

Spring 2019

# Small gods

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SMALL GODS

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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 in Creative Writing, Nonfiction

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By

Alex Dew

Spring 2019



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Mom, the greatest warrior who ever walked the earth.

Thank you to the village that made this and everything possible and helped me so much more than you know: Dad, Kim Sheridan, Hannah Metcalf, Genevieve Richards, Clayton Anderson, Morgan Blackledge, and my doctors who saw me through the biggest test of my life. Thank you to my army of proofreaders, Colleen Hanlon, Michael Dundrea, Caroline Woodwell, and Matthew Darjany.

Thank you to Mike for loving me always and despite everything.

Thank you to my advisor, Rachel Toor, who showed me, along with so many other things, that I could someday be good enough write about anything and everything, that I am more than just my wild life.

Thank you to everyone at Eastern Washington University for making this the time of my life.

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## Twelve

I am twenty-seven years old when I find the note in the teapot. It's one of almost fifty miniature teapots in my childhood room, teapots of every pattern and material, stacked on top of each other in wooden cubbies in front of my *Gossip Girl* and Judy Blume books. They are in tight rows, three per row, nine per cubby, the manic curation of a non-tea-drinking pre-adolescent with obsessive-compulsive disorder and a fixation on the objective correlative of sophistication.

Whenever I go home, I see them, but I never really look at them.

Whenever I go home, I live in the bedroom where I spent ages twelve to eighteen. It's a pink bedroom. My mom found matching fabric for the curtains and bedspread, a blush and green print with the names of different cities in California with illustrations of palm trees and beaches and the Hollywood sign. I designed the room when I was twelve, right before we moved into the "Dreamhouse," the quiet Cape Cod on the corner lot. I chose the paint, and the curtains, and the bedspread, and the offensive daisy printed carpet before I hated the color pink, when my mom told my brother and me that we could each pick the décor for our "big girl" and "big boy" rooms. My choices were based on the first of my many obsessions with a particular aspect of culture -- when I was twelve, it was the film industry. For my twelfth birthday, also known as the best day of my life, my mom took me and my friends to a screening of "Maid in Manhattan," and then we got to have a sleepover at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, where Marilyn Monroe used to go for benders.

When I was sixteen, I covered up the pink walls with posters of Kurt Cobain and Marilyn Manson because I was insufferable. My friends and I pulled up the daisy carpeting, drawing our pipe dreams on the exposed plywood floor with black and red and purple Sharpies. I fell asleep with a cigarette in my hand and burned a black wound into the bedspread. I thought the ambiance

was all very heroin chic, but when my seven-year-old cousin stayed in my room, she was too scared to sleep.

I kept the teapots stacked in their cubbies.

When I am twenty-seven, I take a summer trip home to Los Angeles from graduate school in Washington. I collapse onto the small, hard bed after taking a 6:00 A.M. flight. The room seems to cling to its original immaculateness -- the posters were taken down and the carpet replaced when I was in college, and my mother hired a professional cleaning crew to resurrect it from the ruins of my youth. The room is like a sobered-up heroin addict -- the scars are still visible beneath its meticulously scrubbed skin and plaintive smile.

Drunk on sleep deprivation, I see Kurt and Marilyn in the anemic sun-scars on the walls where they once hung. I hear the murmurs of teenagers talking about nothing. I shut my eyes hard, and then I blink them open; there is silence in the room now. Despite its few scabs, it really does look more like the room of twelve than the room of sixteen.

I am twenty-seven and tired, but in my delirium, I rise from the bed to run my hands over the teapots. What was it about them that I liked so much? As if guided by ghosts, my eyes land on the small black and gold metal teapot that I bought in San Francisco's Chinatown on a family vacation, and my hand pries the top loose as if it isn't my hand at all, but someone else's. I know there is a secret inside, even if I can't conjure the memory -- something that feels like déjà vu strobes in my exhausted brain. When I read the note, I know that I was twelve when I wrote it. It was a note to myself: a wish, a prayer, a question to the universe.

The note asks: "Should I get a padded bra like Maddie and Steph?"

Twelve is a time when you don't yet know whether you're a good kid or a bad kid, if you're a girl who wears thongs and padded bras and makes out with boys and drinks alcohol, or a girl who is the head of the debate team and gets a 4.0 and does ballet six days a week. At twelve, I was a breathless statue, paralyzed between these two mutually exclusive fates.

I first tasted alcohol my twelfth year at a sleepover; my friends and I all took one shot of booze from every type of alcohol in my parents' bar. We laughed hysterically, and then we all puked. I didn't want to do that again anytime soon, but also, I did, because it was so fun before the throwing up part. It was a constant tearing of myself in two, being twelve. This was even more true around boys. Coming of age in an all-girls school, I found them strange and thrilling and dangerous -- they were unicorns who only existed on the weekends at football games, and I turned to stone around them. I turned to stone around so many things at twelve.

When I tried to tell my mom that boys didn't like me, she said, "Boys love skinny girls with long blonde hair, which you are." She gave me advice like grazing my hand against my crush's shoulder when I asked him if he needed help with a math problem. She didn't know that I had never even spoken to him. I always froze, and my indecision was a prison of repressed bad-girl aspirations and good-girl dreams that churned within me.

It also didn't help my case that I was eighty pounds, and thanks to my rigorous ballet schedule, I looked like a little boy. I hadn't gotten my period yet, either. I was dying to belong the exclusive club of other girls who whispered the code phrase, "Do you have money for the vending machine?" and were handed a plastic wrapped tampon by the coy hand of one of their compatriots, the girls who loudly excused themselves from the dreaded, coif-ruining swim class for their "lady time" and sat on the bleachers making overly pronounced text-messaging motions

on their pink Motorola Razr flip phones. I wanted lady time. I was the only girl I knew who hadn't gotten her period, and I ate ferociously when I read online that one must reach ninety-five pounds before menstruation can begin. I demanded birth control pills from my mother when I read they gave you boobs and made you get your period; she said we could talk when I got a boyfriend. As if that would ever happen.

My brother called my boobs, or lack thereof, "mosquito bites" or "cheesy triangles," the name my dad gave to his exceedingly flat, virtually cheese-less quesadillas cut into a triangular shape. My Limited Too rhinestone-embellished training bras were purely ornamental -- props so that boys and other girls would see the telltale strap line across my shoulder blades, the line that shouted, "I have boobs!"

This is where the padded bra crisis, and the note came in. As we were getting ready for our sixth-grade dance, my friend Maddie whipped off her T-shirt to reveal a seemingly ample chest that bubbled over the edges of her bra.

"Guys, I have a confession," she said. Maddie was the coolest of us non-cool girls, so we were riveted, poised to hear her shameful secret, to rejoice in it. She steeped in the pause, a guru of womanhood about to enlighten her motley disciples. "My boobs aren't really this big. This is a *padded* bra."

"A *padded* bra?" I was incredulous. I had seen such contraptions at the department store with my mom, who dismissed them as "false advertising." "Worry about how big your brain is, not your boobs," she chided me when I requested one. Padded bras seemed to me like objects to be used by women of only the utmost sophistication and sexiness, the totem of movie stars, the calling card of models. Maybe that was how Julia Roberts' boobs looked so good in "Pretty

Woman.” Perhaps this was the secret kept by an Illuminati of the glamorous, the magic crystal by which sex appeal could be obtained. I needed one immediately.

But that night, as I pilfered my mom’s credit card and went on my computer to buy the most padded bra of all time, I couldn’t do it. My mom’s judgment of “false advertising” crept up on me, and the guilt of defying what I viewed as her beliefs clawed at my stomach. I envisioned a scenario in which I was with a boy and ripped off my padded bra only to horrify him by the “cheesy triangles” that lay beneath, like a bald woman molting her wig. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have cotton padding on my chest, to have a body that was not all my own. It felt like not breathing, and I quickly shut the top of my laptop.

Reading the note from the teapot, the electricity of twelve rushes like blood to my brain, and I am breathless again.

*Should I get a padded bra like Maddie and Steph?*

My body remembers the constant storm of twelve just as it remembers how to ride a bike, as it remembers the smallness of a corner in a room with screaming voices. Twelve feels like hollowness, like an emptying, like a stomach drop on a roller coaster. Twelve feels like stillness, stultifying stillness. It feels like clammy, pimpled skin that fits too tightly, like not breathing. It feels like the heat on my face the day I wore my new mini skirt and hadn’t started shaving my legs yet, or when my mom said, “This is going to be your year, I just know it,” as she dropped me off at the bus stop every morning. It feels like the coolness of the vinyl school bus seat against my face, as I curled towards the window when my best friends ignored me on the first bus ride to middle school. It feels like the boil of the pity bath my mom drew for me after the first day of middle school and many days after that, the bath I cried rivers into, and it smells like

the fancy bubble-bath she had been saving for such occasions. Twelve feels like weekends with no plans other than going to Blockbuster Video with my dad and running into Maddie who now hates me for reasons I can't understand. It sounds like my dad whispering in my ear on the way back to the car, "She's kind of fat and you're way prettier." It sounds like "ugly," like "too skinny," like "flat-chested," like "big-nosed," like "rat-faced," like "geek," like "eight-year-old Chinese boy," like all their favorite taunts to hurt me. It feels like a boy asking me to semi-formal, and then laughing uproariously when I say yes and he reveals it was all a joke. It feels like my body collapsing into the passenger seat of my mom's Acura SUV, too tired to hear her ask how my day was.

I drown in twelve for a moment. I take a rasping breath and I tell myself to use the skills I have accrued in therapy to bring myself up for air by moving my eyes onto different objects in my surroundings and listening to the sounds of the present. I intellectualize the facts of the room and the story of the note. The defense mechanism softens me, and it cools the room. *Should I get a padded bra like Maddie and Steph?*

There's a thought somewhere quiet, and it rises slowly, steadily, like a truth I have always known, not a volcanic epiphany. The seemingly shallow question posed by the note contains within it the existential struggle particular to that age, the electricity of small things. A padded bra, a note in a teapot, a stumbling glance from a friend, a half-smile from a boy, a too-small portion of salad, an unguarded bar -- at twelve years old, minutiae drip with life and death significance. The small things, the quiet things, echo with the unanswerable question of who you really are, like a song that will never leave your head. There is a sad strangeness, a muted devastation, in the act of still looking for the answer in the bottom of a teapot. But then you

realize that the teapot tells only the truths of the past, and that the present feels like home, that your twenty-seven-year-old body feels like exactly where you are supposed to be, that twenty-seven years old feels like the absence of fear, and your cheeks don't burn anymore.

## Memento Mori:

### Requiem for Alexander McQueen

I discovered Alexander McQueen when I happened upon a clutch he designed in a consignment shop on my 23rd birthday. It was black leather and covered in studs, with a crystal-eyed silver skull for the clasp, a glorious mashup of BDSM and rock n' roll and black magic, the most beautiful thing I had ever laid eyes on.

I had loved skulls for years, ever since I bought a necklace with a small skull pendant crudely carved from allegedly real human skull from a voodoo priestess in the French Quarter of New Orleans. She leaned her patchouli scented head close and told me the meaning of the skull. "*Memento mori*. Remember that you will die," she whispered through fuchsia lips, like it was some secret spell I needed to slay a dragon. And the spell was clear as she continued: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

I was in love. Wandering the streets of the French Quarter on a hiatus from a family trip to watch my younger brother graduate from Tulane University, I was a recovering addict who had almost lost her life twice to drug overdoses. These experiences had left me piercingly aware of the possibility of death every second of every day. I shouldn't be alive right now. According to logic and probability and modern medicine and justice and karma, I should have tumbled forever into the memoryless blue depths of the second overdose. I should never have been somehow yanked up from the deepest sea gasping for air, screaming, furious, exalted to be born again, trying to rip the IVs and monitors from my body before realizing that my hands and feet were in leather restraints attached to the bed posts, that I had fought them, six full-grown men, apparently, as I had the time before, that I had struggled until the final black wave crashed and I

lived for a day underwater, unconscious for twelve hours, while my mother sped back to LA from Texas, chased by a dust storm down the I-10 freeway.

