plastic tray. When the question came to me, I always answered in one of two ways. Either I imagined the food that would make the biggest mess for the jerks who falsely accused and convicted me, something like three pans of lasagna and a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew. Whatever I could think would make the most impressive electric chair explosion. Or I would copy a last meal of a famous villain in an effort to mess with *Wikipedia*, maybe the two pints of mint chocolate chip ice cream of Timothy McVeigh or the lone olive, with pit, of Victor Feguer. Regardless, I never took the question seriously.

In looking back at those snide answers, I find that I am disappointed in myself for not attempting to find an honest answer. Not because it was unfair to my friends who were taking the question seriously, though it was, but rather because it would have given me a head start in finding an answer. I have no idea what I would order for a

last meal. A year ago I would have ordered meatloaf, but that was before I turned it into an anxiety-attack trigger. I am envious of those who can answer the question immediately and honestly. People who view food in the same way that I do have weakened the psychosomatic link, and by doing so have stripped food of its ability to manipulate us. As I have said before, it sucks. I have accidentally muted one of life's great pleasures. I have turned the idea of a last meal, the pinnacle of dining, into funeral food, that insidious indoor picnic whose sole job is to be invisible.

Am I overstating this? Probably, I tend to do that. I am not going to change a worldview in order to get more out of a meal. There are benefits to seeing food only as a tool. I am bigger, faster, stronger, and healthier than I would have been had I pulled toward the opposite side of the spectrum.

What upsets and embarrasses me the most is that I never bothered to examine my relationship with food, and my inaction had me unknowingly severing a connection that would have been very

useful to me in the winter of 2012. I can't imagine that even if I had had complete information, I would have made any different life choices. I just would have liked the option. This entire exploration has ended with me in the strange position of feeling jealous of people who can cure their anxiety with meatloaf.

## Bottle

I store nearly all of my personal care products on the natural shelf created where the back of my acrylic tub meets the corner of the bathroom wall. The chromed cylinder of Edge shaving gel, the boxy tube of Suave honeydew melon body wash, the three white tubs of Paul Mitchell conditioners — all of varying strength — the bubble gum-colored Oxy facial scrub, and the jet brand revitalizing gel all sit on the shelf, huddled together like a flock of tropical birds, shielding one another from the shower spray. All my essential grooming products are neatly organized upon their perch, well, all but one. The Trader Joe's tea tree shampoo sits outside of this flock.

The shampoo bottle has a very awkward shape. It is as though the bottle cannot decide if it wants to be a pyramid or a cylinder. The seven-inch bottle begins as a two-inch-square base; then it tapers up, eventually terminating in a one-and-a-half-inch-diameter circle. The aloe-colored bottle is difficult to hold on to. It is prone to squirting out of your hand if too much pressure is applied to its upper half.

Aesthetically it would be better if the shampoo could be with the other products. And originally I forced it into the group. But its fat, unorthodox shape and water-slick surface made a mess of things. The bottle inevitably escaped from my half-awake hands. It cannonballed through the clique of grooming products, sending them soaring down the half-pipe edge of the tub with an embarrassing clatter.

My first thought was to dump the bottle and get another shampoo, one that can fit in more easily with the others. The problem is that the shampoo itself is excellent. It is just the right mix of chemistry and organic odds and ends; the stuff performs wonderfully. It feels somewhat unfair to toss aside a product that has served me so well. But it really is so awkward and so prone to making a mess of things.

Unwilling to give up on such a promising product, I needed a solution. The solution is to store the bottle on the back corner of the tub, opposite the collection of personal care products. It is hidden in the shower liner partition. Isolating the bottle between the shower liner and the curtain helps keep it dry and protected. Keeping the bottle separate from all the others seems a bit cruel, but so far isolation is the best way

that I have found to keep it from fumbling around and making a fool of itself.

## **My Wardrobe**

I am sitting at my desk, looking at my wardrobe. This is something that I am almost never able to do as my combination office and walk-in closet is often so filled with dirty clothes that I cannot appreciate my wardrobe in its full glory. The mess is rarely an issue. The room is as far away from the front door of my shotgun shack-like rental as possible. The farther I get away from the front door, the more willing I am to tolerate a mess. This will be the case until one of those rare occasions when I have company over. When that happens, I feel the need to put everything in order just to be on the safe side in case, on the off chance, someone walks all the way through the bedroom and into my closet. I find that I do not want to lose the illusion of being put together because I am lazy with my laundry.

