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"Two Thousand Hours" and Other Essays

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“Two Thousand Hours” and Other Essays

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing (Nonfiction)

by
Bradley Guillory

B.A. Loyola University, 2001

May, 2013
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wife Celia for supporting me through this process. I have to use a pen for my first draft, so Celia is always happy to type my scribblings into a notebook, plus it’s absolutely beautiful to know that she is my biggest fan. I also have to thank my mentor Dr. Peggy McCormack, who passed away in 2012. She was a brilliant woman who opened my mind to the coolest moments inside the onion that is literature. I would like to thank Randy Bates for his help and inspiration during my years in the UNO MFA program. I would also like to thank my mother who always told me that her psychic predicted I would be a famous writer who traveled by train because I don’t like to fly. The truth is I don’t mind flying, but I would love to write during a train ride. My mother-in-law, Cyndi, has always been excited about reading my writings and her input has become invaluable. And, of course, to my son Brighton and my daughter Chloë, whom I love with everything I have.
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Introduction

My first day of graduate writing workshop was a bit scary. As people walked through the door, they knew each other; most importantly, they knew what creative nonfiction meant. During the class a synapse connected the neurons that made me realize I had no idea what I was doing. I began to sweat, a cold sweat. The professor assigned an in-class free write. My pen started to scratch my paper, but soon the ink trailed into words. I was writing. Something came out of my head, something about me and my past as it related to my present.

The personal essays in my collection exist as a mirror I can look into; again, a mirror of the past that reflects the present. Creative nonfiction persists as a genre for the writer and the reader. The essayist writes about the world and how it relates to him/her. If the readers empathize and emotionally react to a writer’s catharsis, an essay succeeds. As I started writing about personal experiences, I started opening up doors in my brain. The problem is I didn’t know if I really wanted to open any doors--the wooden doors had swelled up in the heat of summer and sealed shut. The essays gave me a reason to pull and pull on the doors. Sometimes the stories depressed me, but in the end, my essays pulled me to a better place. I hope the reader can gain some comfort from my experience.

My first nonfictional narrative in this collection, “Kiss Alive--from Afar,” became a written montage of action. In the beginning of the essay, I proclaim that I will metaphorically crawl into the middle of a specific interval of moments in my past. I want the reader to know that I am looking at an edited fast-moving piece of my life. The narrative has a sense of motion because it is a scanning of the past to find the present. My experience with the piece and the voice brings me to a story about morbid curiosities and where they came from in my life. I have memories burned into my mind. I picture myself unrolling a reel of film, and the images are in
front of me, glowing as negative pieces of time. “Kiss Alive--from Afar” represents me staring at these film frames and putting them together into a montage that equals something in the end. I started writing the piece to try and put the pieces together and figure out why I am who I am. In the end the narrative is about the strange moments I remember that made me interested in the world of art. I picked the story to be first because it carries many motifs I use throughout my other essays, especially film and music references; moreover, the essay begins a quest for me as a writer, a quest to find out who I am today.

“Defeating the Emperor of Major Drive” is the second nonfiction I wrote, and like a comedian getting a laugh on an improv stage, I felt an elation as my voice started to form. I mainly chose this story because I had been telling my high school students the story for years. The 16 to 18 year old boys I taught loved the story. At a time when we are trying to teach kids how to passively deal with bullies, I know my experience is not very acceptable today. At the end of the essay, I sympathize with Sing because he always seemed so alone. The moment I feel sorry for Sing shows me compassion in myself. The story starts as this triumphant moment of defeating a bully, but I appreciate how it turns into an essay about the beauty of friendship and first crushes and empathy for the enemy.

“A Ghost at Lunch” became a hard piece for me to write. At the time, I was having an intensely difficult time with my family. I had been starting my own family, and my mother’s methodology of lies, hypocrisy, and ignorance magnified. I had come to terms with the fact that I couldn’t trust my family. It seemed everything was a lie, and I didn’t want my children to be emotionally victimized. I wanted to use my writing to find out why I was so bitter with my mother. Again, the writing became a walk across a dilapidated bridge. Fortuitously, I came across Donna while I was working on the piece. With her words, Donna helped me finish the
first draft of the essay. The more I edited the piece, the more I began to be disgusted with myself for writing it. I felt as if I was attacking my mother to favor my writing. I originally had a purpose for the essay, but I needed more for the essay and my mother. I find what I’m looking for at the end of the piece: a nice memory, most likely my favorite memory of my mother, but most importantly I find forgiveness and, again, empathy. I understand that I have not been the perfect son, and like a great mother, my mom forgives me every time I mess up. Ultimately, I find forgiveness for my mom by recognizing she has always forgiven me. I truly believe the piece has healed our relationship tremendously.

“Ahhhh, the Power of Satan” is one of my favorite essays of this collection. The memories I have of Satanism in the 1980s stand out so much. The essay fits into the time period I’m writing about, and it exists only because the other pieces exist; in other words, by setting myself into the time which I am writing, I became flooded with moments I wanted to write about. I also find the essay fits well with my themes of morbid curiosity and esoteric music. All in all, “Ahhhh, the Power of Satan” discusses a fun era in my childhood while presenting a regional phenomenon. When workshopping this essay, many of my classmates remembered the Satanic epidemic in their far off neighborhoods. My mother actually read this one and she was extremely upset with my description of her actions. I originally filled the essay with hyperbole, comparing my mother to savage animals and portraying her as caricature. In the end I changed the overblown imagery; her actions are enough to show her as allegory for the irrational savagery from Satanic panic. The reader’s trust is very important to me as a nonfiction writer. Therefore, I assure the reader there is no hyperbole involved in the essay.

I knew that I would have to write a piece about comic books. “The Value of Comics” captures what I happily remember most about comic books. My dad would take me to the comic
shop when I was in middle-school, and he would take me every Friday when I was in high school. He was never into comics because, according to him, he didn’t really understand how to read them. He took me because he loved me, and I appreciate those moments with my father. I don’t want to take the reader through a history of comics or give a societal thesis on why comics are important. I want to take the reader through my history of comics and why my moments with comics are important. It seems that comic books have always been an invaluable variable in my friendships. I realized the importance of comics while writing this piece because I knew I would have to write about the birth of Image comics and my friends and I enjoying that moment in time. Hanging out at their house is a memory I hold as such an essential moment in my life, and the common thread is the comic books we scattered throughout the house.

“The Warmth of Recording Your Own Music” was an experiment that originally went badly. The narrative was more confusing when I first wrote it. I wanted a story that was an analysis of thinking about my own music while I listened to music that I presently enjoy. The essay would sporadically move from my listening to a record and commenting on the music to my memories of recording my own music. The only device that separated the two time periods were italics. Needless to say, it didn’t work. The narrative confused most readers and the point of the essay had been lost. Eventually, I figured out I needed to just write about the times when I started recording my own music--learning how to layer music and create songs that told me something about myself, staying up all night, boiling with energy, the rising sun reminding me I had to go to sleep. Like the other essays in this collection, this piece captures a moment in my life that was so important to whom I would become. The problem is that the moments are gone. As adults we have to realize that we may never have those moments again--that’s probably why we remember them so well.
“On Technology” is a piece that is mainly a dedication to my greatest friends Will and Pat. Our late night listening sessions are always fun, and I wanted to write about the technological evolution of our friendship. I met them in college and we have always stuck together, and the art and popular culture we adore really bind us. The essay represents a contrast to our modern time of social networks like Facebook and Twitter; after all, Will, Pat, and I still have the need to meet face to face and use social networks like Youtube to elevate our friendship. At a time when social media’s long term effects are being critically examined, I’m excited that something positive came from this analysis of technology and friendship.

A friend of mine recommended I write about my adventures with Truegore Video. I ran a cult film website for a little over ten years--I sold hard-to-find horror movies. The essay works as a personal history more than anything. However, while writing the essay, I found a bigger piece of me in the history: A story about another moment that I am trying to find again, where I am in control of my life. Like recording my own music in my home studio and collecting comics with friends, I remember a feeling of safety that came with the time in my life when I was up all night packing boxes or updating HTML. There is a heavy proclamation at the end of the story and some may disagree, but I stand by my statement that the popularity of the cult film can only come from viewing the movie, and if the video smugglers don’t get the movies out there, the movies are not viewed.

I’ve taught in all boys Catholic high schools for ten years, and each school has its own philosophy that basically mimics all the other schools. One school is “touching hearts” and another school is proclaiming they are forming the “whole man.” St. Luke’s is a private Catholic school that has a scary history--many private Catholic schools do, and I wanted to write a piece that shows the grotesquery of this particular school. However, “Tales of St. Luke’s School for
Boys” became something more. I could not end my essay in the medieval 1960s. I had to present what the school became in the 1970s and 1980s and, of course, today. When these stories were being told to me, Michael and I were both laughing and then quickly wondering why we were laughing, but--just like the essay--we realized that the school has become an empathetic place for young men to universally thrive.

“The Cool Kids” is my own personal dedication to the kids I teach who teach me so much. I sat down with the three kids in the piece and just let them talk about life in high school, but none of the stories of drug abuse and alcohol poisoning was as interesting as Jackson, Peter, and Ridgeley, so I had to just write about them. I think Jackson gets more attention, but it’s only because of his story of the creepy motel next door.

Believe it or not, it took ten years for me to come across a parent who just made me so mad I had to write about him. “Why Parents Shouldn’t Read Summaries” became more than a venting session for me. The essay is a proclamation that Holden Caufield belongs in a high school classroom. Most of the class really enjoys reading Catcher in the Rye, and they ostensibly relate to Holden. The writing is a battle for my class’s exposure to a great American rite of passage and my own personal moments with Holden when I was in high school. I never heard from the parent again, and Holden Caufield still gets to say “Goddam” in my class.

I have always wanted to write about a particular hunting that happens in my area in the deep South. Men go out with pit bulls and knives in order to corner a wild boar and stab it to death. Somebody told me about this sport, and I was instantly interested in writing about it. I became infatuated with how medieval the methodology sounded. I felt like the story would write itself and find transcendental connotation. The student in “Ignorance and Empathy” had a connection to such a trip, so I was always asking him about it, but nothing ever came through.
We were talking about this hunting trip a few days before the conversation in “Ignorance and Empathy.” I find it interesting that what he gave me a few days later in my air conditioned classroom taught me more about being a teacher than stabbing pigs with ugly dogs could ever give me. Austin taught me that part of my mission as a teacher is to imagine what goes on around the child: empathy and sympathy are essential in education.

I think I was reading a lot of Flannery O’Connor when I wrote “Trash Bags.” The people living next door to me seemed like they would be in O’Connor’s stories if she were alive and writing today. What inspired me was the intensity of the fight and the gory daydreams I had while watching the argument in the beginning of the piece. After my first draft, I wanted to discover why I disliked my neighbors so much. I needed more out of the piece, so I let the cold air hit the doors in my head once again, and reduced the swelling. I found an anger for how I grew up that hardened me and saddened me. My realization makes “Trash Bags” a penultimate piece in my nonfiction collection as I move on into a story about my family beginning with the birth of my son.

Writing about the first two thousand hours with my son Brighton needed to happen. I feel this way because of one image I discuss in the essay: the black kitten jumping onto its food in the middle of the night. The occurrence just spoke to me, and I knew I could build an essay from the image. My wife read the story to me out loud recently, and I nearly cried because I captured the first month with my son so well. I can’t wait to read the piece to him one day.
I don’t know where I heard the word *mongoloid*, and I may not even know exactly what it means as I crawl to the middle of my past. The idea is to stand in the vortex of my life at about eight years old, watching the world go by me. I’m in the middle of the whirlwind, and I’ve quickly brought *mongoloid* into my language of insulting. I think I learned it from my mom. The K & B drugstore on Chef Highway has Kiss dolls, and it’s 1979. Mongoloids, I laugh under my breath.

Lisa is living with us now. This is the second time she has come to live with us. The first time she came was because her mom and dad found weed in her dresser. Her parents tried to send her to the hospital for drugs. My mom says Lisa’s mom tricked her. Lisa is sixteen now, and I think she is having a baby. Lonnie’s the daddy of the baby. Lisa’s pretty. She has braces. One night I bite the top of her breast and leave a mark. She wears a t-shirt as a nightgown, and throughout the night I see her panties more than once.

With Lisa come other people from the neighborhood. They have lots of hair and smoke cigarettes. Michael has a go-cart. I burn my wrist on the hot engine. I see my skin bubbling like grease in a pan. I still ride the go-cart some more.

Lisa’s brothers are Ben and Brent. Brent always has red eyes. Ben is taller with big arms. Ben’s hair is short, and he always wears a red muscle-shirt. Lonnie is an odd character who hangs around too. He has a big black mustache and long hair. Lonnie is Michael’s older brother and Lisa’s boyfriend. When my mom and dad leave, Lisa watches me, and they roll weed on the table. There is a lot of it. I try to go to the bathroom, but from behind the door they tell me to wait up. There is a towel under the door and when I finally get in the bathroom, the window’s
open. My parents don’t smoke, so it is easy to smell the smoke, but Lisa somehow covers up the smell before my parents get home.

They listen to Pink Floyd and KISS, and I love it. There is a song on the radio that scares me, something about a brick in the wall. I picture something coming through my wall and landing in my bed, but even though it scares me, I still like it. It reminds me of listening to hell through the floor at school. I would lie on my foam mat at school and concentrate on the sounds coming from underneath us all. I was sure the devil was moving through the tunnels of hell.

KISS looks cool. Brent tells me about Ozzy biting the heads off of bats and dead midgets hanging from ropes, swinging behind the stage. I am fascinated by these stories, but the fascination is cloaked with fear. KISS are superheroes. They fight robot monkeys and sing about rock and roll. They swing their guitars and dance on stage. They’re having fun.

Ben’s room at his mom and dad’s house is amazing. He painted this great picture on his wall of an angel with its wings spread, and below it says “Swan Song.” I want to know about all the bands on his walls. The posters glow under a black light, and the guys in the posters look like mountains from where I stand.

I have this KISS jacket that is silver like a racing jacket, and on the back of the jacket are all of the singers of KISS in a circle of fire. As I walk across the street, I feel like the coolest kid alive with this thing on my back. I’m just going to Maw Maw Sugar’s. She has about thirteen cats, and her house stinks real bad. We have been looking out for her for a while now. She’s not my grandma. She never cooks; of course, you couldn’t eat in her house because it smells like pee. Her husband used to be a painter. Above the sofa in the living room there is a huge painting of a warrior riding a dragon and stabbing its neck; blood spurts out and gets on the man’s arm. I am in love with this picture. Maw Maw Sugar tells me about her ghostly husband sleeping in her
bed with her. She can feel him get in at night. The bed moves. I always tell her I want to sleep over, but I won’t because I’m scared of ghosts. She gave me these awesome books called *Man, Myth, and Magic*. Dracula’s on the cover of one of them, and inside are tons of pictures of monsters and ghosts, and drawings that pull me into crazy worlds.

KISS is coming to the Superdome. The commercial is a movie. Gene Simmons stands on a tank with his monster feet shining. He rolls out his tongue and blood spills down his chin. His guitar is an axe, and this is the best thirty seconds I will ever see on TV. The blue and red lights from the commercial fill up the room. I want to go so bad, but I don’t even ask for some reason.

Weeks go by and I see the commercial a lot. It gets better every time. I love KISS, but it’s the monster faces that move me the most. I like the song “Dr. Love,” but I don’t know what album it’s on. I just know it’s in *KISS Meets the Phantom*. They sing “Beth” in that movie too, and it might be my favorite KISS song. It doesn’t bother me that they’re singing to a girl about love. I like to pretend she’s Olivia Newton John.

The KISS concert is tonight. Brent, Ben, and Lisa are leaving my mom’s house, and I come in from the backyard. It’s dark outside. I open the sliding door and walk through excited to see them. My mom says, “Y’all have fun.”

I speak up, “Where y’all goin?”

Ben steps towards me, “We going to see KISS at the Dome.”

Brent laughs and says, “You wanna come, Bradley?”

I step back with my right foot and use it for support, as if I’m anticipating a strong wind. I don’t even think about it. I just say, “No.”

They ask again. “Come on, you sure?”
“No.” It’s all I can say. I take another step back. I wonder what my face looks like because they laugh. Nothing could have convinced me to go to that concert. They left and I didn’t regret my answer. Gene Simmons was okay on TV, but I know that if I was there, he would have seen me and bit my head off or something. I love Frankenstein too, but I don’t wanna meet him either.

One time Aunt Kathy was at our house. She brought my cousins Ron and Danny, and we watched *Frankenstein*. She also bought us these huge coloring books. The black and white movie lit our pages while we colored. A couple years later my mom told me Aunt Kathy went to be with the angels. I asked why, and she started crying. I hugged her and said, “Don’t cry, Mama.” I patted her back until she stopped. I never feared death until I thought long and hard about eternity. I cried into my mother’s arms, and she made me feel better.

II.

Before my sixth birthday, I pee on my parran’s face: I stand over him while he sleeps. Parran wakes up with my pecker over his head and terror in my eyes. He demands, “Don’t you piss on me boy!” I start peeing. He whips me.

As hard as I can, I throw a white rabbit at the paneled wall: the rabbit’s named Fluffy. For some reason, I think it would be fun to throw Fluffy at the wall. Watching him slide down the wall while his legs spastically search for the ground makes me laugh. I do it a few times. My mom catches me and tells me to stop, and then I hold Fluffy while he shakes. I will never do it again. I realize I scared and hurt my rabbit.

I throw a coke bottle at Ben’s head because he sent me to my room: I’m standing about fifteen feet away from Ben when I let that Coke bottle fly. I know it’s wrong as soon as the bottle

---

1 Parran means Godfather
leaves my hand. He is lying on the couch with his girlfriend. They’re watching TV. I see the bottle bounce off his head. It doesn’t break. Lucky shot, perfect shot, I run to my bedroom and shut the door. I don’t remember what happens next.

And I call Tom Jones an asshole to his face when my mom and dad take me to Las Vegas. My mom loves Tom Jones, and she always talks about his bodyguard, Bear. We are in the front row, sitting at a round table. When Tom Jones starts singing some stupid love song to my mom, I say just loud enough for him to hear, “He’s an asshole!” My mom tells me how embarrassed she is, and my dad laughs.