When the voodoo woman whispered the truth of death in my ear, I was relieved. She had said out loud what every moment of my life since the second overdose screamed silently. I bought the necklace, wearing the totem carved from another's death on my heart, listening to the drumbeat of memento mori with every step I took. My obsession with skulls began in this moment, as I endeavored to place as many reminders of memento mori on my body and in my home. Never forget that you will die. Never forget that you are lucky to be alive. Never forget that every day is a gift. Do not waste your borrowed time.

I found McQueen in my efforts to dress myself with the amulets of death. His stuff was usually out of my price range, but whenever I could finagle getting a used scarf or a belt at a consignment shop or in some corner of the internet, I got it. And I started to appreciate the man behind these dark, beautiful artifacts.

Alexander McQueen never looked like a fashion designer; instead of donning the perfectly tailored suits and dignified gait of people like Tom Ford, he followed the stomping parade of the era's top models down his runways by stumbling around with an awkward grin, his pudgy body sausaged into ratty Nike t-shirts and jeans, usually with one of his beloved dogs in tow.

Growing up the son of an abusive alcoholic father in working-class London, he had made his name as a brash, fearless fashion student sewing trash bags and fabric scraps into couture, and he eschewed the snobbery of high fashion in a whole-hearted embrace of the dark, the lowbrow, the violent. He was highly critical of the industry over the course of his career, and he was fearless in his exposition of its toxicity, a rebel till the end.

In 1995, McQueen's first major collection, titled "The Highland Rape," was shamed for being violent and anti-woman, for featuring models with shredded clothing and bare breasts staggering down the runway, as if having just escaped unspeakable acts of abuse and degradation. McQueen argued that the show was an ode to his mother, the woman whom he adored more than anyone on earth, the woman whom he had watched get beaten by her abusive husband and survive it all. He insisted that "The Highland Rape" was a statement of female strength and resilience, not an exploitation of defeat and domination. After "The Highland Rape," he was hated by most, loved by a few, and talked about by everyone.

McQueen never stopped terrifying. "Voss," his Spring/Summer 2001 show, featured haunting, ghost-like models writhing in a psych ward, a comment on the insanity of the fashion industry. Another show, "Joan," featured a model encased in a ring of fire, and when a vehicle that was part of the set accidentally caught fire, McQueen kept yelling for the models to "walk, damnit, keep walking!" And walk they did, because somehow the show and the glory and McQueen himself seemed more important in that moment than the possibility of the car blowing up. It was fashion, but it was also life and death and everything in between.

I fell in love with the Alexander McQueen, the man, and not the hype around him or the designs he made, when I watched YouTube videos of his Spring 1999 show, "No.13," not long after purchasing the clutch purse I couldn't really afford on my 23rd birthday. In developing "No. 13," McQueen had been harassing his beleaguered staff about coming up with a dress that robots could spray paint on the runway so that his audience could witness the creation of fashion during the show itself. His team ignored the request, hoping he would forget it, but he didn't. He never forgot.

The robots showed up the night before the show, and there was no dress for them to paint. In the earliest dawn on the day of the show, McQueen observed the arrival of his robots like a kid on Christmas morning, snorted a line of cocaine, and pulled out some white tulle. He created a dress and a moment that is perhaps one of the most beautiful and iconic in fashion and performance art history.

During the finale of “No. 13,” Shalom Harlow wears the dress McQueen sculpted in the manic hours the night before the show, standing on a spinning platform like a doll experiencing spiritual exaltation or alien abduction, as the robot arms perform an elaborate choreography, spraying the dress with neon green and black paint.

I was speechless watching it then, just as I am speechless watching it again now. It is raw, and terrifying, and almost too beautiful. What happens before the audience’s eyes is an artistic experience of greater intensity than I have ever experienced before, even when staring into the depths of a Rothko painting, or listening to a song like David Bowie’s “Life on Mars” one that seems to contain within it all of the sadnesses and all of the small deaths and all of the aliveness of life in three minutes and thirty-two seconds.

In a video tape during the finale of “No. 13,” we see McQueen backstage as his doll dances with the robots. A shiny-faced, chubby twenty-five-year-old, he holds his hands above his head and appears to stumble backwards, he himself shocked by the power of his own work. Minutes later, he emerges with his two beloved dogs in tow, skipping down the runway, a gleeful little boy who knows he has just changed the course of art and fashion.

This was the first show that McQueen ever cried over. This was the first time that everyone had told him something was impossible, and he had done it anyway, with his middle-finger-to-the-air, yelling “fuck you” to the naysayers, to the establishment, to the snobs.

Re-watching the finale of “No. 13,” I am stunned perhaps equally by the power of the moment and by the talent of the man who created it. I am not an avid fan of performance art, or even, in my adulthood, a close follower of fashion. It’s not that the dress is so beautiful in and of itself, or that the designs spray-painted on it by the robot arms are so exquisite. While the finished product is beautiful and sculptural and dripping with nineties don’t-give-a-fuck style, the coolest psychedelic kimono of a punk rock geisha, the finale of “No. 13” is not about the dress. It’s about the birth of the dress, when everything in the big, echoing room in London seemed to stand still. The hands of clocks must have paused, and everyone must have held their breath, and the air must have been vacuumed from the room, and nothing could have existed in the world except Shalom Harlow spinning on a platform like a possessed jewelry-box ballerina with the robot arms rotating around her in the death-dance McQueen had choreographed for them. Harlow’s powerless whirling is the ultimate expression of human vulnerability, an admission of the aching places inside all of us that make us fallible, of the inescapable frailty that makes death come for us all.

Sure, there’s something sexual about it too, this image of the submitting woman and the jet streams of hot yellow and death-black paint. But somehow, it doesn’t seem like it’s about female submission or sexual domination at all, and I can’t find any critics lamenting that this is the case. It’s clear to me that the statement McQueen is making is bigger than that; it’s not petty or hateful; it’s not about women submitting to men, or being victimized by them, or about the domination of humankind by machine. It’s a visual metaphor for the experience of life: we are all born the powerless doll in the unstained white dress, spinning like a top with held breath in the moment before tragedy strikes. And we are all broken, ruined, stained by it all.

Watching the finale of “No. 13” is like watching a car crash, or a baby being born, like watching all of the most spectacular, horrifying moments of life where you want to turn your eyes away, but you find them fixed inexplicably on the violent truth unfolding before your eyes. The image of Harlow and the robots is a hologram of all your pain and all my pain, a movie of the story of all of us with the volume all the way turned up. It brings tears to my eyes. It makes the hairs on my arms stand on end.

Seeing the finale of “No. 13” was one of the moments when I recognized the truth of my own life in the words or the art of another person. Everyone has the song that spoke to them during a particular moment when they were struggling to survive, the song that made them at least listen long enough to take a deep breath, and then another breath, and then figure out how to go on from there. Everyone has the movie that “was them” in a particular time and place. Perhaps it was not their precise situation but regardless, they were in the feelings and the actions and the tragedies portrayed, it was a metaphor for their experience, and it gave them strength to watch their life with someone else acting it out. Or maybe they have the painting that just made them feel something, something real, a strong, unmistakable emotion that rang through your body, not the ghost of a feeling someone else told you that you should be having because you were in the presence of “great art,” but a rising in the heart so acute that you were a little bit terrified of how alive you felt.

In Alexander McQueen I saw a twin flame, a soulmate, someone like me. I am not an artistic genius like McQueen. But like me, he struggled to birth the cancer inside his soul, and he needed to show it to others even though like me, he never completely understood why. But he

did it so fearlessly. He skinned himself alive for them, he gave them a pound of flesh and a handful of dust and made them stare death in the face without turning to stone.

Obviously, a mind capable of bringing such darkness and truth into the blinding light was a twisted garden of nightmares. Despite his success, McQueen was plagued by the “black dog” of genius, but I think more than that, he struggled to live life while literally being unable to turn his eyes away from the promise of death that was just around the corner of the next moment.

I don't know if McQueen was drawn to skulls as I was, summoned by the call of memento mori. I don't know if, like me, he had experienced an obsession with death and the nature of un-being ever since he could remember. I don't know if, like me, he couldn't imagine going through all of this without being so painfully, terrifyingly aware that everything could be taken away in a moment. But I like to think of him that way, like me -- like the guy in “A Clockwork Orange” whose eyes are pried open by metal contraptions -- forced to view the tragic film of how evil and how short all of this is over and over and over again. Perhaps McQueen's eyes were too open. This is how I understand the choice he made to end his life -- the handfuls of pills he took and the step he took off the ottoman with the tie around his neck. His eyes had grown tired.

He showed us our fear in a handful of dust. That was his greatest gift and his legacy. While the body that held the nightmares and dreams may be gone, the visions themselves remain in the images from his iconic shows, in the existential poetry of “No. 13.” Like the songs I play again and again, or the movie scripts I pore over like treatises on the nature of life itself, McQueen's shows burn within me like cars eternally on the precipice of explosion. They are like the necklace made of human skull; they sing the song of memento mori, of never forgetting that you will die, of never forgetting that today is a gift.

## Falling In Love with the President

I fell in love with Bill Clinton on Thursday, August 29th, 1996, when my mom and I watched him at the Democratic National Convention. I wasn't normally allowed to watch television, as it was saved for only occasions of great political importance such as this one. I was six years old, and I had heard his name spoken many times on NPR, as it has played constantly on the kitchen radio at my parents' house for the past forty years. I had seen in his picture in the Los Angeles Times before I could read, next to pictures of the 1992 L.A. riots that seemed like a far-away war, like Kosovo would look six years later, and pictures of Nelson Mandela winning the election in South Africa, and OJ Simpson tearing down the freeway in a white bronco, and the carcass of the Mercedes S280 that held Princess Diana.

While many millennials express a fond nostalgia for the era that formed them, I remember it as a time that was very fraught. Perhaps it is because it was during the first decade of my life that I first learned how fraught the world was. I was never shielded from the world's terrors, but through all the upheaval of the nineties, it was President William J. Clinton who emerged as my guiding light, my personal Jesus.

I wasn't alone in my worship. In the liberal, Atheist, yuppie household I grew up in, Bill Clinton was worshipped with a zeal that verged on religious. When I failed a math test in elementary school and came home crying because it felt like the end of life as I had known it, my dad came up to my room and sat with me on my bed.

"Think about what Bill would do. Bill is at his best when his back is up against the wall, at the eleventh hour. Bill shows us that it's not about how you fall down, it's about how you get back up again." I stopped crying, fortified by the unflappable spirit of Bill, determined to ace next week's math test.

While I knew who Bill was, and worshipped him like my parents did, it wasn't until I saw him at the 1996 DNC that I came to love him, not only as the president but as a man. It wasn't until then that I really saw him -- I wasn't used to seeing anything on video due to my mother's Draconian hippy ways, so when confronted with his room-engulfing presence in twenty-four frames per second, I was hypnotized.

When Bill, and he was Bill to me because we referred to him by first name in our house, was announced as the nominee at the 1996 DNC, I shrieked with the glee of Christmas morning, not fully understanding that his status as an incumbent had guaranteed this. When they announced his name, Bill emerged, and red and blue and white balloons cascaded from the ceiling, as if he had summoned them from the heavens. It was glorious; it was beautiful; it was America.

In that moment, I loved America, and I loved Bill. The feeling of Bill's procession to the stage at the 1996 DNC reminded me of the intoxication of the fourth of July celebrations we went to every year at Cal State Northridge, where we'd set up beach chairs in a field with other families and watch the fireworks and sing songs of America like it was the Sunday service. But it was even more intense than that, because my patriotism was now inextricably linked to the 42nd President of the United States.

