Five years ago, *The Peel* was established to provide Appalachian State University with a quality literature and arts review. The founders of this publication sought to provide an outlet for the overflowing creative talent in this community by exploring, distinguishing, and cultivating the imaginative enterprises of its members. As an organization that is directed by students and advised by faculty, we strive to honor this talent through a fair and meticulous review process.

Today, *The Peel* is more committed than ever to nurturing and celebrating our university’s vibrant and active creative community. We strongly believe that Appalachian students deserve a forum for evaluation and informed encouragement, as well as a platform for expressive excellence. Each year, I am personally impressed by the sophistication and imagination with which our contributors meet this call. It is my pleasure to announce this edition of *The Peel Literature and Arts Review*.

Laura Taylor
Editor-in-Chief

Each piece published herein reflects the views of its author or artist only.

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The night’s only illumination,  
a wild, swinging blaze above the calm waters.  
Light reflects off the face of Xuan Wu  
swirling in the water,  
playing with the currents,  
guiding the cormorant as it plunges deeply  
to the juiciest fish, attracted by the swaying glow.

The river spirit allows  
sustainment of each clan,  
father and child and mother,  
through every life cycle.

Attached to the fisherman  
is a conical hat, secured under his chin;  
So too is the grey, short-legged stork  
connected by fondness  
and a string about its neck.

The bird dives and snags an ayu  
and swims back toward the dingy,  
the ring around the fowl’s throat prevents swallowing.

Powerful strokes of muscles beneath  
water glossed black plumage  
return the fowl to its master,  
then offers up proudly its catch  
and awaits its reward of fish.

He moved his arm up,  
delicately tossing the ball  
to me, its spongy surface  
rotating in the air like  
the earth on its axis,  
rolling at a slight angle.

I stumbled forward  
with both arms outstretched,  
eyes intent on my prize,  
without a thought of using  
the Velcro glove fastened  
to my hand.

I made a scooping motion  
with both my arms, clutching  
them to my chest,  
trying to absorb  
the Mickey-Mouse-faced  
sphere into my heart:  
to make it a part of myself.

I missed.  
And the ball bounced  
on the grass  
with a soft  
thud.

The smiling face  
stared back at me,  
inviting me to pick it up.  
I squatted down and reached,  
feeling my clumsy hands  
squeeze the ball  
and then held it up  
like a Mayan offering a heart  
to the sun.

But my sacrifice wasn’t  
good enough.  
I had failed.  
So he walked away,  
and I never saw my father again.
“Pick out a prayer bead, or maybe several. Any ones you like. String them all together on a piece of cord, like the birds that congregate on high electrical wires.” The shoebox, offered up to me like a new kind of communion, held many mismatched beads together, reminding me of the homeless that sometimes gathered at my church on Tuesday nights, thankful for spaghetti and steepled sanctuaries holding out the unkind winds. The first color, blue, glass in diamond rays reacting to sunlight. Same way as street lamps refract against rain stained glass windows, without sun. Same way as evening stars flicker in the sky each, perhaps, molded by the Man himself somewhere; each a memoir detailing His prayers for us. I replaced the crucifix with a rosary.

I can see the specters of children: laughing, delighting in the gray ramshackle playgrounds of the broken, graffitied buildings that housed thousands of now-gone Balts. Hundreds of kilometers down dirt roads, the same spirits flit, dart, eluding the naked eye, through birch, through pine: birch blazing white and pine burning orange. Both rooted, bound, and browed by earth.

Stoic lean-tos shudder against every cold breeze, rekindling the rustic sense that permeates from green countryside to stormy-gray urbanity: a dusty photograph of dusty years.

Lift me, Father Time, and transplant me in the heart of my grandfather’s land.
This is thinking in the shower that life’s unfair
That you are somehow guilty
Because you know God wouldn’t fuck up –
and just thinking that you don’t really believe in God.
This is music from the old days, the shivering in your drafty room
and shrinking away from the closet, your clothes.
This is the hours just before sunrise
and the warmer, softer words
that escape your mouth
weaving and dipping
through the wrinkled folds of this disrupted bedspread.
It’s a fistful
of blankets
of hair
or just fists.