I don’t feel bad about calling Tom Jones an asshole. The rest of the stories make my stomach hurt.

My Maw Maw brings me to the show every weekend. I saw Empire Strikes Back the other day. School just let out for the summer. I watch TV at Maw Maw’s. She taped this movie on Beta. It is off channel twelve, and it has King Tut in it. Scientists talk about how they had to break King Tut’s legs to fit him in his coffin. He was eighteen when he died. The show also has a mouse rotting really fast and becoming grass. I request this tape every time I go by my Maw Maw’s house. She’s glad to play it. The things I can only see through the television fascinate me, but to go near them I won’t even consider. It’s like I’m scared to leave a cave.

III.

In “Songs of Experience,” William Blake builds the idea that a bridge leads a person from innocence to experience. It is what happens on that bridge that maps the tones of the rest of our adult life, which is represented by experience. The occurrences on the bridge can make you bitter, frightened forever, timid, morose, upset, tired of living, and conjure myriad self-
disappointments. On the contrary, good things can bring even better things to the realm of experience.

Did my morbid curiosity and lackadaisical brutality destroy my bridge within the first few drastic steps of life? When did my bridge fall from under my feet? Why didn’t I go with it? Am I still hovering over an abyss, barely opening my eyes to look at the horizon that is experience?
Defeating the Emperor of Major Drive

I’m ten years old and my enemy is Sing: the Vietnamese Bully. My best friends live on Major Drive. I have a crush on Dana. She has brown hair and sometimes I can see the sun shining through it. She always sounds like she has a cold when she talks although it makes her laugh much better. Her eyes are brown like mine and there’s a happiness in there that I want to find, but she likes Kevin. He’s a pretty boy with a cleft upper lip and blonde hair. Dark brown ceramic tile layers Kevin’s floor in his house and gives the open space a certain feeling of darkness. His parents are quiet. Dana’s friends with a girl named Bridget who makes yellow jeans look like half of a superhero suit. Laurie is a bit of an ugly girl. She’s tall and lanky with a giant face, and she loves Bon Jovi. I see her after a rainfall, barefoot, listening to Slippery When Wet, holding the tape case like a miniature billboard. David doesn’t live on Major. I meet him on the corner of Pressburg and Friar Tuck. We both have BMX bikes that we know everything about: my bike is a red Schwinn Predator. It’s the lightest bike out there. David’s bike is stripped down to the chrome. It’s a GT with pegs on the back wheels. We use our bikes for street riding. The canals behind our neighborhood act as a moat, protecting the woods from no one else but us. We make bike trails with machetes, ride through the junkyards, and find rotting wild boars. David can jump over the pigs’ carcasses with his bike. We always want to see how far away from home we can get.

Sing: the Vietnamese Bully is sixteen. He stands about 5’10” and is thin. As I turn onto Major, I feel his eyes on me. I don’t make eye contact. He has no white in his eyes and his eyebrows dip into the center of his forehead and shake like two opposing magnets. It doesn’t take long before he starts threatening me. He says not to come near him. He has his side of the block under siege. Sing calls out, “Don’t cross the street. You better stay over there!” He makes
me feel like a pussy in front of my friends, and Dana. I can feel myself shaking when he speaks. I’m scared of him, and he knows it. I ride my bike on the sidewalk across the street from Sing. I won’t even use the street. I wonder if he’s scared of anything.

My parents bought my sister and me a trampoline. We jump on that thing all day. Its rectangular frame is blue. Thick springs grab the black fabric and pull the canvas tight towards the frame. I can jump so high on my trampoline. The green grass frames the trampoline, and the blue pads over the springs act as a matte for the absence of color in the middle. I mark the dark canvas with grass stained heels and summer sweat. My friends and I play crack the egg and double bounce. In crack the egg one person is rolled up like a fetus, holding his arms around his knees, with his thighs touching his chest. Two other people bounce around the egg. Eventually, the bounces cause the egg’s arms to fly from the shell, letting his legs spill – cracking the egg. Double bounce, on the other hand, can be scary if you get bounced too high. When two people are jumping on a trampoline, they are usually jumping in a see saw effect: as one goes up, the other is hitting the stretching black. This routine seems to be an automatic reaction because if two people hit at once, one person will get an extra bounce. It’s called double bounce because the bouncer gets a jolt of height. Sometimes I get bounced into the springs or into the adjacent work shed. Double Bounce can be dangerous, but not nearly as dangerous as figuring out that if we move the trampoline close enough to the above ground pool, we can climb on the roof, jump onto the trampoline, and then in the end land in the pool. None of these stunts take courage; we’re kids; we don’t think about getting a massive spinal or brain injury that could lead to paralysis or wearing diapers for the rest of our lives. All we fear is looking like a pussy in front of our friends, and I especially fear looking that way in front of Dana.
Sing never gets close enough to actually strike me; his threats are always from afar. He’s never been in my face. I think subconsciously I understand that Sing’s threats are just threats, nothing else. He’s like a big spider that runs from your shoe. I just don’t want to hit the spider that spills out hundreds of spider babies ready for vengeance.

David and I are leaving an abandoned protestant church. The magic realism of childhood leads us to believe that Satanists gather in the church after dark to sacrifice goats and call on the Devil. Someone actually took the time to climb on a ladder and spray paint “BLACK SABBATH” on the side of the church. The letters stretch from one side of the wall to the other. The guy who did it may be one of my childhood heroes because it’s his midnight scrawl that made me seek out the music of the band. David and I are running away from the church because a noise scared us off; something fell and the results were loud. It sounded like the podium was pushed over, and as far as we knew David and I were the only ones there.

We ride back to our neighborhood with the rush of laughter from a good scare. Slayer’s “South of Heaven” plays inside my head. My bike tires become the analog tape reels that recorded the song. It feels good to be me today.

We turn left onto Major. Laurie, Kevin, and Dana are at the end of the street, but the king of the block is there, standing in front of his house. David rides to my right and Sing stands on the sidewalk to my left. The canals run perpendicular to the streets. I focus on the end of the street, where the rows of houses end and the woods begin. The hope of escape into a different world projects like a cinemascope screen. We had to jump the canal in some spots. If the water lowers enough, we can build bridges with rocks and wood.

Right as I pass Sing, the music in my head slows down to a rumble. He squeals, “Get out of here motherfucka!” The analog tape pulls itself back into the right tempo and stops. David
keeps going, but I have stopped. I straddle my bike and say, “What’s your fuckin’ problem?”

David stops and turns around to see what’s going on.

Sing answers, “You.” He stands still. He doesn’t charge me like I expect.

My hands go cold. My heart beats the hell out of my rib cage. “That’s it, Sing, we’re going back to my house and fighting – on the trampoline.”

I don’t even know what he says, but I know he’s following me back home. I feel like I can feel his breath on the back of my neck. David isn’t beside me, but I know he’s telling the others what’s about to happen. We get to my house and I prop my bike up on its kickstand. I turn around and David and Kevin and Laurie are riding up. David says, “Sing’s walkin over here.” We both laugh. Sing has no bike, no friends, and too much confidence. I stand in front of my house. I have a bike, friends, and too much fear for what’s about to happen. Sing shows up, and I tell him to follow me. I finally look in his eyes and see a bit of something sorrowful. I open the wooden gate and we all walk through. My dog barks until I appear from the side of the house. Sing starts to climb on the trampoline’s frame. I warn him with authority in my tone, “You gotta take off your shoes first!” Sing throws off his shoes and I do the same. David and Kevin and Laurie stand by, completely unsure of the outcome. There is no wind, but I can feel the springtime. We are both on the black rectangle, jumping. He jumps up and I hit the black with grass stained heels and sweat. I don’t look in his eyes because they scare me, but I watch his feet. By Sing’s fifth bounce, I’ve got his pattern. I pounce towards him, seconds before he connects with the black. I hit him with the dreaded double bounce. He doesn’t fall, he bounces high, but I bounce higher and kick him right in the mouth. His head acts like a weight that found more gravity, his back hits the springs, and he flips backwards into the grass. I hear him yelp like a pounded puppy. Before I can even see his face, he runs out of the backyard. My friends laugh
and David grabs Sing’s shoes and runs into the middle of Pressburg with them. As he throws them past the corner of Robin Hood Drive, he screams, “You forgot your shoes!”

David comes back to laugh about what just happened. By now I’m laughing too. Laurie’s laughing so hard she’s crying and she says her stomach is cramping up. Kevin just can’t stop saying, “That was awesome!”

David recalls a moment. “Dude, when you hit him in the face, his body fell back like a wet rag. I thought you knocked him out.”

That night David slept over. We ate ketchup sandwiches under a picnic table while it rained. I remember feeling sorry for Sing because of what I saw in his eyes before we fought. I never saw Sing with any friends. He probably didn’t have anybody to make fun of him for what happened that day. He would stand outside of his house, alone. I started to think he was waiting for something or someone. He couldn’t be standing there waiting for me to challenge him. I started thinking about being sixteen and not having any friends, and it scared the hell out of me.
A Ghost at Lunch

From minute to minute, I don’t know whether my shoes are resting in Yorkshire urine or water. I see a dog turd across the room; no, three dog turds, under the dining room table—my mom’s house is always a little piece of chaos. As a kid I was always embarrassed by my home. As an adult I am always embarrassed by my mom’s house. Even as I became older, cleaning up the house myself was an endless struggle. The house would filth up immediately—I use the word filth with no hyperbole. I can remember plates so caked with days-old food that only an electric sander could make them clean. My room and the hall bathroom, which was technically my bathroom, were always clean because of me and Christi, my little sister, except for my mother’s stash of dirty laundry in the tub, hidden behind a flowered shower curtain. If there was nowhere to put the clothes my mom wasn’t wearing anymore, they would lie in the tub like corpses from a forgotten nightmare. I always had to bathe in my mother’s bathroom.

My mom also had a hiding spot for the dirty pots and pans. If company was coming over, the dirty dishes would go in the oven for the night; the problem was that those dishes would be forgotten. Some smells in the kitchen would come out of nowhere. Pots would soak too long; the left over food became a part of the soapy water, creating a stench that had a foul sweetness to it, the kind of smell that attached itself to the back of your throat. When I smelled the stink, I usually would start washing the dishes. Although as soon as I disturbed the cesspool, the smell would blossom into the air and I would gag.

I have no good, tender memories of my mother and me, nothing. I imagine my sister doesn’t either. When Christi was about twelve, my mother pounced on her, slapping her across the face, but here comes the horror of it all: My mom, our mother, was on top of my sister with a faded and torn night shirt, wearing no underwear. My sister screamed, “Mom, you don’t have
any drawers on!" My sister’s face turned red with shame. I can’t remember exactly why my mother was attacking my sister. But I do remember my mom just laughing and screaming at Christi, “Don’t get smart with me!” As this scene ended, my sister and my mom and I were laughing. It became a moment of twisted hilarity. The moment isn’t funny anymore.

We’ve seen my mom’s vagina more times than we can count. We’ve seen her naked body scurry across a room too many times, bruises on her ass catching the light, making the iridescent blemish glow. “Ah, ma!” I would declare. My mom’s nightgowns are too short, unbelievably too short. If she walked outside she would be arrested. She bends over, and her fat, hairy twat pops out like a carnivorous plant. I can see it now. A projector is on loop in the back of my brain. Its pubic hair makes the labia appear dark grey, and I wait for it to open and suck me back in where it’s cleaner.

Writing this about my mother, whom I do love, hurts so much. I know when she’s dead I will be haunted by these words. Maybe this narrative can lead me to solace or an understanding that the problem lies within myself. I think about the times she’s lied to me and I become angry. I stand up to her and tell her how I feel. She tells me I need a pill or a psychiatrist. She hangs up on me. She steals a credit card from me and spends money on it. I find out through a credit check. I tell her I don’t trust her, and I scream and cry at the same time. I speak with my dad on the phone and scream and cry some more. He starts to cry and tells me I need help. I tell him I just need her to stop lying to me. I want to look over a bridge and spit out the rocks that roll around in my belly.

My wife, Celia, and my son, Brighton, are with me in the food court at a mall. As we walk away from Chick-Fil-A with a tray of food, I see Donna. She is a friend of the family and
my sister’s godmother. She’s with her husband, Nick, and we ask if we can sit and eat with them. She gives Brighton a kiss and we sit with our tray of food. We talk about Nick’s motorcycle. He’s a good person and Donna deserves him. We start talking about the time I spit in Donna’s face when I was eight; she was probably eighteen at the time. She chased me until I gave in and hit the ground laughing. I was probably covering up my fear of what she was going to do to me. She pounced on top of me. Her knees held my arms to the ground. She started gathering up saliva from the back of her throat and started spitting on me. I continued laughing and turning my head side to side, but I couldn’t escape her thick rain of vengeance. I started crying and she stopped. She got up and walked away.

We laugh about this for a minute and move on to questions and answers about the present. While my wife holds a conversation with Nick, I look at Donna and ask, “Do you have any good memories of me?” My countenance changes drastically.

“Yes.” She seems surprised by the question.

“Well, I don’t know…I just…always hear bad stories about me as a kid.” I say this with stuttering laughs, trying to hide my seriousness.

“I wouldn’t say you were a bad kid. You were just…”

“Mischievous?”

“Yeah, but you really just needed attention. I don’t know if you remember, but I watched you and Christi all the time. I would clean the house and cook sometimes. Your mom was always chasing Tom Jones around the country. I really think you wanted attention, and the things you did were the only way you could get it.”

She’s right. I wish I could see my face as Donna says this. I feel like I see a ghost for the first time, but the ghost isn’t Donna. The ghost becomes an apparition of relief or an opaque
answer I can see slowly forming. All my life I have heard stories about how bad I acted as a child. Everyone knew the story about me peeing on my uncle and the time I smashed an acoustic guitar over Donna’s brother’s head. I understand that these stories were about my mother too. Every time these stories have come up, my mother would seem embarrassed as she defended me: “He wasn’t bad.”

I do remember Donna being around a lot. My sister has two children and they both have the same godmother: Donna. As a young girl, Christi was very attached to Donna. Now I know why.

The short conversation with Donna drapes around me for days. Memories start coming back to me. I remembered sticking a safety pin in a wall outlet and getting shocked, running into the other room, hugging my mom, scared. I remember throwing a match in the gas tank of the lawnmower—luckily it was out of gas. The ignited fumes only singed my eyebrows. I remember starting a fire in the driveway with newspapers—the neighbor walked past me and knocked on the door to tell my mother what I was up to. As I think of these incidents that happened at a young age, I can’t help but ask: where was she? Why was I left alone to grind my knee into the slowly cracking sidewalk? I remember my mom being on the phone a lot. Like a raucous teenager, she would talk day and night. Then I receive a memory of a moment when she put the phone down.

I remember thinking about eternity as a young boy. I just couldn’t understand forever. I couldn’t wrap my mind around what infinity meant. I became frightened. I started to cry. I rolled out of the bed into a darkness that just made me even more scared of the horrid crack of death. I left my bedroom into the light of the living room. My mom sat there on the sofa. I climbed into
her lap and cried out, “I’m afraid to die.” I couldn’t look at her, but I trusted her, and I knew she would tell me the truth. I knew after I pressed my face into her breasts, I would be okay.

Before a tear could wet her blouse, she had a reply, “Don’t be scared, baby. You’re not gonna die for a long, long, long time, and when you do, you’ll get to see your Paw Paw and Buffy and Aunt Cathy.”

“So they’ll all be there? Will they see me?”

“Of course, they’ll never stop loving you.”

With this memory I want to forget the past and push forward with forgiveness. I want to embrace the unconditional love my mother has for me now because I know she has forgiven me for everything I have done to her. She constantly pushes forward as she makes me feel safe and loved. I want to do the same for her.
Ahhhh, The Power of Satan

So it’s around 1988, and my home state of Louisiana was experiencing a Satanism epidemic. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it’s the truth. The news was filled with stories about Satanism getting into suburbia and guiding children to patricide, matricide, prolicide, uxoricide, sororicide, avunculicide, and—of course—deicide. The local media blamed music; well, not just any music: heavy metal music. Horribly enough, this hyperbolic scare was something that would leak into my house and grab my histrionic mother by the side of her face and point her eyeballs right at me and whisper in her ear, "Torture him." Satan had a hold on my mom, not me. Boy, did he have her. Have you ever seen an angry mother reading the lyrics of a Black Sabbath song out loud? She’s wondering if you’re a Satanist, thinking that Satan will get you to join in the fun of cattle mutilation and human sacrifice—and somehow she also thinks you’re gay because you haven’t brought a girl around in the last month. Your dad sits there like an oak tree, afraid of the salty, hot air of the matriarch.

I wanted to be a bass player, \(^2\) so my dad bought me a bass guitar. There was a pawn shop near his lawnmower shop, and he would bring home the weirdest instruments. The first bass he bought me was a custom Peavey that looked like a Fender Precision, but the head had a spiderweb decal coursing past the tuners. The pick guard was white and spotted with decaled drops of blood and a skull and crossbones. Even as a fourteen-year-old kid, I thought this bass was cheesy, but a bass is a bass. When I listened to Black Sabbath, all I heard was Geezer Butler’s bass wading through the mud. While listening to Metallica’s *Kill ’em All*, I heard the weirdest noise coming through my headphones. It was melodic and nasty, like wet electricity.

\(^2\) Ironically, it was Tommy Stinson from The Replacements who caused my rock and roll epiphany. I saw him playing a red and white Fender Precision and I knew I wanted to carry a bass guitar as far as I could.
The name of the song: “(Anestesia)—Pulling Teeth.” Cliff Burton’s bass guitar leaked the fire of a bass solo seeking Hell through a distortion pedal and God knows what else. I used to hum that solo, distortion and all, under my breath. I didn’t think anybody could hear me as I rumbled out the riff, the back of my throat being self-inflicted and scratched from making the same scale Burton did. To me that humming sounded just like the song, to everyone else it sounded like an allergy problem. I only knew this because I embarrassed myself by ripping into Cliff Burton’s bass solo in the doctor’s office, in front of the doctor. As I gargled rocks, the doctor stopped and looked at me and asked, “Are you okay?”

My mom quickly chimed in, “He’s okay. He just does that.”

I was embarrassed and confused. I thought only I could hear the noises that flawlessly played back the music. I don’t think I ever did bass solos again, unless I played them on my actual bass guitar. This wouldn’t be the first time the adult world wouldn’t understand.