My mom tells me I sat transfixed by the spectacle of the 1996 DNC, by him. She tells me that I made my first political that day when I asked her, "What do they have at the Republican National Convention instead of balloons coming down from the ceiling? Guns and drugs?" and I laughed uproariously. She knew then that I would be a die-hard Democrat, a bonafide Bill-head. I loved it all, and I was drunk on America, and I was quickly falling in love with Bill.

The balloons parted, like clouds separating for an angel to pass, and Bill's face came into view. He had the face of God, even though his hair wasn't completely white then. His small pink lips that didn't move much when he spoke, his glinting bright blue eyes, his wide, inexplicably white grin that sparkled with the promise of debauchery and kept secrets. He was tall and gangly in his black suit and grey tie, towering over Chelsea and Hillary in her perfect white suit, and there was something I liked about that, how imposing his figure was on one hand, and yet gentle and non-threatening because it was thin and bending, like a sliver of the moon or a smooth noodle.

Everyone at the DNC had their eyes on him. They watched him unblinkingly, desperate for him to throw a mere glance in their direction, elbowing each other brutally for a chance to shake his hand. They seemed to only come alive under the light from his eyes. He made his way up to the podium and began to talk. Mom told me that the words to his speech were on the tiny screen in front of him, the prompter, but he never seemed to look at it. He locked us in.

Bill Clinton is famous for making everyone in a room full of 100,000 people feel like they are the only ones there. That day in 1996, I fell under his spell, and I too, felt like it was just him and me when I listened to his remarks. When he opened his mouth, the world stopped for a minute and everything went dark and there was just the two of us in a dark room and his words and his crackly, calm voice, despite the thousands of miles and the television screen between us. I inhaled with him, and I feared his words would stop coming and his eyes would stop looking and I didn't want to live in a world without seeing him and hearing him always, because I feared that I would no longer be able to breathe. And when it was all over, and he stepped off the podium to stand with Hillary and Chelsea, there was a hollowness within me, the hollowness I

could come to know well during adulthood in the cold imprints men would leave on my bed as they made their predawn departures.

That night, I went to bed enlivened by the memory of him but empty without the sound of his voice, shriveled from the absence of his gaze like the flower in my favorite film at the time, "E.T." Existing in front of him was a different kind of being, a more sparkling aliveness than our daily trudging. Without him, I felt like a parched shell, abandoned by the fire that once burned inside me. I just wanted to look at pictures of Bill all day and listen to his voice over and over and over. I closed my eyes and tried to conjure exactly how it had sounded. I tried to picture exactly where the furrow between his brow fell between his eyes, where the corners of his smile met, where his long nose met his cherub lips.

That night I dreamt of him speaking to me in darkness, in my room with the purple walls and the purple iris print curtains, our faces lit only by the glow of my nightlight and the shine of his eyes. In the dream he whispered the words of the speech to me over and over, in soft breaths that tingled on my ear: *After these four good, hard years, I still believe in a place called hope, a place called America. Thank you, God bless you, and good night.* I felt his hands on me as he spoke, touching me gently, in soft grazes, kissing me very, very softly with his small lips and his eyelashes and his nose. I woke up sweaty and spent, the sound of his voice ringing in my head. I chugged a glass of water and ran downstairs before my parents woke up to pillage the morning paper for images of him.

It is a strange thing to write about your first sexual experience, made even more strange by the fact that I was six years old and the object of my affection was a middle-aged man who was not only thousands of miles away but also the president. While my sexual attraction to Bill was undeniable, its roots went deep, and it was more love that I felt most of the time than lust.

I loved Bill because Bill was America to me. I loved Bill because Bill was magic, because he was elegant and smart and a bad boy at the same time. I loved Bill because I looked up to him to help me navigate a world that was seeming more dangerous and chaotic the more I learned of it. I loved Bill because he was my role model in more ways than just that, so much so that he soon began to soak up symbolic significance. Bill was strength to me, Bill was resilience. And I knew that I must be resilient if I wanted to survive the world.

I dreamt of Bill every night between in 1996 and 1997. On January 21nd, 1998, the Washington Post broke the news his alleged affair with intern Monica Lewinsky. The following January, he was impeached. When I learned of the affair and the blue dress and all of the goriness of it, I was disappointed, but the full impact of his betrayal of Hillary and his using of Monica and the tragedy of her being destroyed in the media was lost on me. I was eight then, and though I was precocious, I did not yet know all the cruel ways the knife of sexual infidelity turns.

My parents had told me about the allegations against him by people like Paula Jones, and I was reading the paper every morning now with my morning bowl of Rice Krispies cereal, low-fat milk, and exactly nine raspberries. I understood that Bill was deeply flawed, and that perhaps the reason he was in the newspaper, blushing and burning in senate hearings, was in some ways the same reason I was drawn to him. I remember being vaguely disappointed that Bill would cheat on a woman of such perfection as Hillary Clinton, but my youth blinded me to the wake of emotional destruction he left behind his selfish acts. My parents always said that the president's sex life was his business and not a matter of concern for the American people, so I accepted this reality. And I believed that no matter what, Bill would overcome, because Bill was America.

I know now that I was heartbroken, but not for Hillary and not for Monica, and not for Bill, and not really for America either. I didn't feel like a wronged girlfriend, I felt more like a lost disciple. I stumbled through the post-Clinton era, unsure of how to fight against the election of George W. Bush and the subsequent War in Iraq without my prophet. I swam into the Obama era lost at sea, unable to find the shore on the horizon without Bill.

But at the time, the salacious nature of this controversy intrigued me. The Lewinsky scandal was the first time many American newspapers used the words "oral sex" in a headline or even in the text; some even used the word "blowjob." I had asked my mom what a "blowjob" was after reading the paper and she had told me (one of many newspaper-motivated morning inquiries), but to see it discussed so openly felt dangerous and thrilling and deliciously adult. As a child, I came to view this very private information about Clinton's sex as fodder for my sweaty little fantasies.

Naturally, every night when I went to bed, I imagined Clinton engaged in the sex act with me. But there was one problem. I knew what the act consisted of anatomically, but I could not picture how on earth the machinery of it worked, or the configuration of those involved. We didn't have internet at home in 1998, so as far as researching this information, I was pretty much limited to my elementary school library. But when I looked in the card catalogue under "blowjob" and later "sex," I came up empty. Searching "blowjob" and "sex" on the elementary school lab computers didn't go over very well. Eventually, it was when I stumbled upon my parents copy of the notoriously hairy manual "The Joy of Sex," that all would be revealed, but quite frankly I still didn't get what all the fuss was about.

By that time, the flow of information about Bill Clinton's sex life began to peter out and my eyes wandered in the waning, impotent last days of his presidency. In 1999, I started liking

“real” boys, boys who were in class with me, boys like Joey Meyer, who was the class clown and sat behind me, throwing paper airplanes into my giant bun and farting on my glasses. But I never forgot about Bill, and when I saw his picture in the paper after the end of his presidency it gave me solace, but it wasn’t everyday that I got to see him like before, and these small moments of rekindling didn’t fuel me for very long, sexually or otherwise.

When George W. Bush ascended to Clinton’s thrown in the year 2000, and Bill retreated to Westchester County, New York to hike with Hillary and their dog and start the Clinton Foundation, I lost myself. I didn’t remember a time without Bill Clinton as president. In 2000, when I was ten years old and in love with the president, I was unafraid.

But I spent many of the days protesting the war in Iraq with handmade signs screaming, “This is what democracy looks like!” and my nights grasping candles in vigils held for the American soldiers and Iraqi civilians murdered in the wake of the Bush/Cheney quest for wealth, all the while wondering what the hell I was achieving. In 2008, Barack Obama granted us hope and a moment to breathe. But I didn’t love him like I loved Bill.

In 2019, the documentary “The Clinton Affair” was released. As an adult who was no longer in love with Bill Clinton, I had still held him up as a role model of hard work, stamina, and intelligence. Admittedly, I had not yet reexamined Bill in the context of #metoo, when the allegations against Harvey Weinstein were released in 2017, because it simply didn’t occur to me. I never saw him like that, as a predator.

I hadn’t really interrogated my own childhood lust for him, or the love that lay behind it. Hearing the words of Monica Lewinsky describing her first meeting with Bill, the way she felt somehow more awake from the first moment he looked at her, like a clay figure breathed to life

by Bill's Promethean fire, reminded me of the first time I heard his voice on the television during the 1996 Democratic National Convention. Had I been but a naive Monica at six years old, falling for the siren song of a powerful man with a velvet tongue? Does Bill Clinton's use of and failure to look out for his young lover destroy his legacy? Does it mean that he is less a man? Less a president? Does it mean that he is not the Messiah that I once I considered him? That he is not, in fact, the human embodiment of America? That he was not, all those years, worthy of my love?

The legacy of Bill Clinton's many actions during his lifetime is more complicated than Bible stories. My education has taught me that Clinton didn't save us from anything; that Bill Clinton does not encapsulate the breadth of the American spirit and the many colorful multitudes it includes. My heart has also broken many times for the way Monica Lewinsky, the eager Mary Magdalene, was tarred and feathered in the village square for mistakes that were only a very small part her own, for mistakes that were very much those of a young girl in love. But these realizations lead only to more questions.

What I do know is that I don't regret loving Bill Clinton for the first decade of my life.

Despite his troubling history, I find myself thinking of him during hard days, during dark days, during moments when I feel like the one in a senate hearing having to answer for my crimes. I think of Bill and I keep going. I made a poster for my wall that says, "Onwards" and another that says "Relentless," and Bill's face flashed in my mind as I formed the letters. I think of Bill too, every morning as I read stories about Trump's latest assault on what feels like the living, breathing body of America. If Barack Obama taught me the audacity of hope, then Bill Clinton taught me the mental fortitude and the persistence necessary to put this belief into action. During the darkest days of Trump's presidency, it is still Bill who lights the fire within me.

More than anything, it was my love affair with Bill that made me the Democrat and activist that I am today, and beyond that, the survivor that I am. While Bill have may few lessons to teach us in terms of loyalty, romantic love, or sex, even his detractors will admit that he is a man who struggled with demons so large and so terrifying that they blocked out the son. It is Bill's resilience that is his greatest legacy, and it was also Bill's resilience that keeps the fires in my heart ever-burning for him.

## Small Gods

I was raised to be a Spartan. Coincidentally, the mascot of my parents' undergraduate alma mater, Spartans made the perfect role models for the children my parents wanted to create. While their love for me was abundant and steadfast, their expectations were clear: only constant productivity, sacrifice in the name of success, and dedication to the degree of losing oneself in the task at hand were acceptable. In the absence of religion, success became a small god.

After Sparta's walls were destroyed by Athenian army in 404 BCE, all the republics of Ancient Greece believed that the walls would be rebuilt, as all ancient cities were protected by walls. But Lycurgus, the revolutionary demi-god lawmaker, insisted on a different strategy according to Herodotus: "A wall of men, instead of bricks, is best," Lycurgus declared. Lycurgus successfully argued that the funds that would be spent on rebuilding the walls should be redirected into the warrior training program of Spartan legend, the agoge that made men into walls. Lycurgus recognized that enemies would always be arriving at the horizons of Sparta, that there would always be a threat in the distance, and that fortifying generations of men would be the best way to fight the enemies of Sparta. His founding of the agoge created the entire culture of warriorhood that made Sparta both legendary and successful militarily for several centuries.

Lycurgus recognized that the spirit of human resilience was stronger than any physical wall. Walls may break, but strong men do not. Our bricks may always be put back together if we are the mortar that holds them. Or at least that's how the theory goes.

There are no walls to protect modern world cities, and there have never been any physical walls that have protected humanity from the constant wounds of the heart, the universal scars we bear. Most of us in the so-called First World fight our battles in the arena of the mind. It was in an

effort to armor their children for these wars that my parents invoked the agoge of Lycurgus in their own home.