As it happens, it is spring and I have pulled out my summer clothing and have yet to box up my winter wear. I also had company over recently and am now afforded the rare opportunity to see my full wardrobe, unobscured by dirty clothing. This is an embarrassingly rare

opportunity, and I feel somewhat compelled to examine my clothing for hints about myself.

I cannot find the perfect word to describe the contraption that holds my clothes. *Wardrobe* feels too robust and *armoire* feels far too ornamental. My clothing collection is housed in a twenty-dollar plastic clothing rack that I purchased from Walmart when I realized how little closet space my rental had. For the sake of clarity I will refer to this rack as my wardrobe, even though the word does not fit snugly. The wardrobe is four and a half feet tall, five feet wide, and two and a half feet deep. Its skeleton is made from black plastic tubes and screw-on connectors. The entire thing is covered in a protective skin created from a white fabric that I cannot identify; it is smooth and rubbery to the touch. The three brown zippers on the front of the fabric give me the option to seal up my collection, to protect it from the ravages of UV. I have never zipped up my wardrobe. However, I am happy that I have the option as the fabric stretched across the top of the skeleton provides extra storage space. In the center of the wardrobe hangs a small fabric

shelving unit, six cubby holes intended for shoes. The wardrobe has begun to lean. Only the very bottom of the wardrobe is still in contact with the southern wall. The top has been leaning out gradually since the day I filled it. One night I imagine it will fall over and when that happens, I wonder if it will wake me or if my prodigious collection of clothes will muffle the sound of the fall. To the left of the wardrobe I have supplemental storage in the form of a three-drawer Sterilite organizer. The entire setup cost less than fifty dollars and was never meant to be seen by anyone other than myself.

Initially my eyes are drawn to the top of the wardrobe, to the storage created by the white fabric skin. Here I have all of my sweaters, sweatshirts, and other garments that are too heavy to be put on a hanger. These will be the first things that go into storage, when I get around to it. This seems like a bit of a waste as the colors are all very spring appropriate. The two-dozen or so garments on the top are a wonderful collection of sea green, robin's egg blue, royal purple, and white. Oddly enough there are no brown variants to be seen. This is due

almost entirely to the influence of my little brother and my buying-pattern inertia.

My brother is one year younger than me. For as long as I can remember he has been into the outdoors, stoner culture and wearing earth tones. In the years that we shared a house, we operated on one unwritten rule. If one of us was into something, the other could not be. I imagine that I was the one enforcing this. Looking back it seems pretty foolish. In those years my brother was much more successful and popular in high school than I was. I should have tried to borrow some of his shine. But, at that age, I thought being actively different and awkward was the way to go. It is interesting that this far into my adult life I am still unable to shake my artificially imposed dislike of brown clothes. But I have not, and so my collection of sweaters lacks brown and reminds me of my brother.

Under the sweaters, on the right side of the shoe cubby, hang my dress pants and jeans. They all hang on wooden hangers. I do not remember where I got these hangers, nor do I remember where I got

any of the plastic variety that fills out the rest of the wardrobe. I am inclined to think that hangers are gifts from the universe, items that magically come into one's possession, similar to umbrellas and black Bic pens.

I have too many pairs of dress pants. This is entirely because I am an absent-minded packer. I routinely turn a suitcase out onto a hotel bed and find that I have forgotten to pack my dress pants. This begins a mad dash around the mall as I try to find a store that stocks a pair of 36-inch-waist, 38-inch-inseam pants. So far my forgetful nature has not yet forced me to attend a wedding in jeans. The excess pairs of dress pants are a nice visual reminder of a personality flaw that more often than not expresses itself subtly, in lazy work or late appointments. It is useful for me to have those hundred-dollar pieces of fabric hanging uselessly in my closet, reminding me to pay more attention.

Outside and to the left of the wardrobe is the Sterilite storage container. This plastic container has three drawers; the largest of which holds my socks. I have been debating throwing out all of my socks and

buying all new pairs. I am debating this partially because I want an excuse to engage in one of the greatest pleasures available to humanity—new socks. Buying all new, and identical, socks might also get me to pair up socks instead of just throwing them all into a mismatched pile. It worked for my underwear. Three years ago I threw out every pair that I owned and made an investment in Exofficio boxers. High-tech, stylish, and near indestructible, they were money well spent. The rest of the storage container is filled with my warm weather workout wear. I have quite the collection: seventeen pairs of mesh workout shorts and twenty-nine cotton T-shirts. I need maybe half this amount of clothing, but it continues to accumulate. I have never purchased a workout shirt in my life. My collection is built entirely out of “gifts” that I received for entering foot races and basketball tournaments. After a laundry binge, in order to fit all the shirts into the container, I have to mash all twenty-nine shirts into one dense brick of fabric, one that often accordions out into a lock mechanism.