The rise of suburban Satan started with the “Bill Elder’s Report” on the channel 4, 10 o’clock news. In parts of Louisiana, farmers had discovered mutilated cattle, drained of blood. Elders revealed the inside of cement chambers under bridges. Ridiculous graffiti pledged allegiance to the dark lord of hell: SATAN. Satan Rules; Satan is King; Ozzy. The “Elder’s Report” took this seriously. The American South was being torn apart by the Satanic Youth run wild, and bands like Slayer and the Misfits were leading the children into Hell. Of course, I videotaped the “Elder’s Report.” My friends and I watched it over and over. It was five minutes of satanic glory. The grandiose conclusion of the journalistic trash was a tape recording of a woman possessed. An “occult researcher” had placed a tape recorder beside the supposed victim’s bed as she slept. The next morning, the magnetic tape let out the sounds of a demon

3 I think the claim that cattle were being drained of blood is a bit overboard. Did these supposed Satanists have home embalming kits?
screaming. It sounded like a struggle between good and evil or one personality and another personality. A raucous voice screamed, “Get out!” Noises started to sound like suffocating elderly cats. Then the voice came back: “Let me out!” The scene scared us, but we had no intention of ever stopping our viewings of this treasure. The “Elder’s Report” became a short horror film to us. We didn’t take it seriously, but our parents took the news special as an imperative warning: Watch what your children are doing.

Very soon after the Elder’s Report, Geraldo Rivera would give paranoid parents more to worry about. The mustached marauder hosted a television special called Devil Worship: Exposing Satan’s Underground. For two hours, Geraldo guided us to the most horrific stories of cow torture as it related to heavy metal music. Even Ozzy was answering questions—we couldn’t understand him, though⁴. There were interviews with King Diamond and people from the Satanic Church. Geraldo had guests from prison who had killed their parents in the name of Satan. One kid cut his mom’s head off, slicing her “from ear to ear.” I taped the special and as we had with the “Elder’s Report,” my friends and I watched it over and over. The news special Geraldo put together was a circus of horror. The moment reminded me of the first time I saw Boris Karloff as Frankenstein’s Monster or of annually watching the Disney Halloween special that ended with Chernabog calling his horde for a party at the top of Bald Mountain or peeking through my hands at the first minutes of Texas Chainsaw Massacre as a voice clearly stated, “The film which you are about to see is an account of the tragedy which befell a group of five youths…”

My mom didn’t really care if I watched horror movies, as long as she didn’t have to watch the movies with me; however, she did want to watch the Geraldo Satanic special. I guess I

⁴ It’s worth noting that Ozzy ends every other sentence with the question “You know?” No, Ozzy. We don’t know.
naively expected her to find the show as entertaining as I had. She took Geraldo’s kangaroo court way too seriously. While the ending credits flashed across the screen of the Zenith, my mom turned off the television and demanded, “Go get your tapes.” I quickly turned my head and heard a crack of bone in my neck.

“Why?” I asked.

“I want to read the lyrics and make sure they’re not Satanic.”

“They’re not Satanic, Ma.” I lied. Lyrics like “Spill your blood and let it run onto me” were definitely going to freak her out.

She made a face that told me I had no choice but to rise from the honeycomb colored carpet and get my tapes. On the way I thought I might be able to calm her down. I had some Dead Kennedys in my collection and the name of the album was “In God We Trust.” Maybe I could tell her it was a Christian album—even though my mom never took us to church she always said she was “very religious,” so it might work. As far as Slayer goes, I was exposed. There was no way their lyrics were gonna fly. Inverted Pentagrams were all over those tapes, and with song titles like “South of Heaven” and “Raining Blood,” I had nothing I could say. I don’t know why I didn’t just dump the Slayer on the way back to her Lazy-Boy throne. I think I wanted to see her reaction. I stupidly thought it was cool to freak my mom out.

I laid the cassette case on her lap, and she immediately started rooting through the collection. She picked up Agnostic Front and took the tape out, sliding plastic against plastic. She pulled the sleeve from the case and began to unfold the card stock of lyrics. The first song “The Executioner” starts with the statement, “Killing’s my business and business is fine.” She read the lyric aloud. I could hear the accompanying music, but the tape popped and she yelled, “This is about killing; I’m throwing this away.” I begged her not to throw it away. She started
digging for more. She came up with the worst thing she could ever lay her eyes on: Suicidal Tendencies. She just turned the case around and noticed a couple of song titles: “I Killed Your Mommy and Your Mommy’s Dead” and “Suicide’s an Alternative.” She didn’t need to see anymore. I thought about arguing that the song isn’t called “Suicide is the Only Alternative.” I let the argument become a thought. She quickly stated her mantra: “You need a psychiatrist!” For some reason I always needed a psychiatrist, even though I didn’t do any drugs or look all that different from other kids. I usually wore jeans and a band shirt—the shirts were what usually got me in trouble. If there was a shirt my mom didn’t like, it would eventually disappear. This is why I started doing my own laundry at fourteen.

“Go get me a box. I’m putting these away, and I’ll decide when you’ll get them back.”

“But, Ma, there’s nothing wrong with them. It’s just like horror movies.”

“If you don’t shut up, you won’t watch any of that shit either.”

My entire tape collection sat in a dark corner of her closet, rotting. I would sneak in every other night and just take one at a time. My box of tapes was half empty when Metallica’s ...And Justice for All was released. I convinced her the album was political: “Ma, it’s about losing our freedom.” She either believed my sudden interest in politics or she just didn’t care anymore. My mother mellowed out and forgot about Geraldo’s warnings of satanic fun in suburbia. She didn’t throw any of my tapes away.

I escaped the clutches of my mom’s weird obsession with Satan. I continued to listen to music with violent elements. I can still listen to music like that, especially Slayer—the lyrics are funny now, like watching terribly sublime B-grade horror movies. The beautiful cinematography in a film about cannibals on the loose may help the viewer look past the fact that the movie cost twenty bucks to make. Just as well, the virtuoso musicianship in an aggressive metal song may
overlap or surpass the corny angst-ridden lyrics that are actually delivered by a forty-year-old man.

The eighties was a strange time. Satan became what parents feared most. In 1995, Geraldo apologized for his false accusations on his past shows about ritualistic molestation, and many of the authors who were guests on the “Satan’s Underground” show were proven to have been using fraudulent information. One particular author wrote an entire book—hoax—about a young girl—Michelle—who had repressed memories of wild Devil-made orgies with a surprise visit by the goat god himself. *Michelle Remembers* by psychiatrist turned profiteer, Kerr Cuhulain, became an elaborate part of this enraged, boiling hysteria that actually showed that the adults were running amuck, possessed by evil wild imaginations. The kids were merely listening to music. I guess I got it right: The “Bill Elder’s Report” and all the other anti-metal propaganda was outrageous entertainment. Considering that Geraldo’s show aired on October 25, I should have known we were all just watching another Halloween special.
The Value of Comic Books

A comic book is a visual medium that asks the reader to subconsciously fill in the action, thus speeding through the missing movement between each panel. You, the reader, put in the actions subconsciously. I became interested in comics before I started reading books. Before books and comic books, my bedroom had been littered with Dr. Seuss and Mickey Mouse children’s books. I remember my dad reading to me, throwing his voice high for Mickey’s dialogue and valiantly attempting the scratchy, ornery voice of Donald Duck. I laughed a lot then. I was a kid. The world was simple. My world grew slowly. Even though I didn’t like the pacing then, I wish I could slow it down now.

Once I learned to read, the children’s books became comic books. I traded Dr. Seuss’s made up words for actual words like excelsior, mettle, and supercilious. My cousin had left some Conan the Barbarian comics at my grandmother’s house. The images of gargantuan birds with spears sticking out of their bloodied necks stayed with me. I don’t think I liked Conan as much as I liked the vivid world that surrounded him. The worlds in comic books gathered unnatural colors. The trees were green and blue and pink and yellow. Vegetation could come alive any time; of course, the meat-eating plants would bleed purple and crimson. In the original Robert E. Howard Conan novels, the barbarian would be surrounded by women after he robbed a king of all the jewels and gold. The Marvel Comics version of the barbarian was true to the books: Conan was surrounded by hordes of women. The heroines of comics became as important as the heroes.

The women in comic books were always a serious attraction. Of course, the femme fatales were buxom and fleshy perfection—they were strong and powerful; they were witty and intelligent. A hardcover book with no sleeve introduced me to Wonder Woman. The wordless
cover had a fabric texture to it. The color of the book was red, but specks of light red intertwined, creating a random pattern of pink and red. The book had the origins of the most famous superhero mythologies: Batman, Superman, The Green Lantern, and, of course, Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman’s section started in a boxing ring, and the Athenian goddess punched out a goliath four times her size. I remember Jean Grey and Storm being the only women in the X-Men. Jean Grey became one with the cosmic all-powerful force called the Phoenix. Storm had a mohawk and a leather jacket. To me, she represented the subculture of the Sex Pistols and Corrosion of Conformity: punk rock and hardcore music of the 1980s. In the 1990s, the X-men introduced Psylocke. She was drawn as a tall Asian beauty who could use her mind to produce psychic blasts and powerful swords—she’s the perfect mixture of brains and beauty. Comic book heroines would lead me to Katherine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich and Lauren Bacall and Anna Karina and Adrian Barbeau.

In 1954 Fred Wertham published Seduction of the Innocent, in which he accused Wonder Woman of being a lesbian and a horrible influence on the American juvenile. Wertham also claimed that Batman and Robin were promoting homosexuality and pedophilia. Parents burned comic books and the Comic Code was born. As a high school teacher at an all boys school, I hung a Wonder Woman poster in my classroom. One of my women colleagues asked me why I had a Wonder Woman poster in my room, and I replied, “Because she’s a powerful woman, and I think these boys need to know that women are strong…”

She jumped in. “That’s awesome. I think these boys do need that.”

I came back in. “and she’s hot.”

She laughed and said, “Well, you almost had me.”
I wasn’t kidding. Why can’t Wonder Woman be a brilliant mind and beautiful and sexy? I truly believe that comic book fans respect women more than any other fandom out there. Look at football: the majority of women who participate on the field are on the sidelines, shaking their asses and cheering the men to victory. They aren’t cleaning up the streets or doing class A research for the Justice League. Ultimately, the women of comics play on the same field as the guys. Although my appreciation for comic books and super powered heroines would eventually go away, I would come back to comics during a tremendous evolution in comics.

Eventually, I discovered real girls and skateboarding, so the comics were put on hold until my sophomore year of high school. In the comic book industry, a handful of comic book artists fled Marvel Comics to start a mega comic book company. The Marvel creators were tired of working hard to make X-Men and Spider-Man books strong again, only to get nothing from outside royalties. Todd Macfarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefield started Image Comics. Each artist brought his own characters to the mix, and Image Comics had full control. My group of friends at the time somehow got into this industry epoch. We all went to the local comic shop and picked up the new wave of comics. We anticipated comics such as Spawn and WildC.A.T.S. and Savage Dragon and Youngblood. Most of all, I couldn’t wait to get back to Mike’s, where we would spread our comics all over the house: on the floor, on the coffee table, and on the sofa, just reading all day long.

Mike’s mom was never at home, so we had the house to ourselves, and Mike’s mother smoked, so if we smoked in the house it didn’t matter. I can remember smoking cigarettes in the bedroom reading The Catcher in the Rye and being completely disappointed that Holden didn’t do anything with that hooker (I obviously didn’t get it). We read comics in the living room while Eric played the piano. The house became our sanctum sanctorum. There was a room in the back
of the house with a TV and VCR. We would drink cheap beer and smoke cigars and cigarettes. The room had been painted white, and the ceramic tiling seemed to be as bright as the walls. The room was at the end of the house like a cube, a cube we cultured ourselves in. I will never forget the night we watched *Faces of Death* and freaked out about mortality. We calmed ourselves with a midnight showing of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. I can remember a smoke filled room, the white walls slowly staining yellow, and Judy Garland’s beauty filling our pupils. Eric brushed his hair out of his eyes and looked at me to his left. His eyes were huge as he said, “Man, she’s so beautiful.” All I could say was, “I know.” We fed ourselves with so much in that house. We flew kites in the backyard and learned how to barbecue fish by wrapping it in tin foil, and I went to church with Michael and his Mom on her birthday. We hated Troy for stealing money for pills, and I listened to a song that reminded me of him when I found out he hanged himself in a jail cell.

Every Friday my dad would pick me up from school and before we went home, he would bring me to the comic shop. He wouldn’t come in, but the fact that he was taking me there was enough. My father always cared about my interests—he was always good at that. I would climb back into his truck with my findings, and my dad would always ask, “Did you get anything good?” I would answer in what seemed to him a foreign language, going on and on about wolverines and night crawlers and new mutants and twisted tales. He didn’t care about my comics, he cared about my excitement. One night my dad and I sat together watching the Home Shopping Network’s comic book show. They were selling the entire death of Superman run. It was about thirty comics. Every comic DC Comics published crossed over into the death of one of the greatest superheroes of our modern mythology. I was excited about the set. The books were hard to find, and to have the entire run seemed unattainable until now. I went to bed that
night thinking about the books. My bedroom door opened and my dad became silhouetted against the light from the hallway. After telling me goodnight, he asked, “Do you want those Superman comics?”

I replied, “Yes, but I don’t have enough money for that.”

“I’ll order them for you.”

“Really? You sure, Dad?”

“Yeah. I love you, goodnight.”

When the comics came in the mail, I read every issue. My dad asked about them and I loved telling him how much I enjoyed them. His excitement for me made me so happy. After high school, I stopped collecting comics. I couldn’t find any stories that interested me. I would scan the racks and become disappointed. I wanted that feeling back: that feeling of walking in the comic shop and finding an overwhelming amount of stories I couldn’t wait to bring home and spread all over the floor. I would put a pillow under my chest and read until my arms fell asleep from resting on my elbows. I would still pick up graphic novels from time to time, looking for something interesting, but all I found was a handful of independent comics that made sense to me. Comic books weren’t my world anymore, but I wanted to hold onto that world so badly. Video companies started putting G.I. Joe and Transformers cartoons on DVD. I would watch these shows, hoping for the warmth of nostalgia, but the feeling never came. I couldn’t get into these cartoons like I once did. As time moved forward, I wanted the past to comfort the blow of the future. I couldn’t find that moment again, where everything was safe and controlled, when the spaces between the panels were the perfect width for the pleasure of filling them in with my mind.
In 2005, Hurricane Katrina took 25 years of comic books from me, turned my collection into a pile that resembled vomit and mashed potatoes. I had always thought about passing that collection to my child that I would one day have with my wife. I had neither wife nor child during the storm’s aftermath. A few years later, I would meet my best friend and wife. We married, and a year later, we had Brighton, the son who wouldn’t inherit a huge comic book collection, but he would give me a reason to find the beauty of Nostalgia’s touch.

Brighton’s four years old now, and he loves Batman and Spider-Man and Iron Man and Transformers. Through his eyes, I can see what I saw. I now frequent the comic shop once a week, and I pick up a handful of titles. Ironically, all the guys who started Image Comics are back with Marvel and DC. I’m starting my collection again. Brighton gets Tiny Titans and looks at them in his bed at night with a flashlight. His comics wind up being torn to pieces from his tossing and turning in bed, but I’m saving my new comics in their plastic sleeves and cardboard backs for Brighton. I won’t have as much as I had before the storm, but I’ll have enough to sit with him and explain how the X-Men represent racism and Batman needs the Joker to exist. We now have a little Wonder Woman in our lives too: Chloë is five months old and my life has certainly sped up tremendously. Having two young children can take a lot out of you. When we’re young, we want to move faster so we can catch up with the world, and when we get older and live for our families, we want to slow down, but the option isn’t there. I think getting back into comics helps me slow down. The spaces between the panels are shorter in width, but there’s still some space there. There’s not a lot of space for me, but that’s okay. At least I’m able to take a small breath between each panel.
The “Warmth” of Recording Your Own Music

While I listen to a new album, the shake of a ceiling fan is a numbing metronome. I’m relaxed and lulled by the rhythm, but I turn off the fan so I can hear everything in the recording. The second song is playing, the singer howls “so the story goes.” A great amount of swirls flow over the acoustic guitar. Now the repeating lyric returns: “so the story goes.” Beautiful sounds. Now the guitar is distinctly by itself – the strings stop.

Next track. I’d love to describe the first song but it’s passed. “My, my, my, my, my…” The songwriter went into a Wisconsin cabin to record an album and came out with *For Emma, Forever Ago* (2007). In the liner notes it states, “Recorded by Justin Vernon in the hunting cabin.”

I’ve been in and out of bands since I was 16. It wasn’t until I was 26 that I realized I could just record my own music and play every instrument through a multi-track recording program on my computer. “June,” the first song I recorded starts in A minor – what a formidably comely chord. The first time I recorded “June” I was using a PC with the small condenser microphone that came with the computer. Condenser microphones pick up everything in the room--one of the most prevalent rhythms on the recording had been my squeaky desk chair. I plugged the mic straight into the back of the computer and downloaded a free multi-track recorder. I had a keyboard and a bass my dad bought me when I was 16. The bass had an aluminum neck and a distinct dirty sound. Together, the bass and I made an even dirtier sound. I definitely developed my style of playing on that thing.

A Ludwig drum set was part of my in-home studio. A friend of mine was going to live in the dorms at an art school in Atlanta, so he couldn’t take his drums. He traded me sixteen CDs for the kit. I picked up playing drums faster than I expected – once you coordinate the bass kick
and the top drum hits, you can make basic beats.

The room I recorded in was small. I had to carefully work my way around tables and instruments. There was a lamp in one corner of the room. The shade of the lamp made the room seem cavernous. I think the drum set was facing the wall so I could get to it quickly after pressing record. All I needed was a drum set, a keyboard, and a bass.

So I laid down the opening of “June.” The piano melody moved like the rhythms of a trumpet with a mute. I added two more layers of vocals over the top of the first. Each additional vocal track surprisingly built a chord that made sense and developed something. It reminded me of Badalamenti, Lynch, and Cruise.