My parents are from Detroit, and they are imbued with the unflappable grit of not only the American work ethic, but also the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps, suck-it-up, man-up, specifically Midwestern mentality that drove the first factory workers to march through blizzards to labor in the plants that made the first cars. And this philosophy also imbued their parenting.

Like all parents, they founded a city with no walls when they had a family, and they needed to fortify their children enough to withstand attack. They prepared me well, even if the preparation itself was sometimes damaging. I was forged in the fires of their making, and I was toughened to steel in the flame even as it burned my skin.

The hotter the fire, the thicker the hide. Activate your core of steel. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Onwards always. Carpe that fucking diem. These were their battle cries.

My parents' Spartan warriors didn't get sick days from school, unless they literally couldn't move, and anyone who made the request would be subject my mom's rigorous examination, at the end of which she'd take their temperature, and pronounce, "You're cool as a cucumber, now get your ass out of bed!" Their warriors understood that like the children of Sparta, their value lay in their ability to serve the small republic of our family by attaining success.

I understood that I was an investment, a vessel filled with expensive educations and tutors and fitness training, that all of the things that made me strong cost money and demanded that I return the favor in the form of attaining success. While this truth was only made explicit to me on one occasion during high school when my dad told me that I was a bad investment that wasn't returning much, I knew it all my life. I understood that service, and success, meant

sacrifice. I understood that I had to be willing to give anything, any part of myself, so that I might succeed; that there was no cost of winning too great. And most of all, I believed that the traumatic aspects of my childhood had prepared me well for the battles we would face as adults.

The fires my parents forged in me continued to burn after I left their home, and the armor they gave me served me well. It seemed at first that my tough-love upbringing had prepared me well when I chose a career as a film producer and thus became a citizen of the republic of Hollywood.

The truths and trials of the entertainment industry are best told in examples, in anecdotes like those shared by the brave women of the Me Too and Time's Up! movements in the industry. Like many women who have labored on film sets, and it is labor, I was thrilled to hear members of my gender finally speaking out about sexism in the industry, and about violence against women. I myself have endured countless episodes of sexual harassment at the hands of the small gods and their monolithic male egos that have dominated the industry since its dawn.

But in reading the narratives of these women, I found that there was a haunting truth missing. Film sets, and the film industry itself, are places where conflict becomes tinged by the ancient, the carnal; where surviving the emotional warfare of each moment demands the strength of a Spartan. This machoistic, militaristic mentality is inescapable, and it intoxicates both men and women. I do not offer this fact to in any way contest the undeniable truth that the industry is sexist, and harassment and assault are unbelievably common, but only to offer more context. This is a world in which all participants, male and female, are made to suffer, and expect to suffer, and accept their suffering because they know nothing else. Perhaps it was upon this ethos that lecherous opportunists like Harvey Weinstein seized and worked to their horrifying advantage, but the sufferings of women in Hollywood have been able to exist without any media

attention for so long exactly because of the fact that this is a world in which sacrifice of all things body and soul is the expectation.

Spartan strength is not only required, it is the bare minimum for survival, not the measure for excellence. The armies behind the camera are expected to shed blood every single day. Incidents such as the death of 27-year-old camera assistant Sarah Jones on the set of “Midnight Rider” in 2014 and her parents’ subsequent wrongful-death lawsuit against the production company scream this truth, usually to a silent public. And while a day filming a movie may not be the Battle of Thermopylae, the physical and emotional demands placed on the crew feel almost as taxing, even for the few who seem to thrive in battle.

Perhaps that statement sounds like the whining of the weak, of the surrendered, or worse, of the dramatic. Like anyone in the industry, I understood that spending a day making a movie was an enormous privilege. But it was also so hard. Film school was the ultimate agoge for me, and I emerged at the end of it all forged by fire, but also burned to the bone.

The first time I ever worked on a film set was the summer before I was to start at one of the top film schools in the country, an institution that prides itself on the warriors it forges in caverns of fire and upon the tips of spears. A second-year producing fellow who was working the shoot, which took place in a sweltering, dusty corner of Santa Clarita as so many of them do, offered me some wisdom.

As we sweated into plastic chairs, he told me with downcast eyes, “You must be one tough lady if you’re doing this program, or else you’ll never make it through to the end.”

I didn’t see my own toughness then: like all Spartans I ever self-flagellated and despised my own humanity because it was my greatest weakness. I didn’t know if I could succeed in film school, but I knew that my parents had raised me to be a warrior who could look her enemies in

the eye without turning to stone. And that day I vowed that I would do anything, give anything, walk to the ends of the earth if it meant success as a producer at both my school and in the industry.

Once during my first shoot as a full-fledged producing fellow, I took a box of tissues flung to the chest. My supervisor had fired the spear and it landed right on my heart, and I cried for a moment, even though my parents and teachers had always told me that warriors didn't cry in front of people, especially not in front of the adversary.

I spent two years running on four or less hour of sleep, working fifteen-hour days in the heat, toiling in "production offices" that were usually just a tent, or once, a sweltering diner kitchen. Our teachers were convinced that they had to break us before we might be made strong, much like the cruel instructors of the Spartan agoge. Every day, we were made to shatter physically, mentally, and emotionally, and then put ourselves back together again, and show up for battle the next day.

In order to break us, they put us in situations like desert shoots with three-AM call times and made us drive equipment trucks while delirious from sleep-deprivation, and screamed knives at us, and worked us and worked us until we were movie-making machines, robots who could still fight without food or water or rest or human contact or anything resembling love. I've heard of one incident in which a cinematography fellow crashed a truck he had to drive in a state of severe exhaustion and bashed his head open, but I'm unable to put a name to the tale. My own battle stories have shown me the undeniable and sad truth of this.

Granted, these are the battles of the real film world too, and production abuse plagues the industry as much as it did my school. In order to ready me for the "real world," my instructors hurled insults like steel arrows aimed perfectly for the heart, insults like "This film looks like a

damn costume party. What were you thinking?” or “Maybe I was right about you Alex, maybe you are too weak for this industry,” or “You’re just too green and too fucking sensitive,” or “Maybe you should just pack up your shit and leave because you’ll never make it here.” And I wasn’t alone in that. Once when a boy asked a teacher if he could turn on the AC in a steaming classroom, the teacher said, “What are you, some kind of pussy?”

In some ways, examples fail to capture the truth of production abuse because they do not show how every day, how unrelentingly, how frequently, or how universally we were broken down in film school, and further broken down when we entered the industry. Perhaps Herodotus faced this challenge when he wrote the histories of Greece, often adding in his own editorial between the great battles to make sense of all the carnage. Battle stories are not enough to distill the truth about the toxic culture of masochistic work ethic that dominates both the entertainment industry, and in many ways, the ethos of America.

Not only was surviving this kind of trial a point of pride, but the measure of how masochistic one was became the scale of excellence. Other fellows often bragged about the one hour of sleep they got last night, or the day they went without food, in effort to show that they were the strongest Spartan. Once a friend took a nap at my house, and I took a photo for Instagram because she looked very adorable curled up with my stuffed animals in my bed. She castigated me for posting the picture and made me remove it, afraid that our classmates would see that she took a thirty-minute nap in the middle of the day instead of working, as if she had committed a federal offense.

I deeply believed in the philosophy of film school and the industry, just like I believed in the philosophy of my family, because I needed to believe it to survive, and thus to succeed. But today, I wonder if I had to feel every nail on the bed I slept in to be made strong.

The internet abounds with millennial whining about things like “burn out.” Like many of my elders, I am often quick to dismiss it. What a bunch of crybabies, I often think, what a bunch of Athenians. And then I remember myself, as a child, and as a film student, and now, and the sign that hung in one of my supervisors’ office at film school that said “whining” with a big red cross through it, and how my dad would yell “No whining!” every time we got in the car to go through some physical trial, like a long-distance bike ride or learning how to roller blade. And it occurred to me that this labeling of the cries of the outspoken as whining is a teaching tool straight out of not only my parents’ playbook, but also the Spartan playbook. Silent warriors make good warriors.

I chose to leave the industry shortly after film school after coming to the realization that, while I may have been a warrior, this wasn’t my battle. I had survived the trial by fire, but I nearly destroyed both my body and my mind.

I cannot deny that many aspects of my childhood and my time in film school fortified me and made me able to stand still in a typhoon. I cannot deny that there is some truth to what Eleanor Roosevelt said about how our suffering makes us strong. I cannot deny that I am now able to tolerate many wounds of the heart because I’ve felt deeper wounds before. But I also know that the things that made me also broke me. That I did not stand up a proud Spartan at the end of the Battle of Film School, even though I won a Student Emmy and got nominated for a student Academy Award. That I laid crumpled and sickened by the task of success, and

surrendered my broken body to my family, to the industry, to the world. That it took two years to be made strong and whole again, two years of unlearning how to be a Spartan.

During my twenties, the countless tests and the countless failures and all the wanderings and the hours in therapy somewhat deprogrammed my Spartan upbringing. At twenty-eight, I attempt to resist the masochistic work habits that both defined and destroyed my past life. I know now that I am not willing to sacrifice everything for success, that I'm not really a Spartan when the battlefield clears. That I don't really want to be one, because I want to live long enough to drink every drop of life. I want to not only survive and succeed but have some kind of happiness too. The life of warrior is no longer enough.

It turns out that divorcing myself from the republics of my past and their dogmas is a daily task, and one that I still fail sometimes. There is still the Spartan voice inside me that whips me for spending the time to make a nice breakfast, or go for a walk, or even getting up to pee when I am supposed to be working. But there is another voice that rises to meet it, a kinder, gentler, quieter one that declares that it is alright for a warrior to rest sometimes.

## The Hustle

I was a liar for a long time. I lied to everyone, but most of all, I lied to doctors. Under the Objectivist laws of the drug world, doctors were fair game, to be used as we addicts pleased for our brutal self-interest. It's called doctor shopping -- the art of manipulating medical professionals into giving out prescriptions by dishonest means, and it is a felony in many states. I was dangerously good at it.

As a line producer in the film industry for the duration of my addiction to opioids, hustling was pretty much the job description. Like line producing, the art of being a successful drug addict relies upon your resourcefulness, grit, and above all, your ability to manipulate. Most people don't realize that just like producing films, surviving as a drug addict requires skill, hard work, dedication, and perseverance. If you've ever seen a quivering crackhead search for crumbs in carpet you know what I mean. For both the film producer and the addict, success means survival. And survival as an addict is measured by three criteria: you don't die, you don't go to jail, and you don't get sick.

In the tangled mind of the opioid addict, dopesickness and death are as conflated as dream and memory. It is the particularly heinous plague of withdrawal that addicts fear, not the certain death that they seem to race towards, dreaming at the wheel like dormant boulders hunched and heavy and tumbling onto the gas pedal. I was once this way.

This high-speed pursuit doesn't make sense to those who watch at home and wait and wait with breath held. Those who ask addicts why they continue to use despite the undeniable fact that every time they do so they could die, don't understand the nature of addiction. People like this, called "Normals" or "Normies" in the recovery community, judge addiction with the

same eyes that scorn speeding on the highway without a seatbelt. To normies, addiction is the idiotic risking of a ninth life already spent.

The truth about addiction is that a peculiar and demonic hijacking of the mind has taken place, that the driver is not only asleep at the wheel but comatose, and further, that the hijacker is the one pushing the pedals and switching the gears and swerving back and forth through the night. The sleeping flesh the hijacker inhabits is just along for the ride, and it rots from the inside into nothingness.

Being dopesick means that you're withdrawing from an opiate like heroin or one of its better dressed pharmaceutical cousins like Oxycontin, Vicodin, or Percocet. It means that you're sweating profusely, and shitting your pants, and barfing in places where it's not okay to barf, and mostly just lying there sleepless wishing you'd never been born, because you feel like you were born to run from this, to always run from everything.