Next, I come to the shoe cubby hanging down the center. It has never been used for its designed purpose. I did not bother to do any in-store calculations and so found that my shoes were too big to fit in the “one size fits all” cubbies. I remember feeling disappointment at the time, though right now I feel more embarrassed that it did not immediately occur to me that my size 17 shoes might not fit. For most of my life, the act of buying shoes was a complicated procedure. I wore size 13 shoes in elementary school and at that time no chain shoe store stocked my size. To get new shoes I had to special order from a catalogue in the back of the store. I was limited to tennis shoes and basketball shoes.

This is no longer a problem; Internet shopping solved all of this for me, in the best possible way. I have not stepped foot inside a dedicated shoe store in fifteen years. I have found that Internet shopping has a strange side effect. On the exceedingly rare times when I see a shoe my size for sale in a store, I feel compelled to buy it. It is as though I am being presented with the opportunity to buy a black

leather unicorn. I would be a fool to pass up such a rare opportunity.

There was a period between the end of elementary school and the beginning of high school when I was very self-conscious about what I perceived to be my clown shoes. Luckily puberty hit, and it brought with it rumors of a positive correlation between shoe and penis size.

That in turn brought on a period where I exaggerated. This is a period I am not sure that I ever pulled out of. As soon as I realized the cubby would not work, I decided to store all of my shoes by the front door. I thought I was doing this entirely for the sake of convenience, but it is very possible that I am being subconsciously motivated by a desire for juvenile bragging rights. Since my shoes are out in the open, they often end up directly next to my girlfriend's. The juxtaposition is striking and a bit unsettling. She wears the most common woman's shoe size, 8.5. I imagine if you were to walk into my living room and see her pink running shoes next to my flip-flops, your mind would immediately see a father-daughter pairing, and not a boyfriend-girlfriend match. Seeing our shoes next to each other makes me uncomfortable, not because of any imagined incestuous undertones, but because it gives me a visual

reminder of the body I inhabit. This is not a complaint. If I could re-up as six foot six in another life, I would do it in a heartbeat. The reason I feel uncomfortable when I am reminded of my body is entirely because it forces me to backtrack through my memories, hunting for places where my obliviousness to my image could have hurt me. Focusing back on the wardrobe, the shoe cubby that is too small for my shoes is being used to hold folded pairs of shorts and fancy T-shirts that I wear with jeans and sport jackets.

Last, we come to my shirts, the jewels of my collection. To the left of the shoe cubby hang all of my collared shirts. There are twenty-six of them. All but three of them are garishly bright and happy. They are all high end and brand name. The ones that are not flashy are wonderfully utilitarian. I can tell you where I purchased every single one of them. The reason that I hold these shirts in such high regard is that they are the only items that I have ever been able to consistently go shopping for and wear off the rack. I have a fairly difficult-to-fit torso, with broad shoulders, long abdominals, and a thin waist. I find most brands' XL

shirts to be too short and XXL shirts to be baggy. The exception to this is the top-end brands, like Jhane Barnes, Robert Graham, and Bogosse. They are produced with adequate material and a nice tight athletic cut. I look great in them. The problem is that some of my favorites retail for over \$300 a shirt.

My current favorite is a hot pink, pale green, and white checkerboard-patterned Bogosse. It has dark green branded, hexagonal buttons running up the front, with similarly colored accent stitching alongside the body and edges of the collar. Rather than using collar stays, this brand instead opts for a button-down collar with metal buttons and removable forest-green leather cuff links. It retails for \$185 at Nordstrom's. That is a lot of money, money that I do not have. I cannot rationalize paying full price on my budget. Thankfully I will never have to.

An often-overlooked advantage to having an uncommon body shape is the ability to shop off clearance racks. I imagine that they are not much good to people looking for a pair of 32-30 jeans, a pair of size

8.5 shoes, or a medium sweater; all of those items will be scooped up as soon as they hit the floor. Those pieces are in high demand. There is considerably less demand for high-end XLT dress shirts with an athletic cut. This is even more pronounced for me personally because I am drawn to the clothing colors and patterns that border on peacocking. The men who are in a position to pay full price tend to be more conservative and so the pieces I want fall to the clearance racks. My body shape and personal taste has flipped the shopping dynamic. I cannot shop in most stores because what I find in my price range does not fit and what fits is not in my price range. What I can do is shop in clearance stores knowing that they will be filled with clothes that both fit perfectly and are marked down considerably. As you can imagine, this is a fantastic shopping experience. When I see the shirts lined up in my wardrobe, I am reminded of the adrenaline rush that came with finding them and I am thankful that I discovered this pleasure later in life, and so have not yet become desensitized to it.