I sang:

I know
by now it’s cold
but hey you’ll get there
soon enough in June
We’ll see
what’s left of me
to go around
the toys will break by then
I hope we’re still friends
by then
this promise can end

With the microphone pressed against my lips, I just blew air through my teeth and produced a sound of violence. A sharp growl of bloody teeth and exasperation. For the bass track, I used a fuzz pedal and added a slow grinding bass line with shaking sustained notes. The drilling of teeth ended. The song went back to its original melody and floated among low-end and synthesized organ, piano, accordion, and horns.

When I first started experimenting with multitrack recording, I had a friend make wild Balinese-like screams into the air. We would freak out together. I would record it. Add another
track. Press record. Scream. I repeated the process two more times. The end result was a terrible chant from the wooden walls of a mad house. I mixed the tracks and put them into one track and stuck it in “June,” right where the fuzzed out bass comes in. The effects of the sounds of banshees getting burned alive is a dirty trick on the listener. Sometimes this part will turn people away or make them laugh. Laughter can be a part of music. I have a memory of driving all over Louisiana with this guy I had just met. I was trying my hand at selling amazing vacuum cleaners. We rode in my car and talked about music. I played my guest a sample of Mr. Bungle. The song was “Merry Go Bye-Bye.” The song begins with a 50’s style slap-back guitar. The singer sounds like an Elvis impersonator and continues as a tribute to rock and roll until the song breaks into a wall: the band turns the studio into a festival of noise. My guest described it best as he spiked the VU meter with laughter: “It sounds like they’re beating the shit out of each other.” I took his laughter as enjoyment.

In his autobiography, Frank Zappa wrote about musical performance and how the music becomes “wiggling air molecules.” Zappa also brings in the idea that the “air in performance space is sculpted into something” (161). I tried to record “June” in a studio. Zappa’s idea of space being manipulated by sound is probably why “June” just didn’t sound better in a studio. The cheap condenser mic I used picked up too much of the air to be sculpted. There was an aural ambience that couldn’t be recognized at all. AC leaking from vents or creaks in the frame of the house had joined to create a dissonant chord that meant something only then.

The next song on my home recording was “Rusted Lunch.” I like the hyperbolic joining of these two words. The slowness of rust just makes the title hurtful. I thought of a child’s lunch just rusting. You are just looking forward to that break at school, and while you waited the lunch was turning against you.
“Rusted Lunch” starts with two pitches going back and forth like a dingy see-saw. Then an organ melody comes in and the vocals follow the notes. My second song was coming out of me like biological involuntary movements. By now I had purchased a real condenser mic. This time I set up the keyboard in the adjacent room to my pseudo-studio, the bathroom. There I was sitting in the bathroom with a keyboard in front of me, a microphone coming from the ground, and the sink slightly running. It all worked because the opening verse of “Rusted Lunch” sounded like I was singing in a cave to the accompaniment of a strange air organ.

Twists in cum  
I kiss her once  
no more to  
hurt and push through  
Give me some  
Thing  
To do  
This time we’re…

It’s at the end of this part, after the word we’re, the word through is implied because of the previous scales and the last note that extends into the next part of the song. In other words, through could go there; therefore, I felt I could leave through out. The lyrics and music would lead the listener to the word: “Now we’re ________.” I don’t know if anyone will ever get the idea I had at the time, but it doesn’t matter. There’s a moment from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) that I constantly keep in mind. Marlowe, the narrator of the novella, boards his steamship and begins to discuss the work he had put into the boat:

No. I don’t like work…but I like what is in the work, the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (Conrad 239)

This is how I feel about the bridge in “Rusted Lunch,” and it’s how I feel about all of my music. No one can ever appreciate the feeling I get when I put a song to tape or listen to it for the first time. However, I do want an audience to appreciate the music. They may not be able to have the
same reaction I did, but their reaction is their own as well. They will never feel the moments of control I felt.

The next part of “Rusted Lunch” comes in with a Beach Boys piano rhythm, and the bass bumps in with a melody. My prosaic drums come in like the intro of a jazz track. I do a roll on the floor tom and slowly build to a cut with the rest of the music. Here I recorded the sound of a needle scratching a soundless groove on a record. It worked well, the effect makes the song sound like the next part came from a sampled LP. Underneath my recording, the audio pops from dust and analog “warmth.” The opening melody of the song rolls in with distorted bass, drums, and layered keyboards. The sound is mean and sublime, and the instrumental bridge roars. The section concludes with two hard hits of the tom toms and bass strings. An eerie conclusion comes in, and it sounds like a keyboard track found in a dirty time capsule. The music drags like an aged cassette tape and “Rusted Lunch” fades away.

The last song of this trilogy was inspired by Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys. After watching some 8mm footage of Wilson sitting at a piano in a red robe, playing and singing “Surf’s Up,” –a song that lyrically moves into a corner of sadness and self-abuse—the piano ballad “Sad Smile” came out of me like a reflex. The only thing “Sad Smile” has in common with “Surf’s Up” is the aesthetic of piano and vocals, but if it wasn’t for that moment with Brian Wilson, I don’t think my song would exist.

“Sad Smile” bounced along with four chords. The vocal melody and the lyrics poured out of me. I realized what I was writing about. All three of these songs were about the last girl who broke my heart. Our relationship had ended over six or eight months back. I was over it all. The residue apparently needed to be scraped from my subconscious. This discovery didn’t upset me. It made me so happy. My catharsis was happening on a level I had never experienced before.
The lyrics to “Sad Smile” caused the other songs of the trilogy to make more sense:

Watch this ground melt away
It’s over with today
I can’t see through broken glass
I always was the last

CHORUS
Why can’t you just be alone
Stop pulling me along
Why am I feeling so alone
I guess I need to be pulled on

When will you just walk away
It’s over with today
Wet her wings
She can’t fly away

CHORUS

It is here that “Sad Smile” brings the listener full circle and the piano and vocal melody of “June” come back:

I went to see your place
But realized you’d been erased
I can’t count the ways
Today
I saw my old face

Now, I wrote “Sad Smile” at home. Since it was written for only piano and voice, I was able to record it at a nearby college on a baby grand piano. A friend of mine came with me and brought a 4-track recorder and a credit card to break into the piano room—he knew how to work the doors perfectly because he had been breaking in at night to make his own recordings. It was there that I decided to circle back to the “June” melody. We mixed it down that night, and I was able to listen to it on my drive home.

There were many times after the recording of these first songs that lyrics and melody came out to later show me a piece of myself I couldn’t face. This is the work for me. Play the parts and sing the words. What it is and what it means will be there later for me to understand.
The music is a moment built from the past, a moment I can control and layer to get to the present.

The turntable is growling. I realize the needle of my record player has been playing nothing. I pick up the tone arm from the record and slide it to the right, placing it on its stand. I cover the record player, turn off the receiver, and turn the fan back on.
The Story of Truegore Video: How I Learned to Unearth Celluloid Trash and Sell It

Here is how a typical conversation between two cult film fans would sound:

“Oh yeah, that shit’s crazy when that monkey pops up with the straight razor, and the music is awesome.”

“Have you seen El Topo?”

“Yes, Jodorowsky (pronounced ho-doe-row-ski) is the man.”

“What about Holy Mountain?”

“Yes, the Jesus waking up surrounded by plastic Jesuses. And the invasion of the Aztecs done with dressed up toads—yes!”

At this point, we don’t know who’s who in the conversation. The two film freaks are having an awkward ritual in which they are forming one person--nothing exists around them for hours. I’ve had this conversation before, but not nearly as many times as I want. The beauty of the cult film is the sublime obscurity, but the cult film cannot be shared with everyone.

My grandmother’s house stayed a warm little world with perfect carpet. She had no pets, so the place was pristine. I can remember lying on that gold carpet, in front of the TV. The primary colors of Voltron cartoons filled the room, and every bounce of light filled me with imagination. The TV weighted down a cart with wheels. A Betamax player rested on the second shelf. There was no cable television. My grandmother had taped a documentary for me. It was filled with morbid curiosities. I always think of this tape as my first experience with cult films. I probably watched the recorded PBS documentary 100 times. Now that I think about it, my grandmother probably had just taped PBS for two hours because there were multiple subjects on the tape. I can remember being fascinated with a section on King Tut. I was enthralled with how he died at a young age, but he stood too tall; the gravediggers had to break his legs to fit him in
his sarcophagus. The TV glowed with an X-ray image of a twelve-year-old boy in a rectangle, fibula cracked and separated from the femur. The two pieces of the leg just lie there beside each other. The video skips ahead to a time lapse video of a rat rotting in the grass. The land eats the small creature, but it’s a beautiful movement because death gives to the living.

One cannot just jump into cult films. There is an “Allegory of the Cave” philosophy. In other words, you have to work your way up. My mother would watch a lot of black and white, Golden Age of Hollywood movies. Because of her, I fell in love with Katharine Hepburn, Jimmy Stewart, and Harvey the Rabbit. In the 1980s, Nickelodeon transformed into Nick at Nite after 8 o’clock, so I was exposed to Dobie Gillis and Patty Duke. The shows I watched with my mother would be my school for the cult arts.

Blockbuster Video didn’t exist when I was growing up. The video stores were all Mom and Pop, and home video was a brand new item on the pop culture menu. Before this, I remember my dad getting movies like Jaws and Star Wars from a mysterious character. My father never went into the house. He would just knock on the door, and a thin man would appear with a Betamax cassette. The tape would have a primitive label on it: STAR WARS. In the Mom and Pop video stores, movies weren’t put into sub-genres. The horror was mixed in with all the other films, and the tapes were arranged in alphabetical order. Some of the tapes were in gargantuan boxes made of cardboard or plastic. The plastic ones were called oyster shells. The oyster shells held up better while the oversized cardboard boxes were always falling apart. The horror films, of course, were better off in the oversized cardboard box. The thick paper would rip and peel, and excited hands could easily deform the case. Attempts to tape up the boxes would just turn into strips of yellow gunk.
The box for *Faces of Death* and *Children Shouldn’t Play With Dead Things* whispered out to me like a ghost I wanted to see so badly. At the time, *Faces of Death* had become the ultimate death film with real footage of animal mutilations, human executions, and monkey brain dinners. The *Faces of Death* box read, “Banned in 46 Countries.” As a kid, you believe anything you read. The box could have proclaimed the film had been banned in 8 million countries and no child my age at the time would stop to ponder the geographical impossibilities. I begged my mother to let me see *Faces of Death*, but I would have to wait.

The idea of watching real death was too much for my mother to approve, but fake death was fine. Instead, I could watch *Halloween*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and many more films considered cult iconography. There is a next step in cult film appreciation, a step we cannot skip. In other words, you can keep climbing the ladder of horror films towards the next level of cult films, but eventually you have to realize you are going up when you should be going down. If you keep moving up you will find love for movies like *Saw* and *I Know what you Did Last Summer*. You will accept these shiny polished up horror movies as an improvement of the genre. But there is an extension on the ladder of cult film. Instead of going down, you must move to the right and discover a new ladder that moves down to a paradoxical apex. It is impossible to jump from John Carpenter’s *The Fog* to Lucio Fulci’s *The Beyond* in two rungs. You have to move to the right and soar downwards. It’s at the bottom where the cult film fan finds the top. This is where there are movies that most people would consider crap. These people would find the acting terrible and the plot boring. They don’t see what you see. They don’t understand that *Suspiria* is a great film because the otherworldly lighting brings the viewer through a looking glass into a new kind of film where the blood is bright red and the atmosphere is boiling a brood.
of hopeless terror. Some can’t find the style of the filmmaker, the subterranean auteur, in the work. I found the appreciation for such beautifully bad horror through 1970’s TV horror films.

I was growing up in a time when the made-for-TV horror appeared. The movie *Gargoyles* is the one that I remember most. Two teachers are hunted by a race of ancient cursed creatures: the Gargoyles. My dad was able to record it onto a video tape for me, so I watched *Gargoyles* every chance I had. The head-to-toe green make up and wings that couldn’t even lift a pebble from the ground pulled me into this world that I had no idea was there. The atmosphere was mystical as pink lights would come from outside the frame and shine on the gargoyles terrorizing a half naked girl and her anthropologist father. The low budget passion would get me ready for Asian action and Italian horror.

Somewhere along the way, someone told me that “art finds you.” The idiom stuck with me because art has been finding me all my life. The Beastie Boys—of all people—introduced me to the world of Chinese horror films. I had been reading an interview with the hip-hop group, and the journalist asked what movies they had been watching lately. One of the Beastie Boys mentioned how they had been watching a horror film called *Chinese Ghost Story*. I felt a sudden urge to find this movie. I had never heard of it, and the simple name made the film sound unbelievable. I felt like I fell into another world where *True Romance* and *Reservoir Dogs* were the real B movies. A Star Trek convention had come to town, and the dealers’ room always had a video vendor. These guys had movies that I couldn’t find anywhere else but in these screening rooms. It should be mentioned that this is before the American family had the internet in the home or DVDs (later the internet would be a huge factor in getting films and my becoming a video vendor).
The Star Trek convention had one vendor. I mark this search for *Chinese Ghost Story* as my first experience with trying to track down a cult film. The vendor had VHS tapes with labels only. The spines of the tapes filled the table. All I saw were labels with titles I never heard of. I felt overwhelmed. A small TV and VCR stood on a small cart. The vendor stood lanky with long stringy hair and a grizzled goatee. He asked, “You need some help? We’re selling these 2 for $25.”

I asked the vendor if he had *Chinese Ghost Story*. He knew right where it was. “Yep, here it is. This movie was totally what inspired Raimi in the *Evil Dead* series.” At the time, I didn’t realize that 1987’s *Chinese Ghost Story* came after 1981’s *Evil Dead*. Mistaking a 1980s or 1990s Hong Kong low budget horror film for a 1960s or 1970s horror film is understandable. The Hong Kong film stock seems Super 8 quality. All in all, the low budget grain shows up and you automatically subtract decades from the movie.

The vendor asked me if I wanted to take a look at *Chinese Ghost Story*. He popped in the tape and I could immediately see the *Evil Dead* quality to the film. The camera glided across a foggy layer of mud and algae. In Raimi’s cult classics, he would move his camera backwards. When he played the footage in reverse, the camera would move forward, but the trick gave the movement a dream-like quality. Every small maneuver in the environment of the shot had an abnormal motion. Tsui Hark did the same thing in *Chinese Ghost Story*, but I wasn’t convinced enough to buy the dub. My friend spoke in my ear, “Dude, it’s a crappy copy.”

I asked the vendor, “How much is the movie?”

He replied, “1 for $15 or 2 for $25.” I was too new at this market to spend 25 bucks, but I was also too new to buy anything. I walked away wishing I had purchased the movie.
About six months later, I encountered a video vendor; he had cases with color artwork. The movies were still dubbed copies, but the presentation made me more comfortable. The guy had the same pricing as the previous backwoods vendor: 2 for $25. This special pricing was helpful because I bought a lot. That day I learned about The Bride with White Hair, Naked Killer, and Violent Cop. I finally picked up Chinese Ghost Story and couldn’t wait to see if it would live up to my expectations. The films did satisfy my curiosity; I was instantly hooked on the style of the filmmaking; the lightning fast, operatic action was like nothing I had seen before; moreover, the mini-quest for Chinese Ghost Story started a journey that would lead me to more underground films.

I found out later that the films I had picked up were the epidermis of cult films. In the folds of the flesh of the sub-genre, there were films that shocked and shook your senses. Comic book and sci-fi conventions always have a video room. Someone rents a room in the hotel where the shoestring convention is being held and sets up a TV. The video guy basically plays movies all day on a small TV. I only visited a video room once, and it was there that I found out the truth about Tetsuo: the Iron Man. Before the convention, I had picked up a book on Asian cult films. Tetsuo: the Iron Man seemed to be discussed as if the film was the Citizen Kane of underground cinema. Naturally, I had to inquire about this celluloid force of nature: “Do you have Tetsuo: the Iron Man?” The video room guy didn’t miss a beat, “Ah, man, Tetsuo: the Iron Man is one of those movies that pops out of the screen and starts beating the shit out of you and then crawls back in, and then it pops out again and beats the shit out of you some more.”

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5 BACKWOODS (1987) A secret hidden by time that will reap its horrible revenge. The same ole’ hillbilly murders film that always leaves us entertained, but Backwoods seems to add a pinch of realism that helps the creepiness enter into your mind.

6 IN THE FOLDS OF THE FLESH (1970) Multiple beheadings, acid baths, Etruscan skeletons, preying vultures, Pop Art, Nazi Death-Camp flashbacks, and dog strangulation makes In the Folds of the Flesh a true piece of trash cinema.
“Where can I get it?”

He thought about it for a second, “It’s not available now, but I think it’s coming out in America.”

I eventually found the movie in Blockbuster of all places. I knew I would have to copy *Tetsuo: the Iron Man*. I had to buy two VCRs before I rented the movie. *Tetsuo: the Iron Man* didn’t visually assault me as promised, but I understood the analogy. The film’s use of super-rapid montage really strains to get out of the thick grey glass of an analog tubed television.

The movie that did beat me was an American film entitled *Begotten*. This bastard left me pale. The film opens with a man in a room slicing at his stomach with a straight razor. The man is supposed to be God, and the slices are convulsive and spastic. The movie looks like it was filmed on Super 8 that had been dipped in syrup and then rolled through cut hair and glass. Once the God finally kills himself, the camera zooms in on his foot and God defecates. As a result of his suicidal gesticulations, Mother Nature emerges and creates a man. A horde of men beat the man to a bloody pile of wet mud. In the end, we see time-lapse footage of the earth coming to life. The violence births creation. The visual poem *Begotten* showed me a glowing and grainy meaning in cult films. In my mind, I felt like movies like this were for a group of people who understood the world is violent and creation is violent. Alejandro Jodorowsky, who directed the great *El Topo*, says it best:

“I like violence. I love violence! I hate the weak person who goes to art and say ‘Oh, that hurt me... that image!’ Why make pictures for that person? They are blind. Poetry is violent. This is the reality. There is so much in a violent world. They don't want to see that. I am in the middle of violence.”
As more conventions came to town, I started going just for the dealers’ room. Many people went to meet celebrities like Burt Ward (Robin from the 1960’s Batman series) and Lou Forrigno (He played the Hulk in the 1970’s TV show).\(^7\) I was never interested in those guys. I wanted to soak up Tsui Hark and Beat Takeshi. I needed to learn about cult films. With no internet at home, these annual conventions were like a library to me. The convention dealers were limited to mostly Asian cinema. At this time even Japanese animation was hard to find.\(^8\) Once the internet injected itself into the American family, my esoteric group could find more cult films.