Most drug addicts don't have much to lose if they get dopesick for a day. I had a big life to burn, but I didn't think about that as I swallowed handfuls of opioids in dry gasps. I didn't have a day or even a part of day to spend at home sweatily reckoning with death. I had to stay well to do the hard labor of making films. I worked fifteen-hour days on the battlegrounds of film sets, and I had to perform at my peak always. Thus, I had to also become excellent at being a drug addict.

Simultaneously succeeding at my career and my addiction was a daunting task, but I did it. I am one of the only opioid addicts I know who was able to consistently use an obscenely large amount of expensive, prescription opioids and never get sick. Obviously, this is nothing to

be proud of, even if I am just a little bit proud, but it is nonetheless something that required work, determination, and above all else, manipulation, and lies. It took a lot of hustling.

During the year I spent addicted and running and hustling and winning awards for the films I made during my graduate program, I also obtained more than 5,000 Vicodin, Percocet, and Oxycontin pills from about twenty doctors in Los Angeles area by illegal means.

I don't recognize the person who did these things, this hustler. I gave up lying and manipulation during my time in treatment, but part of me does admire the skill I once possessed. Doctor-shopping was like playing chess, but with stakes that felt like life and death.

The process of doctor-shopping began with selecting a target. Men were always easiest, especially sleazy ones. The typical male doctor play was a spin on the oldest trick in the book. I would adjust my behavior depending on the doctor's age and his sleaze level. I always presented some cocktail of flirtatiousness and innocence, which I named the "virgin/slut ratio." I never went full slut or full virgin; that is a rookie mistake.

When I was hustling a doctor, I would try to determine how they related to me. I called this their "switch." I'd research each target ahead of time to identify it so I could flip it. Some male doctors would relate to me as a daughter; I called this type the "Daddies." Nothing more than the most subtle, girlish flirtation was needed in those cases -- perhaps just a coy, prolonged glance or a quiet giggle or the asking of a stupid question I already knew the answer to. I played the good girl during my interactions with "Daddies," the dumb girl, the innocent, expressing my anxiety about "taking drugs." God forbid I become a drug addict, like the fake childhood best friend I made up to sweeten the sell.

I made easy pawns of the sweaty, hungry male doctors who were unabashed in their objectification of me. I labeled them “Nasty Pervs.” While I have never exchanged sex for drugs, I have shamelessly flirted to lure physicians into writing unnecessary prescriptions for me. After a time, the “Nasty Perv” play bored me. It was kid stuff, a game too easily won, and a victory that wasn’t intoxicating enough.

The highly intelligent male doctors, either “Smart Daddies” or “Smart Pervs” depending on their tendency towards lechery, would know they were getting played. The trick was to make them not care that it was happening. I did this by making them have fun despite themselves, making them *enjoy* being in my web, even as they saw it loop and tighten around their throats. I accomplished this through the art of banter. I enjoyed this challenge most of all. It really felt like a victory, a high even, when I walked out of each oatmeal colored office with a script in my hand, because it was such a challenge to hustle these types.

My favorite target was my egocentric psychiatrist, a squat, middle-aged Harvard Medical School graduate who sat like a self-satisfied, self-interested sausage, sweating grease into his Italian leather chair. Dr. Sherwitzky was a perfect hybrid of a “Smart Daddy” and a “Smart Perv,” which just added more intrigue. He loved to tell me about how my boyfriend and I didn’t have sex enough, about how he and his Chinese child bride had kinky sausage sex every night of the week. He also loved to tell me about how things weren’t so bad, and I have to say, his sermons did save me sometimes.

Once I came to my appointment directly from a meeting with my location manager for my film school thesis. When I flipped the switch in the waiting room that blazed his name, and he emerged to open the door, he looked at me like I was a strange and beautiful bird he had never laid eyes on before.

“I see you dressed up for me today,” Sherwitzky said. “You usually look like shit.”

“Yup, just for you. Definitely not about the super important meeting I just came from.” I channeled a combination of angsty teenage daughter and twenty-year-old tease. We both smiled the same crinkled, one-sided smile, and we looked at each other, and we knew we were mirrors in the doorway, reverse images of the same secrets, and we shared our shame.

During the session, we bullshitted and threw our chess pieces onto the board with what felt like wild abandon, but we both knew that the real game happening beneath its surface was calculated and quiet, conniving. We went through our usual dance of me lying, and him knowing I was lying, but still loving lying back to me. The crinkled corner of his mouth, the pinch of his left eye told me that he knew very well that I was a drug addict, and that most of what I told him was bullshit, and that I only saw him and entertained him and pretended to like him to get drugs.

As we concluded his session, he wrote me my usual prescription for Xanax and Adderall, but we both knew that wasn't what I had come to him for. He went to his drawer and took out ten gorgeous ovals that I knew were ten milligram Vicodins, popping them out of the foil that held him, and holding my gaze as we both counted the pops.

“This is what you get for dressing up for me,” Sherwitzky said, and he pressed these small and precious winnings naked from the foil into my outstretched hand so hard it hurt. As soon as I climbed into my car and drove away like a conqueror, I put the pills into one of the many prescription bottles in my glovebox that were purposefully mislabeled to throw off any suspicion. When I emptied my hand, I could still see the dusty imprint of the pills he carved into my palm.

As much as I was addicted to the drug, I was also addicted to the procurement process. The harder the doctor was to crack, the bigger the emotional payoff. While I had access to a few prescription pads during this time and could have easily stolen them like a normal drug addict, I never did. Doctor-shopping was just too much fun for me.

Doctor-shopping a female doctor was the greatest challenge as the female bullshit meter is sharp. Women often see the world more clearly than men do. When I did have to doctor-shop a female doctor, only because I ran out of nearby men to hustle, I would usually pick someone who reminded me of my mother -- a soft, nurturing person who I knew how to manipulate adeptly. I called these women doctors "Mamas" or "Aunties" depending on subtleties in personality. Hustling a woman was dicey, but still, I never got busted, even when the feds created a database for all pharmacies, with a file for each customer showing every pick up at almost every pharmacy. I soon figured out that the key to beating that system was only going to mom-and-pop, independent pharmacies that had not yet updated their systems, instead of trying to pick up from chains like CVS.

There wasn't any maze I couldn't paw my way through, no game I couldn't win. I was an excellent producer and excellent drug addict for at least a year. I never got caught by the authorities or my parents for hustling. It wasn't until my boyfriend at the time desperately tattled on me to my parents that I reluctantly agreed to get help.

When my therapist in rehab told me that in order to recover from my addiction to opioids, I would also need to recover from my addiction to hustling, it made sense, and a large part of the ten months I spent in treatment revolved around learning to interact with people in an honest way

instead of hustling them, which had become my default. I found myself constantly trying to control both other patients and the therapists and techs treating me to get paltry privileges, playing the game once again even though I knew it was sick, even though the winnings were now as tasteless as being excused for a day from group therapy. After a year, I had mostly stopped hustling, partly because I knew it was wrong, and a symptom of addiction, but mostly because attaining sobriety meant that I didn't have to do it anymore.

There is shame for a long time in recovery. There are many nights of lying awake remembering all the ways you hurt people, and more nights of dreaming about them. You will always dream of them, and sometimes feel their burn.

I was and still am deeply ashamed of all of the ways I hurt my family. But strangely, I never had much shame about the hustle. While I accept full responsibility for my actions and for breaking the law, memories of doctor-shopping don't tug at me the same way that those of stealing from, and lying to, and yelling at my family do.

I don't think I ever hurt any of these doctors with my lies. In fact, the tortured history of the opioid epidemic that swept America in the mid-nineties after Purdue Pharma released Oxycontin in 1996 tells me that many of them likely received kickbacks from Purdue or other pharmaceutical companies for the prescriptions they wrote for me. My doctors and I existed in symbiosis, and neither of us was a parasite on the other.

But still, when I was recently contacted by an attorney prosecuting one of the doctors I used to shop for illegal opioid distribution, inquiring about whether I would be willing to testify, I didn't leap at the opportunity. In fact, I said "no" without much thought, partly out of residual allegiance to the drug addict code in which "snitches end up in ditches," and partly out of

reluctance to revisit my filthy past, but more so because I was not comfortable with the idea of this doctor going to jail because of me. I had never been the innocent, even if she saw me as that, and she had never pushed opioids on me. I had played her subtly, as expertly, as I did them all, and she had agreed, but it had taken some doing. I never could tell whether she knew I was lying or not.

Of course I believe that in principle, unethical doctors who over-prescribe opioids should be prosecuted. But I never saw this doctor as being in the wrong, or myself as a victim. I was the one hustling her, not the other way around. Obviously, there are those greedy men who descended upon the Appalachians to set up pain clinics and destroyed generations, who are unquestionably heinous in their disregard for their patients and the Hippocratic Oath. There are those like two individuals picked up in the sweeping raids on medical offices in this area in April of 2019, like the male doctor who referred to his practice as a “fun house,” and lured barely adult women with the promise of drugs, which he would provide them with after a sexual transaction. And there are so many more doctors who are somewhere in the gray area, who didn’t sell drugs for sex or target the ignorant, but who still played along when faced with a hustler.

The crimes of both addict and doctor are part of a larger and far more tangled web of pharmaceutical companies and insurance companies and lobbyists and lawmakers and all varieties of movers and shakers and moneymakers. I know as well as anyone how easy it is to get caught in the snarls, to live and breathe the hustle until there are no more games left to play. But I also know that it is only by resisting the hustle, the greed, the hunger, that addicts and doctors and family members and law enforcement and the government may someday find a way out of this epidemic.

## Colossus

Friday nights were the worst nights of my childhood. From the ages of four or five until eleven, I would sit at the kitchen table and color or do homework while my mother obsessed over dinner. We both waited for my father's arrival. We were both afraid, but we didn't talk about our fear.

We would always hear Dad before we saw him -- the roar of his car, and then the thunderclap of a door shutting, and then the nauseating click of his key in the door, and then the opening of the door; and then he'd be there in a cloud of smoke and fire and fury like an angry god.

Dad travelled for work every week between Wednesday and Friday for two decades. Every Friday night, his plane would touch down at LAX, and he'd re-enter our lives. On Mondays and Tuesdays, he moved about the quiet darkness before the sun rose, often departing the house before I came downstairs to eat breakfast, and not returning until seven-thirty at night for a cursory dinner during which not much of anything was said, and everything was unspoken.

The moment Dad entered the kitchen on Friday nights, he would begin to shout about the fingerprints I had made on the walls and windows. I seemed to leave my sweaty, filthy, invisible tracks all over the house, even though I tried my hardest to never to put my disgusting child fingers on the walls or the windows or the staircase or anything.

Dad would take a tiny bite of his food, and Mom would watch him as he turned it around in his mouth. Dad would comment on how the borscht was too salty, or the sag paneer didn't taste the same as it did at the Indian restaurant. Mom would suck in her nostrils and purse her lips and exhale a scream of silent air.

Then Dad would say, "Why are you so tight-lipped tonight?"

And she'd do the same thing again, spitting furious silence at him, never saying anything back, at least not in front of me.

I'd stare into the murky depths of my dinner and put food in my mouth and chew it silently. Chew it, chew it, swallow it, just like a Nutcracker doll. And we'd all chew and swallow, chew and swallow, and then rinse and load our plates, always rinse and load and rinse and load, and then walk, walk, walk, walk up the stairs and away.

When I was eight or so, we spent two weeks on the island of Rhodes in Greece. Mom and I looked forward to the trip. Perhaps it was Dad's weekly sojourns to Alabama or Iowa or somewhere else sad and tired, perhaps it was all the planes he took by himself, all the lonely lift-offs and touchdowns, that made him hurt us. Perhaps in their absence, in a land that was far, far, far away from the kitchen table, everything would be different.