The pleasure of shopping is plainly visible when you look at my wardrobe as a whole. When all of the clothing is stored away, the structure appears as though it will burst. I imagine that the explosion would be very similar to a party popper, spraying brightly colored fabric all across my office. I suppose this is part of the reason that I am so rarely caught up on laundry. The reason for this abundance is that I have trouble parting with clothing. This is odd behavior for me as I am usually not sentimental and have relatively few possessions other than my wardrobe. This was not always the case, for most of my life clothes were on equal footing with every other item and so were just as easily culled. Predictably, this change in my opinion of clothing happened when I discovered the joys of shopping. As I look back, I cannot pinpoint the exact moment that this change occurred. What I can do is look at the collection that I have amassed and extrapolate backward using my purchasing patterns. I estimate that my wardrobe contains every non-underwear piece that I have purchased since the summer of 2007.

I have become an amateur hoarder. I think this happened because I am able to so clearly remember where I discovered every piece. I become attached. Up until just recently I rationalized this by assuming Goodwill would not want my clothes even if I were able to part with them. In my mind at that time I figured that my outlier sizes would sit unused on shelves and in back rooms. This was a very selfish way of thinking. It was based in a false reality where there are no needy men who are also tall and broad. If I were to donate some of my collection, I would be creating an opportunity for great happiness. I imagine that my joy in finding a Bugatchis marked down 75 percent is miniscule compared to someone who is down on his luck finding a cheap pair of size 17 shoes. By donating I could create an empathetic link with someone who shares my body shape but not my circumstances. But I find that I am too selfish to donate, and so I collect.

When I look at the wardrobe itself, I am shocked by how poorly I have taken care of it. The structure bends under the weight of unworn clothing. The sweaters on the top weigh down the fabric skin and make

it impossible to easily remove the hangers. Pants and shirts have become lost in the wells created by the skin. I could replace the entire infrastructure for less than the price of one of my button-ups. If I upgraded, I might be able to spread out my collection. I could admire it better, and it might help me with the wrinkle problem.

The last thing that I notice when I look at my clothing is how wrinkled it is. There is not a single shirt or pair of pants in my collection that I could wear off the rack of my wardrobe. Every single piece needs to be ironed, or more commonly thrown in the dryer for ten minutes, before I would consider wearing it out the front door. This ends up being a lot of work. Work that could be avoided if I just finished the final 5 percent of the laundry process and hung or folded the clothing immediately after it was dried. I am aware of this, and every time I start doing a load, I plan to finish it completely and nearly every time my motivation leaves me in the final step. I end up with a closetful of clothing that needs more work done before it can be used.

Thankfully, no one would ever know this unless I told them or they made it past my defenses and into my back room. It seems strange to me that I take so little care of these things that I care so much about. Part of the reason for this is that I value the search more than the item. Once I have it, I do not care as much, though clearly I care enough not to donate it. I think the other part of the explanation is tied into self-sabotage. I have been unable to fully shake the childhood idea that clothes that fit are a rarity, that there is something difficult about finding clothing. This is no longer the world I live in. Clearance racks have leveled the playing field. I feel strangely guilty about that, and that is stupid as hell. There is no logical reason for me not to enjoy and take care of my clothing. And yet I hoard fancy, wrinkled clothing. I do it as a way to placate some need in my childhood brain that still associates clothing with rarity and difficulty.

And now I am sitting in my back room, trying to make sense of the wardrobe I see before me as a whole. I sat down to this task with the idea that an exploration of the individual pieces of my wardrobe would

combine to give me an aggregate of insight that was greater than the sum of each individual exploration. I do think that is what happened here. The individual pieces and collections seem to be less important than the collection of clothing as a whole, in particular the condition of my collection. I am disappointed that the wrinkles are more telling than the fabric. To be honest I do not know what to do with this information. I had hoped that this process would yield some practical insight. Instead, I am left in a place where my wardrobe is most useful to me as a metaphor, a physical representation of my inability to decide if I view clothing as a jewel or a commodity.

## VITA

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