After getting a computer tucked into the dark corner of my room, I logged onto the internet for the first time. It wasn’t long before I was introduced to newsgroups, the troglodyte of social networks. Newsgroups were forums where people would post messages with requests. The two newsgroups that aided my collection of cult films was *cult-films* and *tape-trading*. Other collectors not only discussed cult films, they put up their lists of films they owned. If you had a collection, you could send your list and set up a trade. If both parties were interested, the VCRs fired up. So, I would send a list of five titles.

For example:

Hey, you wanna trade? I’m interested in:

1. *The Kingdom II*
2. *Gates of Hell*
3. *Cannibal Holocaust*
4. *The Sinful Dwarf*

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\(^7\) The first time I met Lou Forrigno he was charging money to get a picture with him. Now you have to pay up to 100 bucks to get a picture with cult celebrities like Adam West.

\(^8\) The first anime I bought was *Vampire Hunter D*. The VHS tape cost me 40 bucks plus shipping. I mail-ordered the movie from the back of *Heavy Metal* magazine.
5. *Black Devil Doll From Hell*

If there’s anything you’re interested in, let me know. Thanks.

The reply:

Yes, let’s set up a trade. I’m actually interested in about 10 of your titles. Do you think you could find 5 more on my list? If not I understand. Here’s what I would like:

1. *Cannibal Ferox*
2. *Hell of the Living Dead*
3. *El Topo*
4. *Deep Red*
5. *Blood and Black Lace*

Adding to your collection of rare B movies isn’t hard when you have a gigantic collection to trade with. The conventions gave me enough to start with. Soon, I didn’t need to go to conventions anymore. Movies were plentiful on the newsgroups. And with the creation of Ebay, the conventions became the last place to look for rare cult films. It took me having no job to realize my personal *vault of horror*\(^9\) and weird flicks could make me money on Ebay.

I had been fired from a video game store in the mall. I called in “sick” on a Friday. I was working on my undergraduate degree on English and Film Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans. Two girls I knew asked me if I wanted to go out with them and do ecstasy. I had never messed with anything heavier than marijuana, but ecstasy had a reputation for helping the night end in sex. Well, when I called the store for my schedule, I was told to turn in my name tag. I was surprised they fired me. No job, no sex, and the hype of ecstasy was just that, at least this time.

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\(^9\) **VAULT OF HORROR** (1973) aka *Tales From the Crypt II; Further Tales From the Crypt*. Five men become trapped in a basement with only one thing in common: horror. The five speak about tales that consist of vampires, mysticism, scam artists, and an artist who kills by painting his victims' deaths.
So I’m in my third year of college with no money, and this internet craze called Ebay had been building momentum. For some reason I stumbled upon a sale for an old Lars Von Trier video called *The Kingdom 2*. The Danish mini-series about a haunted hospital had been a bit of an odd hit when it came out in America on video. For one night only, Showtime had aired the sequel to *The Kingdom*. The series ran for six hours on cable television all night. Well, I had recorded the show on an extended play VHS tape. Apparently I hadn’t been the only one to catch this phenomenon. The video was showing up on Ebay and bidders were spiking the price up. The highest bids were at fifty and sixty dollars. The thing that was most interesting is the fact that the movie the Ebayers were selling was no different from what I had: a VHS copy from Showtime. The fact was stated in the description: “comes on high quality VHS. This video is not pre-recorded.”

I had to put my copy on Ebay. I posted the listing and started the bidding at $4.99. It seemed like I was checking on it every hour. First I wanted to see if the listing was still there or if anyone had bid on the auction. Finally, the seven days had ended, and sure enough someone bought my copy of *The Kingdom 2*. The price had reached sixty three bucks, and I was really freaked out by the whole process. I don’t know why it was so foreign to me. I had been buying copied movies at conventions for years. I just felt like the people I sold the movie to had no idea what they were getting. I wasn’t afraid of jail or a $500,000 fine; I was afraid of having to give the money back.

My next move was to send an email to the buyer with information on how to get the money to me. I would only accept a money order, and the shipping was about $4.00. A few days later, I received an envelope with a postal money order. The amount was $63.00 plus $4.00, $67.00. I dubbed off the movie with two VCR’s and sent it off. Until I read some kind of
customer feedback, I would be a mess. I felt like I was checking my email every five minutes. On my way home from classes I vigorously bit my nails in anticipation of what I would read in my email. The day finally came. I opened up my Ebay account and there was a one next to my profile name: truegore (1). I had feedback. I clicked the link and went to the page. There it glowed at me: my first feedback in the game of selling on eBay. It said, “Great seller. Thanks for the movie.” I was mildly disappointed by its terseness but relieved by its statement. I put up another auction for The Kingdom II, and that one sold for $67.00. I quickly started searching for other titles in my collection: Deep Red, Evil Dead Trap, Intruder. The movie that I found to be a rival to the sales of The Kingdom 2 was shot in my very own city of New Orleans. The director, Chester N. Turner, used the least sophisticated video equipment he could find to create a champion film that still feeds on garbage: The Black Devil Doll from Hell. The film is still a subcultural icon and never in danger of a big budget, Hollywood remake. Sometimes the Black Devil Doll could bring in $80.00--for a VHS copy! The made-for-TV horror movies were huge sellers too. Films like Bad Ronald and Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark and The Dark Night of the Scarecrow could go for well over 50 bucks.

Ebay had heated its engines and everyone was searching for the nostalgia of their childhoods and scavenging for collectibles in their garages. I was making much more on Ebay than I had been making in the mall. This new form of internet technology was helping me figure out something. For the first time, I was in charge of my life. The sensation felt nice.

I would stay up late packing boxes and dubbing movies. I listened to the Art Bell radio show on AM radio. The show featured kooks who visited alien spacecrafts, captured ghost sounds, and exorcised the devil. If I needed cases for the VHS tapes, I would have to go out and check the dumpsters at Blockbuster--they were always throwing out hard shell VHS cases.
would take the cases home and print up sleeves that had the name of my business: Truegore Video. I thought it made my business seem a little more professional. My nightly routine was creating a moment in my life that I would have to eventually let go of.

Eventually, Ebay started removing auctions for suspected illegal activity. After looking at other sellers, I noticed a nomenclature beginning. Some would write under their ad “non-factory production” or “this VHS is not pre-recorded.” The language was vague. You see, what we were doing wasn’t illegal. The movies we had been selling were in public domain; therefore, we were protected under the Berne Act. The Berne Act states that anything that is not owned or being distributed in the United States is fair game. In other words, if you could not find *Cannibal Holocaust* at Blockbuster, it could be sold. At this time, the only copy of *Cannibal Holocaust* going around was from a Japanese laserdisc, which had not been distributed or produced in the United States.

The Berne Act brought understanding to the myriad versions of *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Terror* and *Blood Mania*. None of these movies had owners. No one owned the rights anymore. No one picked up the copyright again. This abandonment was why I could find *Night of the Living Dead* for thirty bucks at Tower Records and then see *Night of the Living Dead* for three bucks at Walgreens; in other words, anybody could sell the zombie classic. If you wanted to put up the money to duplicate thousands of copies of *Night of the Living Dead* and sell them at Wal-Mart, you could. This is what I was doing on Ebay, but the nomenclature did become confusing equivocation, and in order to watch its back against lawsuits, Ebay eventually threw us all out. I was starting to lose some control of my first entrepreneurial success.

By the time Ebay beat me out, I had created a website to sell my videos. Truegore Video became my shop name. The films were split into categories: Horror, Asian, and Oddities. The
website worked well. I advertised in low budget horror magazines and scattered the name all over the internet. Truegore Video rose to a great level of success for a college student. I could sometimes make close to 1200 dollars a month and the website’s name was spreading throughout the cult film community. The Village Voice even included Truegore Video within the pantheon of cult film internet sellers. Later, when I became a high school English teacher, Truegore Video helped supplement my absurd income. However, as a teacher I felt the need to remove some titles that were sexually explicit, such as Porno Holocaust, Salo: 120 Days of Sodom, and Pussy Talk. As time went on, I had to remove more and more titles due to the movies’ becoming domestically available.

I surprisingly only received around five or six cease and desist e-mails in the twelve years I ran Truegore Video. I had to remove most movies because they were out on DVD. I had moved to distributing burned DVD-Rs, but now they were in paper envelopes with a label of the movie’s title sealing the paper sleeve. I tried creating box art for a dozen or so titles, but it seemed to be more trouble, and at this time I had been using Truegore as a part-time gig, so any extra effort wasn’t worth it. Besides, more and more movies were coming out. The Italian horror films, or Giallos, were surfacing in nationally chained DVD stores. Dario Argento’s Suspiria was playing on cable TV and Lucio Fulci’s The Beyond was out on a special edition DVD. Cult film fans were still looking for the movies, but they didn’t want a copy anymore. Unfortunately, my interest in my enterprise declined as well. I wasn’t in control of my life anymore. I was married, and my wife was pregnant with our son. I couldn’t stay up all night packing up boxes of gore and schlock. My main income had become teaching, and teaching needed all my attention. By the time I closed Truegore Video, I had lost interest in the kind of films I had sold. I now have a

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10 ABSURD (1981) aka Anthropophagous 2, Grim Reaper 2, Monster Hunter. Directed by Joe D’Amato. This sequel to the iconic Anthropophagous is a mad slasher treat, with a regenerating monster, blades to the scalp, and a monster hunting priest.
collection of obscure cinema in my garage. Maybe my son will find it one day, and I can teach him about Italian zombie films. By making my interest in cult films into a business, I outgrew them too soon. I can’t enjoy a cheesy horror film like I used to. I have no desire to watch a low-budget Turkish remake of Star Wars anymore. But if a young college student wants to watch the masterpiece that is *El Topo*, it’s easier to get now, and I feel good about that.

With the internet booming in cult fandom, cult movie interest grew. Distributors picked up on the insatiable lust of horror fans. The internet and DVDs became a way to keep this history alive. Now, we can watch whole films on the internet and even download an obscure movie. If you know where to look, you can get it. Just as when Truegore Video started, I was at the right time for the push to get cannibal-gore flicks and zombie-exploitation out in the open. I wasn’t alone. Dealers like Video Mayhem, Midnight Video, Vomit Bag Video, 5 Minutes to Live Video, and Revok Film Prodigies were throwing *bloody fragments on a white wall*\(^1\). In the end, we were the guys who put the films within reach for the cult film public. Without us, no one would’ve seen the films and discussed them on the internet and sought them out in search engines and forums. Truegore Video rests as a small piece in the piece in the puzzle, but the pop culture conventions and obscure film dealers made it possible for American distributing companies to find an audience for the films that go beyond *the gates of hell*\(^2\).

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\(^1\) *GUINEA PIG: HE NEVER DIES/ BLOODY FRAGMENTS ON WHITE WALLS* aka *Lucky Sky Diamond*. A man desperately tries to commit suicide, and a girl goes nuts in an operating room. Her entrails fall from her vagina and the fun begins.

\(^2\) *GATES OF HELL* aka City of the Living Dead. A priest kills himself on sacred ground and the dead rise. Yes, this is the one where a girl vomits up her entire intestinal tract. Lovely.
On Technology and Friendship

Once a month, my friends and I get together to catch up on each other and the world around us. Our night consists of the following: Juan’s Flying Burrito, one Macbook Pro resting on a TV tray, Youtube, one CD player, and, of course, speakers. When we meet up at Pat’s house, we know the plan: to show each other what we’ve been discovering in the world of aesthetics.

Pat moves towards the stereo and asks, “Have you heard this?” He has a hyena’s grin on his face as he turns up the stereo. Pat’s wearing an army green t-shirt and brown corduroys. He exercises a lot and watches what he eats. His hair is brownish-red and short. He keeps his face shaved and clean. He plays a new dream pop band called Beach House. As it plays, he looks at me and his eyes widen. The electronic gadgets unfold in the song’s mix. Pat points to the stereo and smiles with a nod of his head as if he’s sending me a psychic message: “This is the future of music.” I ask if he’s heard of Fever Ray, and he quickly replies, “I love that chick.” Once Beach House ends, we listen to the new St. Vincent single “Grot.” The song begins. I offer up a warning, “Get ready. It gets heavy like the Melvins.” As soon as the guitar comes into the song, Pat’s face stops moving and he listens intently. I half-way joke about doing DMT, and Pat says he doesn’t want to do it because he thinks the drug synthesizes the feeling of what happens when you die. I quickly jump in, “Yes! Let’s do it.”

He looks at me and dramatically says, “No! If we experience death now, what’s left when we really do die.”

Will knocks on the door. We open the door and, as usual, he’s not there. Suddenly, he pops up. “Oh, hello, see.” “See” means “sir” in our world, but only if it follows “hello.” Or it can come after “no,” as in “Oh, no, see” or “Oh, yes, see.” We have our own manipulations of
language throughout the night. I used to live in New Orleans, really close to Will, and he would come over all the time. Every time he came over, he would knock on the door and get as close to the crack of the door as possible, so when I opened the door he would just spill into my living room: “Oh, hello, see.”

Will has brown hair and wears black-rimmed glasses. He’s thin with long legs, frequently wearing mailman pants. He has a heavy dark beard because he and his wife just returned from a trip to India. Will came back with these amazing pictures of the people he met in the one second he asked to take their picture. The portraits are the people from the shoulders up, staring into Will’s camera lens. The results are very personal and they seem carefully prepared.

Will sits at the corner of the couch. He slouches as if he’s hiding from something and crosses his legs. As Pat mans the YouTube, a music video by The Knife shows looped footage of 70’s kids on banana boards. The image pixelates and breaks up to the rhythms. I immediately fall in love with the song. Will speaks up, “Can I play something?”

Pat simply replies, “Yeah.”

Pat pulls out his iPhone and passes Will the auxiliary cord. Will cycles through his songs and presses play. The distorted guitar intro begins. As the drums kick in, Will pantomimes the drummer perfectly. He has the grin of an aged rocker as he does it, and then he switches to the driving bass line, mimicking and picking the neck groove of the fingerboard. “The Nuge” starts to sing and Will lip syncs and shakes his hand in front of his face like a tyrant. His fingers stretch out and make a fist with the words, “I got you in a stranglehold.”

The song goes into a guitar solo, and Will mimics the picking as if he’s heard the song a hundred times. He holds up his left hand before an interval of notes begins and he mouths,
“Wait...wait.” The manipulated scale scorches the fretboard and Will smiles. He exclaims, “It’s like the ‘Cortez the Killer’ of Southern Rock.”

We’re obsessed with finding songs that resemble Neil Young and Crazy Horse’s “Cortez the Killer.” When Will heard the song, he was instantly addicted. The song begins with a long guitar solo: a Neil Young solo. Neil Young plays the guitar like he sings: he’s not a technical wizard, but there is great pathos in the way he plays. He just feels it and gets it right. I remember when Will first heard the song. He sat in the backseat of my car. We were in a band together at the time, and we were taking a snowball break. The guitarist of the band had introduced me to “Cortez,” and I had just bought the album the song is on, Zuma. We started the song and just listened. The song rolled in like a breeze we desperately needed on a humid New Orleans day, and then I heard a curious voice from behind me, “What is this?” Will’s tone showed his instant amazement. There are myriad guitar solos out there, and there are many songs that consist of 90% guitar solos, but “Cortez” reaches the zenith of guitar solo songs. As the song fades away, Young is still soloing. We always listen so intently as the guitar disappears. Will and I always wanted to know where the full cut of the song could be, until we recently found out that the machine recording the music fried itself somehow. There were supposed to be more lines of verse for “Cortez the Killer” and more guitar soloing although Neil Young said he never liked those last verses. Will finds songs derived from “Cortez”: Parliament’s “Maggot Brain” or Jimi Hendrix’s “Machine Gun.”

After “Stranglehold” ends, I pull out my iPod and ask for the auxiliary cord to play the 80’s new wave “Cortez The Killer.” “The Kiss” from The Cure’s album Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me is the first track, placed perfectly for an album that’s theoretically about the ugliness and the beauty of love. Like “Cortez,” “The Kiss” drives with a stick shift made of frets and rosewood.
The guitar passes through a wah-wah pedal, and the sound screams the pain of the song. Pat agrees that the song belongs in the pantheon of “Cortez,” guitar solo songs.

We strike up YouTube again and watch footage of a homeless man singing in a parking lot. The man’s mouth croaks like it’s moving through a vocoder. He beats his chest hard, making the bass drum thunder for his song. The video is taken by someone hiding behind a screen door. The fact that the one-man-band doesn’t know he’s being watched makes the performance more interesting.

In college, we used to pass around the figurative mic and present multimedia. Back then it was CDs and DVDs. Now, it’s iPods and YouTube. The technology has changed, but we haven’t. We still care about each other the way we always have: we call each other when we’re down, we have stood in each other’s weddings, and we go to each other’s children’s birthday parties. And once a month, we share our findings in music and film and the just plain oddness of the multimedia world.
Tales of St. Luke’s School for Boys\textsuperscript{13}

I teach with Michael at St. Luke’s School*. He’s been there for at least 15 years, and he’s an alumnus, so he relates to the kids, and they relate to him. I run the video club at school, and we thought it would be interesting to create a pseudo-documentary that perpetuates the mythical tunnels under the school. The school has a culvert that runs underneath the school from one end to the other. The culvert fills up with water when it rains, and at all times it looks like the entrance to a dark underworld.

I suggested to the students that they might want to interview Michael because he lived in the dorms of St. Luke’s for five years in the 1960s. After reviewing the footage, a certain part of the interview interested me. The video student asked Michael what it was like living in the dorms in the 1960s. His reply was simple: “Dark.” I thought he meant the school was literally dark, like a haunted house deep inside the haunted woods. The more I talked to Michael, I realized he meant dark in a psychological way.

St. Luke’s does have a darkness about it. The swimming pool was filled in two summers ago because a second drowning occurred. Just last year, two young men were speeding by the school and ran off into a small patch of trees; the car exploded and the boys died instantly. In the last year, six seniors attempted suicide. The idea that this “dark” place is surrounded by a past that seeps into the present is a bit of an exaggeration, but the “dark” aura of St. Luke’s is not impossible either.