We woke to our first blinding morning in Rhodes and sat down to eat a Greek breakfast on the sun-drenched patio of the hotel before heading out for a day of sightseeing. I don't remember much of Rhodes except that everything was made of stone and sun and sea, that the ancient walls and temples felt like mountains, impermeable, immovable, and impossibly large.

I do remember that Dad took in the spread of homemade yogurt, and fresh-squeezed orange juice, and feta with olives, and hard-boiled eggs like scenery, and then he eyed the horizon for a while, as if he were trying to find the exact spot where the Aegean met the Mediterranean.

And then I remember that he returned his eyes to the still life of Mom and her breakfast, and he said, "It's just hard being married to an overweight woman."

A silent breath of fire escaped Mom's mouth and she stood up like the long-gone Colossus of Rhodes, the bronze sun-god who once straddled the seas, grasping a book and a torch held up as high as Mount Olympus. Only Mom wasn't wielding a torch, but a pitcher of tragically freshly-squeezed orange juice, and I saw her swallow and shut her eyes, so I shut mine too. When I opened them, Dad sat statue-still and covered in pulpy orange flesh and fluid that soon saturated his white t-shirt like blood. His eyes were as open as a dead man's at first, and then they closed for a long time, and neither of us said anything. I tasted the cloying perfume that hung in the air after the juice flew like fire, and stayed on Dad's face for fifteen years, no matter how many times he splashed it with cold water and stared into the mirror unblinking.

And then the Colossus walked away, and she didn't come back for a century that was likely less than twelve hours. Dad and I buckled onto the thin rugs that covered the hard tiles in the hotel room that now felt as stony and monumental as the ruins we were supposed to see that day.

Like the bronze and stone and everlasting wonders of the ancient world that fought time and stood immortal through a thousand wars, we all crumbled in a day. It only took one dark night in 226 BCE, one night when the earth shook and sobbed, to fell the Colossus. It only took one truncated breakfast, one sentence thrown like a knife, and one pitcher of orange juice thrown back to make us tumble and topple like altars made of rocks.

When we returned to the hotel room, Dad and I sat on the rough carpet on the rough sea-stone floors of the hotel and shut the blinds. We cried. I had never seen Dad cry before.

“Are you and Mom going to get divorced?” I asked the question of all sad children who see things never meant to be seen, after several hours of tearing at the scratchy fibers of the rug, of sitting on the floor, and crying, crying, crying into it.

Dad continued to sob, which was strange and sickening and a new kind of sadness. “I don’t know,” he said, “I’m hard person to love.”

I don’t know when Mom came back, because time became a strange dream in the hours my father and I spent on the unforgiving ground. It must have been less than a day, but it felt like much, much longer than that.

My parents did not divorce, not that time or the two other times that broke them in the years that came after the first morning in Rhodes, but they didn’t seem to ever really escape the scars of that day. I didn’t either, for a long time at least, and the scabs were flayed open again and again and again as I soon became the target of Dad’s helpful knives upon entering adolescence.

The battleground had shifted during the day that Dad and I stared into the tangled fibers at our feet, and watched them rip and tear to reveal the saddest truth beneath the ripples. We watched the story of our sadness like television. We felt the truth of the moment that ached and throbbed and screamed that things would always be this way, that things would never change no matter where we went in time and space, that we would all always ache and scream and throb at each other, that we would always be crumbled colossi crying into the bay.

It was because of the day in Rhodes and many other days that came after that I decided to end my emotional relationship with my father sometime during high school. We coexisted most

of the time, moving in cordial, distant, uncomfortable circles that never met, even when I spent winter breaks at my parents' home. He rarely so much as texted me all four years of college.

Mom told me in teary phone calls that he had finally agreed to intensive therapy after her latest threat to leave him, after thirty years of marriage, and at least two decades of her requesting this. She told me he was getting better. I told her that I'd believe it when I saw it, and she roared silence like she always did.

Mom came to visit me recently in Washington where I am finishing up my writing degree a world away from her island with my father. As we girl-talked on my cloud-bed in her hotel room, she pulled out snapshots from the trip to Rhodes, as sun-bleached with age as the day they were taken.

They are all pictures of me walking among the crumbled, hulking ruins of Rhodes, looking very, very small and very, very scared.

"Look how little you are," she said. "Your childhood must have been horrible."

"No," I say, but I'm not sure what to make of her self-indictment.

I looked at the pictures of me walking, so small, walking among giants. I thought I was eight, but I look more like six, in my flower-printed leggings and unicorn or princess or whatever t-shirt. I am infinitely smaller, younger, more afraid, than I remember being. In one shot, my tiny, squeezed face is difficult to make out from beneath the shadow of ancient temples. And I'm squinting into the sun, and my hand is clenched.

Like many millennials, I moved back in with my parents when I ran out of money and luck and nearly razed my life. I arrived at their home fat and filthy and exhausted and sweating shame with some sweats and a tooth brush thrown in a trash bag. When I entered the kitchen, Dad eyed me like a blemish on a window, and he looked at the In n' Out Burger I had grabbed on the way home like it was pathetic art, and he probably looked at my unflossed teeth and my sad, saggy stomach like that too, and he just shook his head, and then he couldn't look at me anymore.

Several weeks after my first twitchy month at home, Dad asked me over a quiet Friday evening dinner if I wanted to watch a show with him.

"Friday Night Lights. I think you'll love it," he said.

"Isn't that a football show?" I made a face that I knew would be ugly to him.

"Just give it a chance," he insisted.

The whole thing felt strange and terrifying-- hanging out socially with Dad, Dad wanting to spend time with me, but I guessed that at a least we wouldn't have to talk if we were watching a show.

Dad made a fire in the fireplace and I took my perch on a La-Z-Boy type chair next to the couch, close to the door, adjacent to being far, far, away. To the best of my knowledge, dad only watched sports games and eighties crime movies that were all some variation of "Lethal Weapon." I didn't see how a show that we both loved could possibly exist, but I gave it chance, just like Dad had asked. Give it a chance, he had said loud and with a voice that frayed almost imperceptibly at the edges; give me a chance.

At the time, I figured that since I lived with the man without paying the rent, I had to oblige. But I also wanted to yield, in some dark and sad and secret place that was frozen in time, stuck in a photograph that languished in the attic for decades.

“Friday Night Lights” isn’t really a show about sports. The show follows the trials and tribulations of the fictitious Dillon High School football team, gods of their small town. New coach Eric Taylor comes to town with his wife and daughter and is faced with the task of cobbling together a winning team after his star quarterback becomes paralyzed in an accident. The football team premise is just a premise, and it provides fertile ground for the compelling human conflict that drives the way. Much of the tension is between fathers and their children.

Despite its superior execution, many of the storylines echo those of “90210” or “The O.C.,” all the teenage girl shows that left me breathless. “Friday Night Lights” is all about kids messing up and kids trying their best, and usually failing, and adults trying just as much and failing just as much. Like any compelling human drama, it tracks the many breakings and makings of a heart and a person.

The show presents the viewer with an encyclopedia of father figures, of small, furious gods of house and home and team and town. There are the fathers like rookie quarterback Matt Seracen’s, who leaves his young son to care for his dementia-crazed mother; and there are many fathers who abandon their children for drugs or alcohol or jail. There is the brutally obnoxious, but kindhearted booster Buddy Garrity, who despite his infuriating jockeying for power and his infidelity, we come to see is a good man, because when the smoke clears, he is still a good father. And most memorably, there is Eric Taylor, a breathing, sighing, winking colossus, a true master of his universe, a god-king who rules with kindness and compassion and grit.

Coach Taylor is an excellent father to his daughter and his team; at points his parenting verges on divine perfection. He is a khaki-shorts clad, tube-sock flaunting, polo-wearing, eternally clean-cut dad-man with the smile of Apollo and the thunder of Zeus. He tells his ever-crumbling armies that God has placed them in this moment of battle on the football field, that they are the chosen ones, that they can, and they will win, because that is what they do. He expects the most, but he loves them through the least, clutching them in square-armed dad hugs until they can breathe again.

When we watched the show, I often wondered where my dad placed himself along the spectrum of great and terrible fathers it presented. To be honest, I wasn't even sure where to put him anymore.

We had a hard time talking to each other at the beginning of our reconciliation. Conversation felt stilted, terrifyingly so, but less and less tinged by his disapproval of me as more Friday nights passed. We still didn't talk much outside of watching "Friday Night Lights," when we'd sit on separate seats, and watch the same satisfying stories happen over and over and over again in different contexts that kept them interesting. We both enjoyed loudly commenting on whatever tragedy was taking place, and it seemed like we often agreed on our commentary.

Dad looked raw and vulnerable as a baby when he watched the show. His eyes, the same grey-green-blue-brown color as mine, would open wide and awestruck as the newest born. His obsession with "Friday Night" was childlike, wonderstruck, heartwarming, and almost always uncritical. And I shared his obsession, proclaiming that this show was the best show I had ever lived to see.

For a man who was usually reserved, he was exuberantly, effusively in love with a television show that is largely just another high school drama. I was captivated by the show, but I was just as enthralled by my Dad's reactions, especially when I saw a single tear drop from his eye after the Panthers suffered a devastating loss and one of his favorite couples broke up.

I don't know how Dad heard about "Friday Night Lights," or what made him suggest that we watch it together every Friday night. Had he thought it was purely a sports drama before we watched it, a cinematically filmed set of football games and practices, and our shared viewings a convenient way for him to make up for lost time as a father without having to talk to me? Or had he known all along that this type of show was something I loved? That, as much as it was set in the sports world, the world he loved, it was just as much set in my chaotic, relentlessly wrought, drama-dripping reality? Had he already seen it all and was now watching it again with me so that it might be a shared story, like the day of sitting on the floor on the rough hotel room rug?

Regardless his initial reason, we were both consumed by the show. We'd yell the mantra of Eric Taylor and his Panthers randomly throughout the day, even when we were walking into the grocery store: "Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose!" We'd clink our dinner glasses and proclaim, "Texas Forever," just like the loveable, broken team on the show.

My dad was, and still is, a human conundrum, a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde type, a brilliant and gloriously tortured individual capable of both earth-moving kindness and earth-ending cruelty. He is much more than the pain he caused my mother and me, even if it took me two decades that may as well have been two millennia to disentangle that truth from the web of our shared tragedy.

He is neither the perfect father that Eric Taylor is, nor the many drunk absentee fathers that otherwise populate the show. He was also changing during the time I lived with my parents. It seemed like the therapy Mom had finally insisted on and his dwindling testosterone and just the soft wisdom that comes with age were softening him, but for a year at least, I set our Friday night viewings as a boundary for the only time we'd spend time together. I no longer knew what to make of him, but I enjoyed our TV time together. It has been a long, long time since I have seen him fly into the type of rage that terrorized my youth.

In the years that followed, Dad has continued to prove himself as a changed man. I have forgiven him in the decade or the day or the age that passed since he finally decided to change, and only when under threat of losing his disciples forever. We text now, and sometimes he calls me. Still, not all conversations with him are comfortable.

My dad will never be the type of father-god to have a heart-to-heart with me, to apologize to me for things he said twenty years ago. He is someone who shows his understanding of his previous crimes through his actions and seeks redemption through action as well. So when I visit, and he builds a fire, and I see him turning on the TV, I join him in the living room, even if it's not a Friday night, even if we watched all the episodes so many centuries ago.

## Bound

My small SUV thunders down empty roads as I cross an entire state to go pick up my first dog, Rufus. Before departing in the early morning, I set up an enclosure in my bedroom, carefully placing the stuffed animals and the little food and water dishes on a placemat, making sure I had everything it would take to keep him alive, packing the car with a plastic crate, leash, and collar that looked more fit for a butterfly than a dog.

Five hours later, he is mine, this tiny, alive thing, and we are on the road headed for home. Rufus is a six-month-old Maltese puppy. He is impossibly small; even for a toy breed he is Lilliputian at a mere four pounds. He is adorable but alien, a strange, enchanting creature with curling tufts of the softest, whitest fur, and dark little doll eyes. The hair on his head is pulled into a top knot. This “man bun” will become his trademark. I will comb the long hairs on the top of his head carefully every morning, using a hair tie meant for an infant to secure them into the tiniest, most precious ponytail.

As I pull onto the freeway towards home, he begins to whimper, quietly at first. Before long, they are sad, strange cries, higher pitched than I had imagined him emitting, more cat or infant-like than the expected howl of a dog, like the screeches of a heart breaking.

The sound pierces me. I try to breathe and keep my eyes on the road, but after twenty minutes or so of his cries growing ever louder and shriller, I cannot bear it any longer. I feel the birth of an unfamiliar adrenaline within me that drives me to respond without thinking. I pull into a gas station among the pines of the Snoqualmie Pass, and pry open his crate, and hoist him from it, and hold him close to me.

His heart throbs like trapped prey, and his breath comes fast and warm on my neck. I stare down at the small, shaking face in my arms. His eyes are so dark and so deep, the black irises so large that I can only see the whites of his eyes when he shifts his gaze, which he doesn't. They shatter my insides like glass.

Rufus clings to me with such tiny might and clawed fervor that I let him stay there, glued to my chest, as I get back on the road and drive the remaining three and a half hours to Spokane. I come to know something in that moment, without knowing how I know it -- that he must be close to me in order to survive this world.

Surprisingly, my stomach doesn't clench at the acknowledgement of this need. In the past, I have deeply resented and feared others needing me. It's been a long time since the brief teenage moment in which I needed to breathe the thick, moist air of a man in order to live. In fact, nowadays, I breathe easier when they aren't around. It seems to me like men are the ones who need to breathe us in, hold us, touch us, be needed by us, in order to feel okay. Men were always wanting, needing, asking for more. And the more I gave them, the more they took.

We come home, the puppy and I, for he and I have become a "we" over the four-hour drive where I held him on my chest, and the anxious scratches left there bear witness to our new bond.

Our arrival home brings me relief, but it brings him terror. It is night time in a new city, and this is not home for him. I hold him close; he has evidently affixed himself to my chest permanently, and he peers out at his new home like a prairie dog observing an encroaching bulldozer.

It mystifies me that he doesn't fear me, especially because he will fear and hate all other people and dogs he meets. And I don't fear him either, or the promise of his closeness and his needs. I don't worry about the daily impositions of finding a dog sitter, the walks and the vet bills and the tether that will always pull me back to him. From the moment I first pull his small, shaking, whimpering body from his crate and hold him to me in the gas station parking lot, we are bound.

We spend the first weekend within inches of each other always. He constantly demands that I hold him on my lap; when I try to unsnag his grip on me he starts shrieking again. And to be honest, I don't really want to let him go. There's a photo of us from that weekend -- I'm a bleary, shadow-eyed mess, holding him on my hip with one arm and opening the refrigerator with the other, but I'm laughing as I look down at him. It is a weekend of doing many tasks one-handed, as the other is ever-busy with comforting him.

Rufus follows me whenever I get up to use the bathroom, sitting next to me adjacent to the toilet, and he pokes his head through the folds in the plastic curtain when I shower, and the invasion is adorable instead of stomach-turning.

Our relationship is quickly defined by his need to be close to me always. This is a hallmark of the breed, as Maltese are some of the first dogs to ever be bred purely as lap dogs for comfort and companionship, dreamt up by the Carthaginian princesses who ruled Malta after its long, bloody conquest in 480 B.C.E. Having secured the first two tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – the physiological and safety-related necessities, the queens of Carthage, and later those

of Rome after the conquest of Malta, craved the love they knew could only come from a dog, and they designed a specimen perfectly suited for this purpose. These ladies of the court were pleased by their creation. Pliny the Elder reports in the first century C.E.: “As touching the pretty little dogs that our dainty dames make so much of, called Melitaei in Latin, if they be ever and anon kept close unto the stomach, they ease the pain thereof.”

It was the female royalty of the Mediterranean who ensured the survival of the breed over centuries of war and upheaval. Maltese dogs endured not only the Punic Wars, and the rise and fall of Rome, but also the death of decadence during the Dark Ages. They migrated into the courts of France and Italy and Britain as gifts for queens, and in the opulent years following the Middle Ages, they were often painted atop red velvet pillows next to their beloved mistresses.

Mary, Queen of Scots, was beheaded in 1587 with her beloved Maltese beneath her petticoats. The dog initially survived witnessing the destruction of his mother from beneath her heavy, blood-soaked garments, but is said to have died of a broken heart shortly thereafter. Legend also holds that on October 16th, 1793, when Marie-Antoinette was led to the guillotine, and the revolutionaries shouted “Vive la République!” as the blade fell and her powder-coiffed head was hoisted into the air by the executioner, her Maltese committed suicide by leaping from the Pont Saint-Michel in Paris, drowning in the blood-run waters of the Seine.

Eventually, I must leave Rufus’ side, but I wait as long as possible to do it.

“You have to live your life,” my mom says, “Do not let him be a tyrant.” But this is easier said than done. During the first class I force myself to attend, I am leveled by a strange,

new terror as I break his hold on me for the first time in days and shut the door while he looks on with sad, scared eyes at the top of the stairs.

I obsess over him constantly during that first class, unable to focus on whatever we are discussing. I imagine him suffering without me there, unable to find his way around even the small world of our apartment without my voice and my hand to guide him, collapsing into seizures of hot breath and combusting veins, hurling himself from the landing at the top of the stairs because his queen has clearly been locked away in some far way tower. And I feel naked without him, hollow and afraid, a fallen queen in a faraway tower. The tether between us isn't broken by our separation, but it feels tight, tenuous.

When I burst in the door after class and go to him, we can both breathe again. He looks up and me, and I say, "Do you know that I love you more than anything in the whole, wide world?"

I refuse to leave him for more than four hours straight, and only do so when my educational obligations necessitate it. I try to go to parties a few times. I try to move among humans and speak human to them and perform all the human charades that we perform to each other, the smiles and the "how was your breaks," and the anxious refreshings of lipstick in a bathroom with the door shut to the noxious noise and motion. I last about an hour and a half. There's a cute boy there, but I can't gather the strength to pretend to be interested in what he is saying, to smile and fake laugh and agree to a date we both know I'll probably end up cancelling a few hours before. I am only a mile from Rufus, but the rope between us still feels like it's pulled too tight to breathe,

so I say thank you to the hosts and make some excuse about my dog that probably sounds weird to them, but I don't care.

Like me, Rufus often displays his distrust of others through aggression, him in the form of barking and growling at anything and anyone unknown and thus threatening. He always fights for his tiny place in the huge world, always so convinced that he must.

I, too, have learned that when faced with the imposing figure of a man and the loudness of his explanations and his posturing and the terror of his needs, that the best defense is offense. I was raised to think of men as a threat, as thieves of soul and body and life goals who as my father put it, were "only interested in one thing." Growing up as a student in an all-girls school, I noticed how things always changed when boys showed up – hearts beat faster, and not in a fun way, and female voices became quieter, higher pitched, and everyone smiled more, and laughed less, and had to work a lot harder just to be.

Being around a dog on the other hand requires very little work, and no inauthentic posturing, no masks, no secrets, no charades. I never have to ask Rufus how his day was, I must only pour food in his bowl and pet him and love him. And loving him is so much easier than loving a man. Loving him doesn't feel like sacrifice, at least not at first.

I spend the dark, short days of our first winter together staying inside with him. He detests the outside world, with its coldness and loudness, and this is something I understand. I don't go on any dates. I make a few impotent attempts to see friends. I am mostly happy, for a while at least.

The change within me is not one I see clearly until a long time after. I still love Rufus, and do everything for him, but I start to lose my fear of separation. I learn to tolerate the bond between us being occasionally stretched to its limits by time and distance. I still adhere to my four-hour rule and I still feel relief every time I come home to him. But there's a new need that confounds me, born out of being still in my twenties and still easily bored and occasionally still desirous of both romantic and platonic contact despite my best efforts.

On a bleak, too-cold Friday in March, I call my mom and tell her I love Rufus, but I can't bear the boredom of another weekend spent solely on chores, and homework, and television, on my dog. The house is starting to feel small, with less and less air to breathe.

I never thought I'd miss humans. I thought my two-person pack complete. If only he could talk, I whined. Then I would have everything I need.

"You know, they aren't all awful – men, people in general. Hang out with your friends. Go on a date, for God's sake. Maybe it won't be terrible," Mom says. I find myself wanting to believe it, even though I think I know better.

I download Tinder and I see a tall, bearded man whose biography says he likes reading. Mike doesn't ask me for nudes within the first ten minutes of us messaging as most dating app cruisers do, so I agree to go on a date with him, and we meet at a coffee shop. We talk about books and politics and art and movies. Remarkably, it is not boring. It doesn't feel fake. He also doesn't terrify me the way most men do. It's all very confusing.

So I agree to another date, and we make out in a parking lot, and it also doesn't feel scary, so we go on more dates, and I start to taste the fear of possible rejection by him, the need to show him only the smallest, shiniest slivers of myself, and I haven't felt this way since I was

stupid and sixteen, and I know that it means that I love him. I try to resist it, to slow the fall and pad it with low expectations, but for some reason I keep saying yes when he asks me out, even though I remember all the things men have taken from me and all the things I've given away to them too easily, and I also say yes when he asks if he can come over.

The thought of allowing Mike into my home is terrifying. He is large, 6'1 and over 220 pounds, and he laughs loudly and makes big gestures and passionate exclamations when something surprising happens in a movie. I know that Rufus will hate him, because he will invade our world, change the order of our pack.

When Mike enters our home with an armful of lilies, Rufus growls and shrieks at the intruder despite his many patient attempts at a truce. Rufus is mostly potty-trained at nine months when I meet Mike, but he poops on the carpet in protest when we have sex for the first time, and I relegate him to the floor space to amuse himself with the cheese-laced Kong I throw down to him. And I feel guilty for leaving him down there, just like every time I leave him to see Mike, like an irresponsible, reckless teen mother, and I feel guilty when I place him on the pillow next to me and I can tell he's having trouble sleeping with this large other in our bed, in our world.

Surprisingly, Mike doesn't end things with me over the mean dog that bullies him and shits on the floor every time we have sex. My new boyfriend is an impossibly good person, and he must be too good to be true, and I fear the moment when he is revealed for the conqueror he really is, that they all are. But when he pulls me into the shower with him, he kisses me through the mist and he washes my body, carefully applying body wash even to my armpits. I forget about my dog for a moment, for the first time since I drove the highway home with him. This forgetting, this untethering, feels wrong and delicious. When Mike and I cuddle, naked and

scrubbed clean, I think of how I used to hate the lecherous invasion of a man into the privacy of the shower, and of how everything feels like a strange dream when he holds me.

I am bound to both man and dog now, and they coexist as simultaneous poles of my spinning compass. Pulled into two separate directions, I am paralyzed. Mike intellectually understands my bond to my dog, but he didn't grow up with animals, so he doesn't know the pull of it firsthand.

Once Mike asks me, if you had a dog who bit me, would you give it away? And I say, did Rufus bite you? And he says, no, but just hypothetically, if it were me or a dog, whom would you choose? And the question infuriates me, because it feels like a test that I will fail no matter what I choose, one driven by a jealous insecurity that repulses me. I'm angry and hurt and disgusted so I say, I'd pick the dog every time, even though I have no idea what I would do. But I do know that Rufus would never ask me something like this, that he would never tug at the rope between us just to know it's still there.