As this revelation fired off in my head, I propped up and asked, “Oh, so you mean dark like messed up, not dark like the woods?”

He replied, “Yeah.” He paused. “The campus hasn’t changed much. It looks the same.”

\textsuperscript{13} The proper names in the essay have been changed.
“I thought you meant there were no lights. I was picturing the place with no lights, and that’s pretty frightening.”

He looked past my shoulder, “No, it was dark and twisted.”

I had to ask about an abridged story Michael had told me, “So tell me more about the flaming rat.”

He started, “Well, there were a lot of drugs at St. Luke's.”

One of the students had a pet rat that he was using for a biology project. The kid was into all kinds of over-the-counter extracurriculars. He would come back from his parents’ house with the latest and greatest, all of it from the medicine cabinet in his house. He decided he didn’t want the rat anymore, so he and his roommate made a concoction of drugs and more drugs. They put together an enormous amount of uppers and mescaline, crushed the stuff up into one hill of mad science. They made a solution out of the powder and injected it into the rat. Who knows where the needle came from.

As these creeps are chemically torturing this poor rat that had also been through God knows what else, the dorm’s paraplegic, Ronnie, comes crawling down the hall. Ronnie didn’t have a wheelchair, so he learned to do everything on his belly. Sometimes he cruised around the pool sitting on a skateboard, using his arms as paddles against the wet concrete. Every night, Ronnie crawled on his belly to the showers. The hallway seemed darkest when the doors were all closed, and on this night, everyone was settled in his dorm room, studying. Well, almost all of them. The light leaking from the exit sign at the end of the hallway hit the crucifix hanging above the sign. The hallway was very long; the faint light of the exit sign was the only illumination available.
Ronnie was crawling to the showers that connected to the boys’ bathroom. The bathroom intersects the middle of the hallway. The mad scientists are at the end of the hallway in their dorm room. Like the doors of all the other boys, their door is shut, and Ronnie is in the dark.

One of the guys in the dorm room laboratory at the end of the hall pulls out lighter fluid. As the white rat spasms and screeches from the drugs in its system, one of the boys soaks the rodent with lighter fluid. The lighter fluid drips from the rat’s gesticulating legs. One of the two boys slowly opens the door and peeks down the hall. He sees Ronnie slowly sliding down the hall in small intervals of movement. Ronnie’s arms reach out in front, his fingers grip the thin carpet, and he pulls his torso forward. The mad scientist closes the door and takes the trembling rat from the other boy. While he holds the rat, it claws to get free. The boy tightens his grip and reaches down his pocket for a lighter. He taps the bottom of the dorm room door with his foot. The door slowly opens, and he thumbs the crank of the lighter. At this point, the lighter is under the rat’s backside, and the chemist holds the rat by the back of the neck like a betraying mother. The wick ignites from the spark and the rat follows in ignition. The boy throws the rat through the door.

Ronnie’s nearing the bathroom, but he sees a ball of fire gliding towards him. The ball bounces from wall to wall. Ronnie screams and starts to panic. His arms go flying, unable to catch anything that resembles safety. He does everything but move forward as the burning, hallucinating rat bounces towards him. As the rat gets closer, Ronnie notices exactly what the ball is. He spazzes out even more.

The rat bounces over Ronnie and lands on his legs and keeps running. Ronnie still reaches for grounding in between his grunts and screams. By now every door in the hallway is open, and the other boarders laugh hysterically at the manipulated side show act. The scientists at
the end of the hall have closed their door because the dorm’s prefect is stomping down the hall with a charred rat in a bucket of dirty water.

I asked, “What happened to the kids that pulled the prank?”

“Oh, they got in trouble.” Michael said.

I didn’t think specificity was necessary. Trouble could mean many horrible things. According to Michael, there were certain Brothers on campus to stay away from. One particular sadist, Brother Xavier enjoyed beating the boys. He would go into a misbehaving child’s room and shut the windowless door. From the dark hallway, you could hear the echoes of the hits and screams. The sounds would bounce down the hall. The molecular sounds of trauma are probably still in that building.

These incidents of high intensity remind me of the Stone Tape Paranormal Theory of the 1970s. The hypothesis tries to explain the existence of residual ghosts by positing that the traumatic moments, when occurring in certain environments, may be able to be recorded into the wall of a structure and become a loop. Some of the chemicals found in magnetic analog tape are a natural part of wood, so the recording possibility is everywhere. When returning to St. Luke’s to teach, Michael would not go into the dorm building. Michael told the principal that he refused to have class in that building. When the principal asked why, Michael simply told him, “I have some really dark memories of that building.” Recently, St. Luke’s renovated the building, gutting the place and rebuilding it into a classroom center. I hope most of the haunting recordings were lost, but Michael did tell the principal, “You can rebuild the dorms, but you have to get rid of the smell in there.” Interestingly enough, Stone Tape Theory includes olfactory recordings.

The Brothers to really stay away from were the pedophiles of the campus. Brother Austin would sit in a chair and watch the kids shower. The sadistic Brother Xavier would roam the
showers with a coat hanger, itching to strike the back of a misbehaving boy’s leg. Michael said you could hear the coat hanger cutting through the wind, but you never heard it hit your wet skin—you just felt it. Between the sound of wisps, you could hear Brother Austin call out to his prey, “Come here once, will you?” The selected boy would sit in an empty chair beside Brother Austin. The boy would sit awkwardly, holding his damp towel over his genitals while Brother Austin’s hand rubbed the boy’s shivering leg. The Brothers would prey on the weaker kids, the kids who would be too embarrassed to say anything. When Brother Austin asked Michael, “Come here once, will you?” Michael ran back to his dorm room, leaving a trail of wet footprints.

Most of Michael’s stories consist of mild molestation, like a Brother draping his leg over a sleeping student’s leg on a long bus ride. While the boy pretended to sleep, the Brother wrapped his arm around the boy’s shoulders, using his foul fingers to rub the boy’s ear. These incidents were out in the open. What happened behind closed doors is only recorded in the wood of the walls. Michael tells me of a Brother who acted as a guidance counselor who would go further with the boys.

Brother Cain had a small office. Allegedly, he would get the boys to pull out their penises, and he would fondle their testicles. Michael’s roommate, Carey, thought Brother Cain’s one-sided trysts were funny. Carey would try to convince other kids to go into the office. While he laughed, he would say, “Yeah, just go in there and let him play with your balls, and then in the middle of it pull your pants up and tell him, ‘Stop that, you dirty old man!’” To Carey, it was worth getting molested by a dirty old man just to have the opportunity to call him a “dirty old man.” Carey later killed himself, and when Michael found out, he stated, “Good.” Michael recalls Carey hog tying him and wrapping him in blankets. According to Michael, Carey was evil
and twisted. Eventually, Michael had to request a new roommate because he feared Carey’s pranks were soon to become sexual.

Throughout his career at St. Luke’s, Michael was smart. He knew what Brothers to stay away from; he went running when he heard, “Come here once, will you?” and he stayed out of the counseling office. Michael knew how to have a good time at St. Luke’s as well.

“The drugs were good at St. Luke’s.” Michael says that mescaline was the thing to get a hold of in the late 60s. When certain students went home to New Orleans for the weekend, they would sometimes come back with enough mescaline for everybody. One weekend, Michael and a friend decided to take mescaline and go roller skating with one of the Brothers. The group was small because everyone else had planned on staying back at campus with the rest of the mescaline. Michael says they had the best time as the skating rink floor became pulsating hills that he just rode and rode, up and down. Eventually, the Brother in charge of the night out took Michael aside and looked him in the face, “What’s wrong with you? Are you okay?” Michael casually let the Brother know, “Oh yeah, Brother, we’re fine, just having fun.” It was the late 1960s, the Brother didn’t know what to find in the young boy’s eyes.

When they arrived back at campus, Michael and his friend walked into the rec center. They were surprised to find a room in anarchy. Kids were rolling on the floors, jumping from table to table, and dancing uncontrollably. Michael realized the Brothers would be able to figure out what was going on, so he grabbed his buddy and they hid in their dorm room to mellow out.

Michael knows that his years at St. Luke's contributed to his own darkness. He’s bitter and pessimistic, ornery, and moody. Michael’s good heart clearly surpasses any crabbiness he displays. When I asked him why he came back to St. Luke's, he let me know that he had a teaching job at the time; he didn’t need a job. He said he came back because he wanted to make
sure the kids weren’t treated to his “dark” experiences. Michael is heavily involved in many extracurricular activities. His work outside the classroom is satisfying to the school and most importantly to the students. At the end of the year, when the teachers are having a luncheon and drinking to the end of the school year, Michael is clearing the recycle bins across campus put there by the Environmental Club he helped build.

Michael’s son graduated from St. Luke’s, while Michael was teaching there. Fortunately, Michael’s son experienced a very different St. Luke’s. In the 1970s, the school began cleaning up the drug problems. I spoke with an alumnus named Brent who told me he was kicked out of St. Luke’s. The school suspected he had been selling drugs. Furthermore, many of his friends were expelled because of the same reason. According to my source, he was just a “pot-head,” not a drug dealer. He remains bitter towards St. Luke’s. He feels that his life would have gone in a different direction had he graduated from St. Luke’s. He said he went there so he could be successful in life.

During the 1980s, St. Luke’s became a day school as well as a boarding school. The brothers who populated the campus were embracing a pacifist approach to discipline. The educators wanted to understand why a student was misbehaving and fix the puzzle pieces with understanding and care. Like a cosmic metaphor, a fire ate away the main school building in 1981. No one was hurt; moreover, the wooden memories burned to ash.

The school thrived in the 1990s, the dorms closed and St. Luke’s became a day school only. The brothers who walked and lectured and counseled throughout the campus became the builders and philosophers of a school that used modern pedagogy to touch the hearts of students. The school continues to grow although lay teachers populate the classrooms. We embrace the
mission of the school and continue to guide and mentor the students as if they were our own children.

My first introduction to Michael had been an address he gave the teachers at the beginning of the year. He said that it was important to see his son graduate from St. Luke’s, and the experience of having his son be a senior the previous year made him proud to be a part of St. Luke's. But his words became pointed as he told an anecdote about his seeing a young boy sitting by himself on a bench, crying. Michael saw the boy sobbing. Michael didn’t know the boy, but he knew he had to sit down next to the young man and just ask him what was wrong. The boy was lonely, much as Michael was when his father dropped him off at St. Luke’s in 1967. Michael remembered his dad driving off, and seconds after he realized his dad was gone, Michael started crying. He was alone. Now this young boy was alone with his emotions and Michael empathized. The boy felt better after they talked. Michael didn’t tell us what was wrong with the boy; he didn’t need to. He just needed the other teachers to know our purpose at St. Luke's: to not only care about the kids, but to show them we care.
The Cool Kids

Jackson’s grades fall when he starts to not give a shit about school. His dark brown hair sticks up, and he always looks tired. He pays attention in class, though, and participates. When he speaks he sounds like he’s been up all night. When he was younger, around twelve, he used to go down to the river and hang out with his friends, just the kids – no alcohol, no weed. Now, Jackson’s younger brother is twelve and he follows his older brother’s tradition. Jackson’s brother, Austin, hangs out at the river, where there is beer and marijuana. Jackson thinks this is strange. On the other hand, he’s happy his brother hangs out at the river. It’s nostalgic for Jackson, makes him feel like a big brother, but the juvenile evolution of kids disturbs Jackson. Austin’s a greaser; according to Jackson, his brother’s explanation for being a greaser is because “Everyone else gets basketball clothes for Christmas, but nobody gets greaser clothes.” Austin hangs out with another 12-year-old with dreadlocks, which is funny – the dreadlocks part. What 12-year-old decides he wants dreadlocks? Does he not wash his hair? Jackson says his brother’s friends make fun of kids who are smart. Once, Dreadlocks walked into a room where Austin was reading a Vonnegut book. Apparently, Dreadlocks brought some girls over, so he decided to throw some verbal fire under Austin’s ass: “Austin, put that shit down, there’s pussy in here!” Of course, Dreadlocks was referring to the book as shit and the girls as pussy.

Jackson lives with his mom and dad and his brother in Covington, Louisiana. His family is affluent although they live next door to a dingy motel called Green Springs, which should have been blown away a long time ago. Most of the homes that surround Green Springs are very nice, and surprisingly the property values can be rather high. The motel was one of the first things built on Old Military Road, but some relics shouldn’t have seniority. One late night, Jackson was feeling uncomfortably warm in his bedroom, so he moved to a room in the house where he
could open a window and sleep in the night breeze. As Jackson drew the curtain to open the window, he saw two people having sex in the motel. It made Jackson feel gross. He told me he had wondered why his dwindling comfort would cause such an odd effect in his life.

Jackson’s dad bought him some night vision goggles. Paralleling this situation was the incident of some stolen lawn equipment. Jackson feels that his dad may have bought these goggles so Jackson might investigate the motel next door, a mission looking for Dad’s stolen weed eater and blower.

Crawling around on the damp ground was part of the fun. The night goggles made it possible for Jackson to see objects in the dark. Eventually, he reached the shed full of lawn equipment. Giant sacks filled with weed eaters raised strong suspicion. Just as Jackson began to dig through the equipment for his dad’s stuff, a truck pulled up onto the property. Jackson immediately ducked to hide behind a cobwebbed bag of weed eaters. Two men stepped out of the truck. Jackson noticed something about them that made him think they had guns. Jackson surreptitiously positioned himself on his belly in order to get back home. While crawling on his belly home, he paused for a moment; the door to one of the motel rooms was open. A Mexican man watched a Spongebob cartoon. The man’s face was in a strange daze. Jackson fell into the same daze. Eventually, he broke from the surreal moment and made his way home.

The next day Jackson woke up to the sounds of cop cars and walkie talkies. He looked out his window at the property next door. A blue, dead man lay face down in the dirt. Later, Jackson thought about the night before and wondered if the dead man was there while Jackson crawled around. Again, Jackson wonders if some kind of cosmic cause and effect is involved. Together we discuss the motel as a portentous figure next door, a living yellow monument.
Peter’s the kind of kid who likes to learn about cool things. He brings to class the latest Don Hertzfeldt cartoon “Everything Will Be Okay.” I decide the cartoon fits in with my lesson on satire, so my AP English class watches a depressingly hilarious short film, animated with stick figures and photographed stills. As a class we discuss the short cartoon.

We head to the library so the students can scour the internet for material for their research paper. Peter and Jackson sit together. The former pulls up his Netflix account. I pull up a chair to see what’s in Peter’s Netflix queue. I see the titles of movies that I wouldn’t see until I was in college. These guys are lucky; after all, they have a much bigger cybermarket than I did. Netflix streams movies and recommends titles according to your previous viewings. Peter is the one who gave me a copy of Lars Von Trier’s Antichrist. He found a download of the film on the internet and burned the movie to a DVD for me. As I watched the film, I wondered if, as a senior in high school, I could handle such grotesque imagery: a fox disemboweling itself, a miscarried fawn hanging from its mother’s womb, and an extreme close-up of a self-inflicted female circumcision. We start talking about Alejandro Jodorowsky’s Holy Mountain and mention the strangest parts. “What about the re-enactment of the Spanish invasion of Mexico with toads and lizards?”

Peter replies with a laugh. “Oh yeah! That’s crazy!”

Jackson stares into the conversation. I turn to him and ask, “Did you see Holy Mountain? Peter, did you show him yet?”

Jackson perks up a bit. “No, Peter will ride up on his bike and be like ‘Yeah, I got Metropolis, so I’m going home to watch it.’ And then he’ll ride off.”

We all laugh and I quickly throw my cult film advice. “You gotta watch this stuff with your friends, Peter.” We start laughing about Blue Velvet and Eraserhead. At this time in my life,
Peter is the only student I can talk with about such celluloid nightmares. He’s learned to appreciate the cinematic realms of the elegant as well as the bizarre.

Ridgeley starts slowly: “No.” Thomas is pretending to ride in space. The screensaver from my computer is engaged, probably the oldest one that Windows still feels necessary to include with its operating system. You know the one: the stars fly at you, or you fly through the stars. Well, Thomas pretends to fly through space, and because my computer projects onto a screen in my class, the class laughs at the low-grade effect, but Ridgeley insists, “No!” Now he brings in a little force: “Stop! No!” Thomas insists and I soon catch on. Ridgeley lets out a mean, “No!” Really loud. At this point, I have to stop laughing with the class and stop Ridgeley because he’s getting loud. Thomas sits down, and I interrupt the screen saver. After telling Ridgeley to stop, I start laughing again. I know Ridgeley isn’t really mad that Thomas pretends to be a space boy, Ridgeley just has this Dadaist sense of humor that makes me laugh. We talk about Adult Swim cartoons and the absurd skits on The Tim and Eric Show: Great Job. I think about how much I have in common with these kids who to me are more interesting than most adults I know.

Later the same day, Ridgeley passes through my room to get to the adjacent classroom. I’m eating a sandwich at my desk. He turns around and looks at me with a deadpan stare and asks, “Is that ham?” His wavy brown hair parts to the left and he has a smirk on his face that defines him perfectly. He knows the way he asks will make me laugh, and I do laugh. There are a few times where I project the space screen saver and tell Thomas to get up and pretend he’s flying through the stars again. Immediately, Ridgeley catches on and slowly builds up to a giant “No!” It’s perfect: as Thomas walks up to the screen, Ridgeley starts with this paranoid tone, “No...don’t...Stop!...No!” At this point I have to stop the show and begin class. My classroom
neighbor is an older woman who uses a walker to get around. I would hate to have her get up and come to the door just to make sure everything is all right. She usually attributes the loud noises to my dramatic interpretations of *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*.

They teach me, and I teach them; they give me as much, if not more. Jackson’s adventures, Peter’s interests, and Ridgeley’s hilarity keeps me happy at work. This is why I became a teacher: to learn. I originally interviewed these guys in hoping to create an essay about how the smart kids see the world during their high school years. As I started to put it all down, I noticed how they actually help me see the world differently.
Why Parents Shouldn’t Read Summaries

Class let out, and I stood at my podium. It was lunch time and the class and I had just had an interesting discussion of *Catcher in the Rye*. It was my first year teaching 11th grade American literature, so this was my first time teaching J.D. Salinger’s classic rite of passage novel. The last time I had read the story of Holden Caulfield was in high school, over fifteen years ago. Holden is still funny. He still made me laugh, and he’s still clever. He is a bit of a jerk, but I get him. At 37 years old, I empathized with him and he taught me a few things. Holden hates everyone around him, and my class seemed to understand that he hates everything because he wants to be a part of the things he hates. He’s lonely and his misanthropic attitude is simply a defense mechanism. I can be like this. We can all be like this to some degree.