Mike tells me months later that my answer hurt him a lot, and I tell him the question hurt a lot, and that it's a bullshit question because you can't account for having two loves of your life. I tell him how my family friend Michelle gave her dog away because her new boyfriend couldn't stand his farting, and how I've hated Michelle ever since.

"So, you love me?" he says, "I'm the love of your life?"

I can't believe what I've done. I know better than to say "I love you" first to a man. I've shown him my cards in a moment of weakness, and he is sure to take the winnings without a backwards glance as he shuts the door on everything that we once were. No, I say, and we both know I'm lying, because he pulls me close and he says, I love you like that too.

Mike wants us to have a “staycation” and spend the night at the Davenport for his birthday on June 27th, 2018. The promise of a guilt-ridden separation from my dog scares me, but the promise of a night free from the tug of my dog-child is tempting. As my connection to Mike has thickened, I’ve fought hard not to let the one between me and Rufus start to fray. But I agree.

I drop Rufus off that morning at the adorable home of a babysitter I trust, Amanda, who has a long list of testimonials, and a fenced-in yard, and I kiss him goodbye, and I feel a little bit guilty about it, but I give myself permission to release myself from his hold, just for a night.

As Mike and I walk amongst the ripe, blooming roses of Manito Park, I let myself breathe them in. I let myself relax for a moment, and I yield my hand to the larger one that grabs it and leads it along the path. We sit down on a bench in front of the pond and Mike kisses my face, and I tell him happy birthday.

Catching my breath on the bench, I realize I haven’t checked my phone over the last 30 minutes of our breathless, sweaty wandering among the flowers – I haven’t even thought to. I curse myself for the mistake, tearing my cellphone from my purse. I see the missed call on my phone -- Amanda’s number. Two missed calls. The voicemail she left is gasping and sobbing and something about Rufus is gone, Rufus is gone. I call her, and she takes a very, very long time to tell me that my dog is dead.

He snuck out of the yard through a hole, she says, too small and too smart to be foiled by the carefully constructed chain link fence her boyfriend built. I suck in air and impatiently whisper “uh huh,” because I already know the end of the story, because she is crying while she is telling me this, and she’s taking so long to tell me what I already know is true, and I just want

her to say it already. She tells me that she chased him down the street, but that he ran so fast and he hid, and he disappeared from her sight like a wily rabbit. She tells me her boyfriend came over and made a post about a tiny lost dog on NextDoor, and that one hour later, as I began my walk through the roses with my boyfriend, she received a call from a neighbor who had found his crushed corpse in the street. The babysitter has him now, or the flesh that contained him, and she wants to know if I want to come get the corpse or if she should take it to the vet.

I yell “Fuck!” in front of all the children and the families at the park when she tells me, screaming “My fucking dog is dead! My fucking dog is dead! Fuck!” over and over and over again like a sidewalk schizophrenic. My tears are hot and dry and I am gasping on the bench for hours. Mike doesn’t know what to do, this is our first tragedy spent together, and I’m scared because I’ve never been so ugly in front of him, but he rubs my back and strangers come, and everyone lets me smoke cigarettes and they tell me that there is no greater love in the world than the love of a dog.

The tie that binds me to Rufus doesn’t break immediately upon learning of his death. It’s a strange truth of grief that the tether to the dead still holds fast to the living like a phantom limb. It’s still there, but it’s loose, frayed, and my orbit around it is stumbling, off-kilter. I move through the foggy days and hours and months after Rufus’ death in jagged lines, thrown off course by the planet that tumbled from my sky, the phone call that disrupted gravity and the atmosphere and tore a hole in the sky.

This new normal of waking up without him, of never having to take the annoying bathroom trips outside, of not having to consider his survival every moment of every day feels so surreal that I almost don’t believe it. I wake to a botched, distorted facsimile of the world that

cannot possibly be real. Sometimes I swear I can hear the pierce of his yelp outside my window or feel his warm outline among the sheets.

I never saw the body. *I never saw the body*. What if it wasn't really Rufus? What if it was a different beloved Maltese, and he's really in a sad dog pound somewhere, or in the bowels of a ship bound for a Chinese dog meat factory?

But of course it was Rufus. Of course he is dead. I'm not that crazy. Or at least I don't think I am.

I must believe that he has died so I can figure out how to live my life without him, so I can break the slowly tattering bond between us. I know this, but sometimes I still find myself pouring bowls of dog food for a ghost.

It is virtually impossible for the human mind to comprehend that a being that was once here and still loved is gone forever.

I know he busted through the gate in search of me, pulled to me just as I was pulled to him, but unable to fight it because he was always so small and so afraid. I know that he ran through the streets with a pounding, fearful heart, in the zig-zagging, compass-less patterns I now walk, like Marie-Antoinette's suicidal pet fleeing the revolutionaries through labyrinthian, blood-stained Paris streets. I know that when Rufus escaped he was looking for me until the very last moment when he was crushed under the single rotation of a car wheel.

I hope that the wheel obliterated him quickly, that he didn't feel his tiny bones crack like glass under the weight of the car, that he didn't feel his heart stop as it was pulverized into pavement. Had the link between us snapped immediately for him, just as his paper bones did, in

the moment of heart-stop? Or had his body still felt it in the jerking moments of rigor mortis, even though his mind no longer did?

I wonder about many disgusting, sad particulars of his death. What did the dead husk of him look like? Was any of the physical body that once held such a force of nature not ground into nothingness? Was there any part of him, some magic, that dissipated into the air as he took his last breath, any part of him that was still here with me, holding fast to the ghostly threads that once linked us?

I spend a summer underwater, watching reality television all day and refusing to be totally alive in a world without him. But Mike makes me get out of the house, and I hate him for it at first, but I do it anyway, because being with him I can feel the bind to Rufus start to snap and break, and it hurts a bit when it does, but there is relief in the breaking.

The numbness of time and distraction tear at its fibers until it almost isn't there anymore, and so does the growing bond with Mike. But it is seven months before I can open the plaster cast of my dog's dead paws the vet sends to me after I say I just can't handle driving down there.

Almost a year to the date of Rufus' death, Mike and I move into together. We have plans to get dog, and we disagree on the size and type, but agree that we need it, or at least that I do, and Mike goes along, even though it makes finding a place more difficult, and everything more difficult and more complicated really. Even though it means making room in the pack, and sharing the few shards of affection I have to give.

I have waited a year for this new dog. I do not yet know if he or she will be tiny and dangerous and cunning like Rufus. Sometimes I wonder if the new dog will be as large, as dominating in the horizon as my first was, if I will be pulled to it as I was once pulled.

I wonder too, how Mike and I will fare as we share a life inside a house, how the addition of a dog will affect this small and precious universe. Strangely, I do not fear this formation of a new pack, because the tether between my boyfriend and me is a loose one that does not suffocate, thin enough so we can both breathe and move about the world happily and freely without each other, lax enough to allow for big wanderings and big dreams and new additions.

One day Mike picks me up and we drive to the local shelter to see dogs and pet them and begin thinking of possibilities. I don't find my new dog that day, but there is a peace that comes from our moving together around the smelly, loud pens. There is a relief in the brush of fur against my extended hand, and there isn't fear anymore.

## BOOK LIST

*Sirens* by Joshua Mohr

*The Journalist and the Murderer* by Janet Malcolm

*Killers of the Flower Moon* by David Grann

*The Reckoning* by Leslie Jamison

*Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay

*Days of Obligation: A Conversation with My Mexican Father* by Richard Rodriguez

*Under the Banner of Heaven* by John Krakauer

*The Liars Club* by Mary Karr

*The Rules Do Not Apply* by Ariel Levy

*The Fact of A Body: A Murder and a Memoir* by Alexandra Marzano-Lesnevich

*Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America* by Beth Macy

*The White Album* by Joan Didion

*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* by Sherman Alexie

*They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us: Essays* by Hanif Abdurraqib

*The Opposite of Loneliness: Essays and Stories* by Marina Keegan

## Alex Dew

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# Curriculum Vitae

*December - January 2018*

## EDUCATION

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- 2017-Present **Eastern Washington University, M.F.A.**  
*Creative Writing - Nonfiction*  
Writing Advisors: Rachel Toor, M.F.A., Natalie Kusz, M.F.A.  
Teaching Advisors: Dr. Justin Young, Dr. Max Hohner
- 2013-2015 **American Film Institute, M.F.A.**  
*Film Producing*  
Production Advisors: Neil Canton, Kevin Jones  
Screenwriting Advisors: Gil Dennis, Michael Urban
- 2009-2012 **University of Wisconsin-Madison, B.A.**  
*English*  
Creative Writing Advisor: Laura-Eve Engel

## ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

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- September 2017 - Present **Composition and Creative Writing Instructor, Eastern Washington University**  
Teaching College Composition 101: Exposition and Argumentation, College Composition 201: Analysis, Research, and Documentation, and English 210: Introduction Creative Writing
- September 2017 - June 2018 **Creative Writing Instructor, Airway Heights Corrections Center**  
Ran a weekly creative writing class for inmates that included craft instruction, analysis, and workshopping

## ADDITIONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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- January 2013- June 2013 **Middle School Educator, Planned Parenthood Los Angeles**  
Taught comprehensive sexual education to 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students in the LA area
- June 2006 - August 2009 **Founder and Ballet Instructor, "Dancing Feet"**  
Created and implemented ballet program for underserved inner city students at the Los Angeles Leadership Academy charter school system

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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- May 2018 **"From Screen to Screen: Using Pop Culture to Teach Digital Composition"**  
Research and Creative Works Symposium, *Eastern Washington University*

## HONORS AND AWARDS

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- 2017 **Creative Writing Instructor Appointment**, *Eastern Washington University*  
Selected to teach English 210: Introduction to Creative Writing by creative writing and composition faculty
- 2017 **Squaw Valley Community of Writers Scholarship**, *Eastern Washington University*  
Awarded full funding for conference, lodging, and travel by creative writing faculty
- 2017 **Graduate Student Appointment (Composition)**, *Eastern Washington University*  
One of two nonfiction students awarded full tuition and a stipend for teaching undergraduate composition
- 2015 **Winner, Student Emmy Awards**, *Television Academy Foundation*  
Awarded for American Film Institute M.F.A. Thesis
- 2015 **Finalist, Student Academy Awards**, *Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*  
Awarded for American Film Institute M.F.A. Thesis
- 2011 **Finalist, Chesler Award Scholarship**, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*  
Awarded for critical theory essay on the works of Vladimir Nabokov

## SERVICE

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- October 2018-  
November 2018 **Guest instructor**, English 694: Teaching First Year Composition Practicum  
*Eastern Washington University*  
Assisted Dr. Young in guiding and supporting Composition 101 instructors with the digital storytelling curriculum I created for the department during Summer 2018
- October 2018 **Instructor for visiting high school students**  
*Eastern Washington University*  
Volunteered to teach a Composition 101 class for high school students visiting the university from a nearby high school serving the children of migrant farm workers
- Summer 2018 **Curriculum Development**, Composition 101  
*Eastern Washington University*  
Assisted department with the creation of lesson plans and assignments for digital storytelling unit and final portfolio
- 2011-2012 **Associate Editor**, *The Madison Review*, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*  
Supervised selection of manuscripts for publication
- 2006 - 2009 **Founder, Ballet Instructor**, "Dancing Feet," *Los Angeles Leadership Academy*  
Created summer ballet program for underserved, inner-city students at the Los Angeles Leadership Academy charter school system

## PUBLICATIONS

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- 2012 "Little Boys." *Illumination Journal of Humanities*, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- 2017 "On Location: A 'La La' Land Guide to Los Angeles," *Citizenine*.
- 2017 "The Nerd's Guide to Dating in LA," *Citizenine*.

*Please note: teaching portfolio containing research, sample lesson plans, sample assignment sheets, course evaluations, and samples of student work is available upon request.*