As class bottlenecked out the door, one of my students stopped at my desk. He politely asked, “Um, Mr. Guillory? Is there another book I can read?”

I asked, “What do you mean?”

“I really don’t like *Catcher in the Rye*.”

“What? You wanna read another book instead?

He nodded and quietly said, “Uh-huh.”

“You don’t like *Catcher in the Rye*?”

He just looked at me and shook his head.

At this point I was irritated by his poor taste and his quiet puppy act. “No. Absolutely not. Just suck it up. How could you not like Holden Caulfield?”

“I just don’t,” he said.

“So you liked the Bundrens?” We had just finished Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* last quarter, and a good number of students didn’t like it, but it’s the one book I want them to suffer through.
The class is AP Language, and since Faulkner messes with the language and the novel, I want them to experience it and wade through the murky river with the hideous Bundren family.

To my question he answered, “That was just hard to read.”

“Well, you’re just gonna have to deal with it. I’m sorry.” At this point I was supremely irritated. This same kid asked me if he could be in my class, and he seemed like a polite boy, ready to learn. I had told him, “Well, Corey, you’re the kind of kid I want in the class.” Well, the whole year he just sat there in the front row. When I asked him a question that might require some sort of thought, he just stared at me and turned red. He didn’t raise his hand or contribute to a goddamn thing.

So he thanked me. “Okay. Well, thanks Mr. Guillory.”

I still had some irritation left in my head. “Really? You don’t like *Catcher in the Rye*?”

He walked away, and I left my classroom for some lunch.

About a week went by, and I got an email from Corey’s father. It said that he wanted to have a meeting about Corey’s grade. This kind of message is never a good sign, but I knew what the problem was. Corey had about three failing quiz grades sprinkled throughout the semester grade. Our class was doing seminar presentations on *Catcher in the Rye*. A group of students basically teach a lesson on a number of chapters in the book. In order for the other students to get points on that day, they have to ask a question or comment on the text or the discussion. If a student participates, they get a five out of five quiz grade. If a student does not: zero out of five. Every student in the class had been participating and getting his points, except—you guessed it—Corey. All he had to do was say something, anything. Give me a line he liked, a clever simile, point out the myriad hyperboles in *Catcher in the Rye*, anything! Tell me why he hated Caulfield but liked Phoebe, anything. But he just sat there, with his long legs stretched out and
his skinny arms apathetically folded across one another. When the presenting group finished, I would say, “I have twenty-seven students in this class, and I only have twenty-four names written down for points. Does anyone want to add to our discussion? A couple hands would float up, but I always came up one short.

Our parent-teacher meeting was canceled twice because Corey’s dad couldn’t make it, so I stopped Corey after class and asked, “Is your dad coming today?”

Corey replied, “I don’t know. He said he was going to email you and let you know.”

I decided to get the meeting started without Corey’s dad: “So what’s going on? You know why your grade is falling. It’s because you aren’t participating during seminar.”

“Yeah, well, I’m having moral issues with Catcher in the Rye.”

I felt like I was sinking a little bit. I didn’t know what to say, but I had to say something. “Oh, is it Holden saying ‘goddam’ all the time?” I scanned my mind for more offenses in the book. And then it hit me! Shit, have I been offending the kid all year with my occasional goddamns and shits and fuckings and possibly a couple Jesus Christs here and there? I teach all boys—I’ve been doing it for 10 years. If you’re teaching something and you want them to pay attention you have to loosen up a bit. I might say that “Laertes is pissed off, and he’s ready to kick some ass, while Hamlet’s still playing with himself wondering if the ghost is his dad or the goddamn Devil.” Or, I might teach The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and I tell the students that Dr. Jekyll wants to shed all the Victorian oppression and sin as much as he wants without destroying his reputation. So I asked, “Oh, Jesus. Have I offended you this year?”

He kinda looked confused and said, “No, you don’t offend me. The language in the book offends me, and this is my second time having to read it because I read it in Brother Michael’s class.”
I had to ask, “So were you offended by the other books; I mean Hamlet has incest in it and murder.”

“No, that was okay.”

“So what do you want to do? You wanna read another book? I mean we’re halfway through *Catcher* now. It would suck for you to have to read another whole book. I wish you would’ve told me this when we started the book.”

“Yeah.” That’s all he had to say.

“I tell you what. I won’t knock you for the points, and maybe you can just get through the book because we only have about two weeks left of it.”

“Okay. That sounds fine.”

I remembered something very important. “Aren’t you in a seminar group?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, do you still plan to do that? It is where Holden scratches the profanity off the wall because he wants to protect the children’s innocence, so it’s a positive part of the novel.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I would just hate to see you leave your group high and dry.”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna do that.”

“Maybe you can discuss why you don’t like Holden or you don’t feel he’s a good character at the end, or you can bring up how he doesn’t fully redeem himself. This is a Catholic school. Give a Christian perspective. I’m sure there’s research out there that tackles the offensive things in the book; it has been banned a bunch of times before.”

“Okay. Yeah.”

I could tell he wasn’t buying it. The truth is the kid just didn’t want to speak up at all, and
now that his grade was an issue, he decided to use his dad as a weapon. I could imagine how it went down at home:

    Dad:   Son, why do you have a thirty-five in AP English?
    Corey: Well, Yeah, I haven’t really been enjoying the book too much.
    Dad: Why?
    Corey: Well there’s drinking in it and smoking and a prostitute and her pimp and nihilism and the main character says “goddam” a lot.
    Dad: Jimminy Crickets! You should ask your teacher, this (the father puts on his reading glasses to read the name beside the class title) Mr. Guillory, if you can read another book.
    Corey: Okay.

The participation grade was probably never mentioned.

    After Corey left, I opened my email, and I notice an email from his dad simply stating that he will not be meeting with me today. His number is anchored to the email, so I decide I don’t feel like waiting; I want the meeting to happen over the phone. Luckily, it’s the end of the day, so I give him a call.

    He answers and I introduce myself. He begins the conversation: “I’m sorry we couldn’t meet. I had a doctor’s appointment and then the doctor became ill, so he had to reschedule for the following day.”

    “That’s fine. I just figured I would give you a call about the matter because I just had a long talk with Corey.”

    “Oh, about Catcher in the Rye and Corey’s grade.” I liked the way he put those together so fast, completely eliminating Corey’s inability to participate in an Advanced Placement class.
I continued, “Well, Corey came to me about a week ago and asked me if he could read another book. I told him no. And the reason I told him no is because he didn’t tell me that he was offended by the book. He just told me he didn’t like the book. Well, as a teacher, I was kinda offended myself. I know that every student doesn’t like every book I pick for them to read, but they just have to get through it. So I may have been a bit short with him because I thought he just was wanting a different book because he hates it. Well, today, we talked and he told me what the real problem is that he’s offended by the book. So we kinda worked it out.”

He found a place to jump in. “And I told Corey that he needs to make sure that if his problems with the book get in the way of his grade, he needs to just work it out for himself.” At this point I was thinking, Well, why are we having this discussion? After all, his problem with the book is affecting his grade and he is not dealing with it himself.

I started, “Maybe I should explain how the grade works.” I already explained this, and I assure you the explanations are quite similar. “All Corey had to do was pick a passage that he liked or didn’t like and share it with the class. Raise a question about some of Caulfield’s decisions. He could say anything about the book and get a 5 out of 5 for a quiz grade.”

“Right, well, I have to tell you, Mr. Guillory, I read a summary on the internet about the book and I just don’t understand why you would even teach this. I mean, maybe it’s me, but there seems to be no moral value in this story at all. I do admit that the summary I read was very short, but I don’t blame Corey for being offended by the book.”

Now I was angry, but I couldn’t show that in my voice. Good thing this meeting was happening on a phone. I replied, “Well, Catcher in the Rye is a great American classic, one of the greatest books ever written.”

He laughed and proclaimed, “I’m sorry, but I find that hard to believe. I just can’t buy that
a book like this (I pictured him holding the book in his hand and looking right at it) could be great.”

Had he just laughed at me? Jesus Christ. This guy just laughed at me. I said, “Well, I’m an English teacher and you’re not.” I know that sounds like a very childish and stupid thing to say, but it just came out of me. I should have brought up the fact that he admittedly did not read the book. He read a mere summary. He probably googled *Catcher in the Rye* and read the first summary that appeared. I Googled *Catcher in the Rye* and at the top of the search results was the summary from *Sparksnotes.com*. Let’s see what Corey’s father read:

*The Catcher in the Rye* is set around the 1950s and is narrated by a young man named Holden Caulfield. . . he is undergoing treatment in a mental hospital or sanatorium. . . . Pencey is Holden’s fourth school; he has already failed out of three others. . . . failed four out of five of his classes and has received notice that he is being expelled. . . . he tried to have sex with her. . . . a man putting on silk stockings, high heels, a bra, a corset, and an evening gown. . . . a man and a woman in another room taking turns spitting mouthfuls of their drinks into each other’s faces and laughing hysterically. . . . sexual play. . . . aroused by it. . . . After smoking a couple of cigarettes, he calls Faith Cavendish . . . he believes he can persuade her to have sex with him. . . . kissed her all over her face, but she wouldn’t let him kiss her on the mouth. . . . prostitute to Holden’s room for five dollars. . . . She pulls off her dress. . . . She sits on his lap and talks dirty to him. . . . homosexual overture. At this point, Corey’s dad probably stopped.

Our conversation continued with him trying to accuse me of something I was very guilty of, “Also, my son said that--and I don’t know if this is true or not--you said the book is funny--I don’t know if I believe that.”
I interrupted, “No, that is true because the book is funny. The main character is very funny, and his humor still holds up. I mean he’s a sad character and quite hypocritical, but he’s a 16-year-old kid.”

“I know, but when I read the summary, I just felt like he was sad.”

“Well, he is sad. You did say you didn’t read the book. Maybe you could read it and truly understand the character.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t read the entire Bible, but I understand Jesus. I just think that as a Christian school we can do better than this. Is this book required by the state to be in the curriculum?”

I couldn’t believe it was going here, “No, it’s not. I pick the books for the class.”

“Well, if I see Brother Jonah (the principal of the school) I might have to suggest that as a Christian school I think they can do better. I mean what about the story of the prodigal son? That’s a great story with a message. I just don’t see how *Catcher in the Rye* has a positive message. Maybe we can sit down and you can explain to me why you teach it and what the message is.” At this point I’m visibly mad, but my tongue stayed trapped between my teeth. I couldn’t defend the book in one sentence, and I certainly didn’t want to create a kangaroo court, tutoring session with this guy. Corey read it last year with Brother Michael, ask Corey what the “goddam” message is.

I had to respond. “Well, I don’t teach books for their moral messages. This is an AP Language class, and Salinger is doing a lot of interesting things with language in this book. Salinger is writing a novel from the point of view of a 16-year-old kid, and the way he writes the book reflects the point of view. That’s what’s important to me as a teacher, the way the novel influenced the American novels that came after it.”
I waited for a reply. “Well, I just think you can put something in the curriculum that is less offensive, like I said, ‘The Prodigal Son’ is a great story.” I knew Corey’s father was used to short narratives, but surely he knew ‘The Prodigal Son’ is only a few paragraphs long. If I’m going to replace a novel, it’s going to be with another book, not a parable. I could tell I just had to give up and forget trying to change this guy’s mind. Ultimately, *Catcher in the Rye* is important for a high school class because most of the students enjoy reading it. I devoured the book when I was in high school and so did my friends. At a time when kids don’t read that much, it’s nice to have them enjoy some classic literature. The conversation ended and neither of us became angry or tempered. We finished our discussion with him hoping to meet me at graduation, and I lied and said that would be nice. I guess it would be good to put a face to such a piece of work.

I walked away from my classroom really irritated. I was more angry at the fact that this dad wanted to mention his feelings to Brother Jonah, who has pulled books from the curriculum before. Once, a sophomore’s mother was reading *The Lords of Discipline* to her son, and she stumbled across the term *blow job*. The book was removed from the sophomore curriculum. Just last year, a junior class couldn’t watch the film version of *Of Mice and Men* because they said *goddamn* in it too much. One parent complained, the teacher couldn’t show the movie. Roman Polanski’s version of *Macbeth* was pulled from the 11th grade curriculum because a parent complained about the director’s deviant past. God forbid if someone’s mother reads Grendel’s fantasizing about burning a hole in Wealtheow’s crotch and squeezing feces out from her body. How did *old* Corey feel when he read *The Fountainhead*, and *old* Howard Roark rapes Domonique Francon, and she likes it. I imagine if his grade went sour during those classics, his dad would have read a scorching hot Spark Notes summary.
Ignorance and Empathy

If you ever meet a teacher who tells you he or she never disliked a student, that teacher is a liar. Teaching is a vocation, a mission, a gift, a calling. These common descriptions are all true, but we are not saints or robots. I say robots because some students feel that we should know everything within our subject, no mistakes are allowed. We are not saints because we do not die for a cause and there are, in fact, students that we dislike. The trick is to act like you do like your particular abhorred students. Can you serve them? Maybe. You’ll have a better chance at compassion if you do step back and try to understand the students’ horrid surroundings.

Austin stepped into my room on the last day of school. His cowboy boots were dirty and his crew cut was fresh. He has naturally olive skin and a dopey look in his eyes. He’s a pinch taller than the other kids and a lot thinner than the jocks. Summer break started the next day, and my room needed to be cleaned and the grades had to be completed before I could breathe in the Louisiana humidity. Austin asked if he could hang out in my room while he waited for the bus. I answered, “Of course.”

“Can I help you out in here?” He spoke with a fake country accent that mysteriously appeared after the Christmas holidays. Everyone had been giving him a hard time about his fake accent. When I asked him about it, he said when he came to St. Luke’s in 8th grade, everyone made fun of his country accent, so he covered his identity up by speaking like everyone else. Now, Austin says he doesn’t care, so he amped up his regionalism. When he’s not sure if he agrees, Austin answers with “I reckon” and any other colloquialism he may have picked up from Huckleberry Finn or Anse Bundren. I asked him if he wouldn’t mind wiping my board down. He said, “Yessir” as one word and moved towards the paper towels. I walked around the room, throwing away stickered test papers and coffee stained essays. My classroom gathered dusty
papers all year long. Stacks of five question quizzes were forgotten as they should be; short answer sections were written with a stale formula; and copies of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” were staring up at me, waiting to be passed out. As I tucked away the leftover handouts in a folder for next year, Austin randomly asked, “Mr. Guillory, you lean more towards the left, huh?”

I wasn’t sure where this question came from, and I didn’t know how to answer, but I did. “I’m not really sure. I do think about politics, but I have conservative ideals as well as liberal ideals.”

Austin answered for me, “Well, I think you’re more liberal. I mean, by what you say in class sometimes.”

I needed him to back this statement up. “What do I say that makes me liberal?” I opened up my grade book to begin entering grades into the computer.

Austin answered, “I don’t know. It just seems you’re all about giving the people what they need. You know: power to the people type thing.”

“Well, yeah, I’m for taking care of people, but the system needs a heavy adjustment, especially in Louisiana. I don’t like to see people taking advantage of generosity. There are tons of people staying on welfare all of their lives. I think some of the people who take advantage of the welfare system need to be held accountable. People are freaked out by the poor economy, but Taco Bell’s hiring now. I see hiring signs all over the place, but I think people just don’t wanna work at McDonald’s or Wal-Mart. There’s too much entitlement in this country.”

I thought I had answered his question, but he continued, “So, do you believe in big government?”

“No, I think government should be smaller. To what extent? Well, I guess I don’t know.”
“You don’t believe in the death penalty, right”

“Correct.”

Austin moved back from the white board and began his presentation: “I have a plan that I really think would work well. All we have to do is make sure criminals don’t wanna go to jail.”

I interrupted. “Well, that’s not a new concept or idea. That’s what the death penalty tries to do, but murderers and rapists often are either mentally ill or completely apathetic.”

Austin retorted. “I reckon that’s true, but my plan would be to enslave the criminals. If someone was about to steal $100, they would think twice about it if they knew they would spend time as a slave.”

“Wait, are you saying we would disperse people all over the country and assign them to their slave owners?”

Austin laughed. “No, they would be slaves in jail: hard labor.”

“Don’t they already make prisoners do hard labor?”

He rebutted quickly. “Only in Angola. That’s why they call it The Farm.”

I jumped in. “Wait... let’s back up. You think someone should be forced to go to prison and do hard labor, for stealing a hundred bucks?”

“Yeah. People need to be scared to go to prison.”

“Well, Angola has hard labor, but Louisiana has one of the worst crime rates in America.”

At this point in our conversation, I was just trying to phase Austin out of my mind. All year long I had managed to defend him in class. Every time he raised his hand, I had regretted calling on him because as soon as he began speaking, the other students would grumble. Austin would usually use his time to call out his own ideas, often causing other students to whisper,
“What does that have to do with anything?” Sometimes he would make me feel like a terrible teacher. As he rambled on, my stomach would try to kill me by imploding into small particles that would soon cling to my heart, crushing it with anxiety and irritation. Sometimes I would have to cut him off mid-sentence with a simple, “Okay, thank you, Austin.” I had to have another student picked, so I could quickly call on him. I would later find out that some teachers had given Austin a two-sentence limit on all his replies. Other teachers had also let me know that they spent a lot of time correcting other students for giving Austin a hard time. Some teachers had mentioned Austin’s giggle that would get the kids hissing and huffing at him. I empathized happily; after all, Austin always had this goofy little laugh in my class; it sounded like a “tee-hee-hee-hee.”

Once a colleague and I were going to lunch together, and Austin passed us; the boy made some sarcastic remark, trying to be funny. The remark was harmless and forgetful at best. As we drove off we passed him again. He threw us a goofy smile, and I asked the other teacher in the car, “You ever taught him?”

He replied, “Yes! The kid’s fucking irritating. His dad’s an asshole, too.”

Austin proclaimed in front of the class that his father comes home from work, gets in his underwear, drinks beer in bed, and watches NASCAR until he falls asleep. This statement by Austin, solidified the fact that we all knew--students and teachers: Austin does not get any attention at home. That sad fact is why I felt bad for Austin and tried really hard to defend him and give him the attention he needed.

As our conversation at the end of the school year continued, I moved to the other side of my room. Austin stood behind my podium, and he stated it was time for him to leave, his ride was approaching. I wished him a good summer and gave him a piece of advice. “Maybe you
should think about my feelings on your rebel flag.” All year long I had to deal with the confederate flag stitched on his wallet and drawn in his notebook. Every time I saw it, I told him to grow up. And as usual he had to use some hackneyed argument: “It just represents the South.” I would let him know that the rebel flag mainly represents racism.

My wishing Austin a summer of reflection and possible change engulfed a response I didn’t expect. Austin said, “I’m not racist. I just think that there are black people and niggers, and niggers don’t contribute to society.” I was shocked, but then again Austin had prepped me months back by telling me he was friends with some people who honestly felt I should be hanged for marrying a black girl. He proclaimed that he did not share such an atrocious opinion, but I wondered why he felt the need to tell me this information. Did he think I was ignorant of such idiocy. My grandmother openly disapproved of my relationship, and even though she didn’t get an executioner’s rope, she let me know she would say novenas to stop the relationship. My brother-in-law called me a “nigger-lover” on the heels of an argument. I just didn’t understand why it was important for Austin to grind his opinions into my skull. It made me angry, and I was trying hard to constantly give him the benefit of the doubt.

I asked Austin, “Why can’t you just call them good and bad people?”

“I have no choice. If I think any other way, my dad will kick me out of the house.” As unprofessional as it was, I had to say it, “Your dad sounds like an idiot.” He replied with a sigh as if he agreed, “I reckon, but I don’t have a choice.”

He said he had to go. I told him to have a good summer as he walked out the door. As the door closed on its own, my stomach eased up on my heart and I felt bad for Austin once again. I find it fascinating that of all the things he said that day, the last and worst thing he said made me
feel the most sorry for him. I realized he was trapped in an ignorant world, and as he said, he had no choice.
Trash Bags

The sun had been up for at least six hours, but I can’t remember where it sat in the sky. I just know that when the couple next door pulled into their driveway they were angry. The car created a metaphor as it squealed to an obstinate halt. I was living next to a collection of myopic minds. Trash bags, that’s what I secretly called my neighbors whenever their existence made me sick. I pictured their insides filled to the top with garbage. I lived in a neighborhood about thirty miles from New Orleans across the Lake Pontchartrain, in a small town called Slidell. I had bought my house almost a year before. My street was filled with brand new houses, trailer homes, and white trash. It was July 2005, and the following month Hurricane Katrina would throw parts of Lake Pontchartrain through my house, turning my place into a giant washing machine filled with mud. I was standing on my front porch smoking a cigarette. My black lab, Monster, was doing what he usually does: stare into the sky, realizing he has free will. My garden was filled with coleus and the blood-red veins that flow down the middle of each leaf. These plants would completely die in the winter, but I loved the natural aesthetic of them because they looked like they were from another planet. That’s what we did when I smoked: Monster contemplated his existence and I stared into my garden.

All of a sudden the trash bags next door pulled into their driveway. The woman of the couple stepped out the car, dragging a gray baby carrier across the foul air. She was holding the carrier with two hands. I couldn’t see the baby at all, but I knew it was a girl. She yelled at her husband, “No, I will not come inside after you did that shit to me!”

She walked away from the house up the black-tarred street, holding her baby as she treaded with huge overblown steps. I could hear her flip-flops slap the heels of her feet. I remember wondering where she was going. Somehow I knew she wouldn’t
Her husband stepped out of a silver dilapidated Toyota and called her back with a thrust of aggression. He stood tall and lanky. He yelled, “Come on, get your ass back over here.” When his demands were not met, he began walking after her. He was wearing a flannel shirt and a mustache under his nose.

She turned around and started screaming at him. “Don’t you follow me. You fucking hit me, motherfucker. You ain’t never gonna hit me again.” I think she was wearing the same thing she always wore: pink shorts that rode up the crack of her ass with a T-shirt she probably won at a casino. She had red hair and pale sickly skin, covered in acne or possibly psoriasis. She looked greasy like you could put a napkin on her neck and ring out the oil into a mason jar. Her bulbous curves shook and formed grotesque trenches of plopped mayonnaise. Her husband looked like he actually believed he was sorry. I could see his face, covered with the fear of losing his family. From what I knew of him, I thought he was more concerned with his four-wheeler or the crotch rocket parked on the front porch.

I just kept observing the moment unfold; I couldn’t be discovered and risk them breaking from their natural actions. I felt like a nature photographer, breathing very slowly, capturing hyenas eating. I lit another smoke with my nearly finished cigarette. He caught up with her and grabbed the handle of the baby carrier. The baby girl’s father dragged her mother back to the driveway, using the car seat as a slowly shredding rope. When they made it back to the oil stained driveway, she went for the still ajar car door. Holding on to the baby carrier, her hands lost all their color and the pink pigment spread to her face. She screamed, “I’m getting in the car and leaving now.”

“No, you’re not!”
He made promises he wouldn’t keep, and a tug of war match began with the baby in the middle, only protected by the plastic carrier. As they shouted, the baby moved side to side, and I felt sorry for the child. The baby wasn’t being physically abused because their struggle wasn’t violent, but I wondered if that was what the baby’s environment was all the time. I hoped the baby always had the thick plastic of the carrier to protect her, but I knew she didn’t. Will the baby have the same fight in her future and find this moment in her subconscious, unraveling a painful catharsis of choking, crying, and phlegm?

I imagined the baby being loosed from the hard plastic shell of the carrier and hitting the black street, brains spilling out of her head. The parents start crying and screaming and blaming each other. They are so stupid that they try to scoop up the baby’s brain and put it back into her head, getting dirt and beer mixed in with the wound, sewing the baby’s head back together with a mildewed shoestring.

I snapped out of my morbid fantasy and things had cooled down next door; the couple and baby went inside. I called Monster to follow me back into my house. When I went inside, my mind was still meandering through horrible possibilities. I thought of finding a child’s tooth at the bottom of the porcelain sink in my bathroom. Spots of blood from the tooth looked pink against the shining white. The tooth was so small I felt like it could slip through my fingers. I picked it up anyway. A child’s tooth is a sign of growth, but this violent withdrawal from the jaw was death. I snapped out of it and noticed I had been gnawing at a hangnail on my finger. I pulled the hangnail and the blood formed a small pond in the crater on the side of my finger. I thought about my life as I was growing up, and I wondered if there was a deep-seated disappointment from my childhood that made me so angry towards these people next door. My stomach hurts when their noises start.
My parents would scream at each other a lot. My father was never physical with my mother, but the two of them together in a screaming match conveyed a sense of violence that sticks with me. I have an image in my mind that is too vivid: My father is holding his .357 revolver with the barrel pointed towards him. The gun is in its protective holster although the grip of the handle is exposed. He offers the gun to my mother. Tears are scrolling down his face and his voice trembles as he screams, “Just shoot me. If you hate me that much, just shoot me.” My little sister, who’s ten years old, sits by the front door, begging my Dad to stop.

My mom yells back, “Don’t be so stupid.”

I’m frozen. I don’t know what to do. My dad threatens to leave and my sister screams as loud as she can, “No, Daddy. Don’t go. No, Daddy, please.” He stays.

The next day the gun rests on the seat of our truck between my dad and me on the way to school. The part of New Orleans where he worked had become ridden with violent robberies, so he brought the gun to work everyday.

Three hours later the patriarchal trash bag next door celebrates by revving the engine on his motorcycle. He does this for ten minutes. I fantasize about planting a ghost in their house; of course, the thing would scare them away. I would slip it in through a vent. They have no fence, and their chained up dog never barks at me as I approach the adjacent yard; the dog probably hopes I will sneak up and kill him. He’s infested with fleas and ticks. The dogs we had where I grew up stayed outside. They were never chained up, but I remember ticks on our dogs. The parasites would form a barrier of grey bumpy flesh. The blood from our dogs would keep the ticks hard to the touch. I would pick them off and squeeze them until they burst. As an adult I realized we had been abusing our poor dogs. I thought it was
normal for dogs to have ticks. My sister had a tick on her scalp once. My Mother pulled the nasty thing off in a department store. I should’ve realized then that the ticks didn’t belong on dogs.

Another three hours go by and now he’s listening to a CD in his Chevy Silverado. The speaker system for the truck is worth more than the truck. The bass from his truck vibrates my walls. Four hours from now, I will be lying in bed and all I will hear is the sounds of the trash bags talking with their friends on the front lawn that is located at a short diagonal distance from my bedroom window—they will probably start a four-wheeler. Monster will be at my feet without a care in the world. I envy that he understands himself. The mirror next to me will show me my reflection. I will think about my own life.

They irritate me and aggravate my memories of the past and how I grew up. The bottom of my stomach begins to fill with a rage and bitter hatred that just twists and writhes. I decide to mentally walk through the mirror in the corner of the room and come out into a place that brings back memories of a childhood that spark a despondent reaction I have when the trash bags are turned up all the way. I want to confront the memories and banish them from the me that is important now. I am trying hard to not resemble everything that frustrates me about my past. Through my bedroom window and in the mirror, I see the sun falling in the west.
Two Thousand Hours

My son, Brighton, was born at 6:36 p.m. on January 24, 2008. By cesarean he was pulled from his hiding spot, tucked high in my wife’s belly. She wanted so badly to have him naturally, but Brighton was comfortable. By the third time the doctor checked on Celia’s progress, it was apparent to everyone that the boy wasn’t moving. He was as far away from that cold outside world as possible—smart kid.

My wife cried after the update, but she knew that it just meant she would meet her son sooner. I had to get some scrubs on. About an hour later they wheeled Celia away. I kissed her and told her I’d see her in a minute. Once I suited up, I waited in the room that was now much bigger without my wife’s bed. My mother and mother-in-law, Cyndi, were in the room waiting with me. I guess the room started closing in on me. Suddenly I could feel my hands getting really cold. I looked up to see if I was under a vent. My mother grabbed my hands and asked, “Brad, are you all right?”

I started rubbing my palms together and said, “Yeah, I’m fine. I guess I’m just cold.”

“Brad, you’re turning as white as a ghost. You need to sit down, baby.” By now both women have a hold of my arms as I agree with my mother and sit down.

“Are you okay?” Cyndi asked.

“Brad, you’re really pale. You want some water?”

“No, Ma, I’ll be all right.”

I know what caused me to whiten up. I thought about seeing the procedure. I thought about fainting or throwing up in the operating room as they cut my wife’s belly open. What if I threw up into her stomach, and it gave her some strange infection that paralyzed her for life, or what if I threw up on my son as he came into the world. Would that affect his ACT score in the
future? My mother-in-law stated how she wished she could go in with me for the procedure; Celia is her only daughter, and like a good mother she worries about her daughter. I looked at her with what she would later say was a very serious face and asked, “You wanna go?” She laughed at my desperation, and told me I had to do it.

They called me in and the nurse led me straight to a chair that was placed next to my wife. For some reason I remember them telling me to just walk straight to the chair, and I did just that. As I walked, all I saw was the chair; I don’t think I even saw Celia. In my peripheral vision I saw machines soaked in blood. When I sat down I kissed my wife and told her everything’s going to be fine. “I’m here.” The room was very cold. A curtain set up a wall to keep me from seeing what they were doing to my wife.

The doctor walked us through what she was doing. She told Celia that she would feel a lot of tugging and pulling. When that tugging and pulling started, Celia’s face told me she did feel it, and I’m sure the numbness from the epidural made the tugging and pulling feel very awkward. Less than a minute later, we heard Brighton crying from the cold air of the room. As the doctor pulled him out, she said, “Oh, he’s biting me.”

Celia cried and said, “Oh, my baby.”

They brought our son to his own little cleaning receptacle. I watched him from about five feet away. He was purple and slimy. Squeezing my wife’s hand, I bent down and put my face against hers, feeling her wet cheeks. In her ear I whispered, “You’re awesome, baby. You did so well.” I stood up on my tip toes and looked over the curtain. I saw a sea of blood finding its way through small canals of a thick plastic bag-like covering. I couldn’t even see my wife’s body. I bent back down to see Celia. She said, “Where’s Brighton?”

“He’s fine, babe. They’re cleaning him up. I’m gonna go check him out.”
Brighton looked like an ugly little god. His head was coned. He was still a languid purple pigment. Spots of blood that the nurses missed during his clean up looked crusty. His face was swollen. All I could think was that babies really do look like little, old men—scary, little, old men.

The nurses wrapped him up in a blue blanket and brought him over to his mother. Neither of us could hold him at this point. Celia kissed him on the forehead and told him she loved him. It wasn’t long before Brighton became a normal looking baby. He was beyond normal. A head of black hair and a fat nose like his daddy’s, perfect lips like his momma’s.

The night of Brighton’s birth the nurses recommended we let him stay in the nursery while we just slept in the hospital room. My wife was reluctant to do this, of course. But when her mother said it was a good idea, Celia felt relieved; we slept that night with a whole new reel of dreams and fears in our minds.

There are moments that stick with me: Celia’s mother stayed with us for about a week to help out. Brighton wouldn’t stop crying one night. We were beyond delirious with exhaustion. Celia was standing in the kitchen, about a foot in front the open entrance to the next room. I was standing in front of her. Brighton had been crying for a while now, screaming, wailing. Celia started crying in a panic. In between gasps she said, “I don’t know what to do.”

Having raised three children of her own, Cyndi hugged her daughter, grabbing Brighton from her at the same time. “Okay, baby. You need to get some rest. Don’t get upset. It’s okay.” I just stood there, scared. The framed entrance to the living room from the kitchen became a film frame that I could only watch. My stomach hurt, and I felt helpless, too. Tired, hungry, miserable. Nothing was happy about this. I was afraid of so much more now.
Once my mother-in-law had Brighton, who was still crying, I reached in to hold Celia. She laid her head on my chest and calmed down. Cyndi said, “We just need to get some Mylicon. You know what Colic is? It’s just gas.” Of course, I was out the door in seconds. When I got back, Brighton had fallen asleep, but we were armed now. When colic came up again, the Mylicon didn’t work.

A week or so later, Celia’s mother had to go back to Houston. Celia cried when Cyndi left. Again, I just stood there, watching this moment. Every object around me (the piano, the ceiling fan, the TV) knew what it needed to do, but I had no idea. As my mother-in-law walked away, I had moved over to Celia. She hugged me after we closed the door. She started to cry again.

Taking Brighton on late night drives, putting him in his car seat and propping him on top of the running dryer, rocking him, and rocking him and rocking him; none of these strategies worked. Brighton was going to sleep when he felt like going to sleep. Every night at 2 AM he would wake up. I remember this because I would hold him or walk around the living room while a very strange irony glowed out of the TV: Most Evil. This show is a documentary series about a psychologist who came up with a scale that measures if a serial killer from history is truly evil or just plain nuts. Charles Manson came up evil, and I think Ted Bundy was evil too, but Dahmer and Gacey, just crazy.

Sometimes I would walk around the living room with Brighton in my arms. He wouldn’t let me sit down. I would walk at a fast pace through the house, humming a tune. Sometimes I even marched, pretending he was part of a Sousaphone. As Brighton would drift off to sleep, he would make a strange grumble. When I rocked him in my arms, his little noise had the vibrato of a remote control boat losing its battery power. If he reached any form of sleep, I had to gently sit
down on the sofa or he would wake up. That’s where I would sleep. Putting Brighton in his crib was not an option at this point. I didn’t mind sleeping on the sofa because he would sleep on my chest, I hoped we would share the same dream; besides, I knew he wouldn’t sleep on my chest as a sixteen-year-old.

The window that faces out from the front of my house was a good place to stand and sing to Brighton. I would look out across my lawn into the sleeping world. It’s extra quiet after two in the morning. Brighton’s eyes would stare up at me, and I would tell him about outside: the steady stars, the gibbous moon, the calm trees. One night I saw a black kitten walk across the grass. The kitten suddenly jumped about a foot into the air to land right back onto the grass with her front paws clapped together, trying to capture a late-night snack, a roach, a cricket. I don’t think she got it. This moment may have been given to me by God. This kitten was on her own; she knew how to survive; she knew how to become a cat. That’s why Brighton was in my arms. Celia and I had to teach him how to be on his own one day; how to survive; how to become a beautiful person.

I teach 11th and 12th grade at an all-boys private school, and whenever I talk to the parents of students who have already become wonderful people, I like to ask the parents how they did it. I want to know how they raised their son so well. Most people have the same answers: “We kept an eye on them. We listened. We beat them. We treated them like adults.” Some of these responses are helpful but hardly profound. Tonight I had the last parent-teacher conference of the school year. I had a mother come to me just to say hello. Her two sons are brilliant and adored young men. After we talked a bit about her sons, I asked the question. She blew my mind with her answer. It took a second. She actually stopped for a moment to think about her reply. She started, “I always told my children that I don’t want to raise happy kids. I
want them to be good. I just think happiness is overrated. You don’t want to look for happiness. If you’re a good person, peace will come.”

At first my son Brighton would snatch my glasses from my face. He probably saw my glasses as a black shiny bug that covered daddy’s face, staring back at him. Brighton would grab my glasses and throw them to the ground. He was fast. Sometimes he would try to put them on himself, placing the glasses over his head, the frames resting on the back of his neck. After that they would hit the ground. I thought about getting contacts, until something changed.

Now, when Brighton snatches my glasses from me he grabs them with a little grace. I don’t try to stop him now. He puts the glasses on the top of his nose, sometimes they’re upside down. I’m near sighted, so when Brighton runs off with my glasses, I’m blind. When I’m holding Brighton, I can see him as he takes my glasses from my face. Since he is in near sighted range, I can see him. He’s clearer, though. My smudged up lenses are not in the way. I am not looking through anything. There is no window to help me see. I see him with nothing in the way, and he glows. Again, I think of a film frame. Without my glasses, Brighton is in focus, and the background is soft and out of focus; he is all there is.
VITA

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He obtained his Bachelor’s degree in English with a minor in film studies from Loyola University in 2001. He joined the University of New Orleans creative writing graduate program to pursue an MFA in Film, Theatre and Communication Arts in 2007.