Watching small birds with my little brother
In the front yard, we sat on the grass
In the open and passed the binoculars
Back and forth between us while he used his
Wooden red train whistle like a birdcall.
October and the wind blowing
But the sun still near enough to make
The feathers on the back of a small bird
Glisten golden glinting gloss
Close to our eyes inside
The binoculars. We made a game of it
While my little sister laid her pink raincoat
Covered in bears on the grass and picked
And put rose petals in a pile on top
And called it “stew” and laughed,
And scared the small birds.
My brother invented names for the ones
He didn’t know, which were all of them,
And told me what they ate and which ones
Loved their moms and which ones
Had children or enemies, and which ones
Fought battles and which ones
Liked French fries and which ones were famous and why.
We would laugh because we felt silly,
And scare the small birds, then feel guilty.
And we all pretended to eat my sister’s stew
Of sand and petals and leaves I shredded,
All crushed with rocks by my little brother
And stirred together by my little sister
And watched by the small birds.
We ate it all up by tossing handfuls over our
Shoulders, then threw the remains on the road
And went walking around the field.
We are going to live up in a room together
In some tall building in the city,
Surrounded by trees and dragons.
We are going on an adventure,
Past iron gates and paved pathways,
Pulling along our strings of light.
We are going to hold hands in a dream,
Repeating it in spirals throughout our lives,
Letting it reverberate into our bones.
We are going to sing softly into the cold air,
Lying next to one another blowing smoke,
Tickling and laughing.
We are going to memorize one another,
Taking photograph after photograph,
Telephoning it to the world.
We are going to read between shelves,
Holding out our fingers to untouched pages,
Hoping to escape.
We are going to sleep in bed together,
Marrying our skin hip to hip,
With me on the right and you on the left.
We are going to.

What I heard on the radio
Imperial troopers
Drums reporting
Odd ritualistic performances
“Putin’s Army”
Unrest in Syria
At 3 a.m.
Pythons help with heart disease
On the radio
An author promoting a book;
The sequel to Pride and Prejudice
“Melancholia”
A movie about depression and human interaction
After the BBC is done reporting there is jazz
Sweet and smoky;
melodic interpretations that dance on the air waves
tickling piano keys
Back to news:
Arab League Abandons their Mission
Eurozone Crisis, Debt in America
Do you remember the way
the basement of the old house smelled
the first time we slept in that old, rickety bed,
those metal posts burrowing into the plaster
walls behind us like we
burrowed underneath the covers,
my nose like a cold grape,
pressed firmly into the warm cushion
of your cheek?

It was like turning metal, old snuff,
broken umbrellas and the garage sales
your grandpa used to go to
every Saturday morning,
the kerosene heating unit he installed in the old fireplace
at the other end of the room for cold nights.
The heat never could penetrate those stacks of antiques
your grandmother crowded along the shelves
of the floor to ceiling bookcase
that separated our bedroom from the kitchenette
and the old recliners that sat next to our dining room card-table.

We were so young that
pockets of air still held the lingering,
stinging smell of the mason jars
full of smashed grapes,
water and fermenting yeast,
twenty years old,
that Pap kept tucked under sink cabinets
and behind the curtain on the bathroom window sill.

Fifteen years and your grandpa’s death later,
we emptied all of those jars out for cabinet space
when we moved upstairs.
Remember how we had to open up all of the windows
just to get rid of the smell?
You tasted some from the first jar
and it was better than you expected,
but only because you still missed him.
Rachel Ballard | Wood Whispers
Plaster & Wood

Lisa Gigioli | Breathe
Digital Photography

Jessica Harris | Frozen Whispers
Digital Photography
Betty Caulkins | **The Old Man**
Original Photograph by Marc L’Esperance, Pen & Ink

Zen Du | **Untitled**
Latex Paint, Charcoal & Gouache

Nina Montalto | **Strangers**
Digital Photography
Holden Miller had known Danny since their daddies got locked up together back in ‘89. It was after a barroom scuffle over a woman, a southern belle named Rita that was shaking her ass on the dance floor over at a place called The Round-Up. Nobody remembered who had started the fight, only that when the flashing lights showed up outside the honky-tonk, both Roger Miller and Daniel Caudill Senior were on the floor in a heap of blood, booze, and broken glass.

Holden and Danny didn’t become friends until about twelve years later, when they were both trying to get acquainted with what Allison Ellis had hidden up her tiny little skirt. That had been in high school, before Danny dropped out, and right around the time Holden was finagling for his first car. Neither one ever figured out what Allison came equipped with, but shortly after, Danny Caudill found his daddy’s stash of weed hidden in a sock drawer. He had been looking for money to buy a couple malt liquors from the Amoco station down the road, the one that never carded. He had been too excited about his find to ever purchase those forties.

Danny could smile bigger than anyone back then. He got his whole face into it. His blue eyes squinted up, brow wrinkled. A blind man could count his teeth. Holden could still remember that face. It had been about ten years since Danny—then nothing more than a shaggy haired boy—came knocking on Holden’s door, holding the bag of weed he copped off his daddy.

A lot had changed since then.

“Listen to them,” said Danny. “Just going on and on, don’t give no never mind to what’s around them. Just keep on making that noise.”


“That what they called?” said Danny. “Shit, I always thought they’s called jar flies.”

“Yeah,” said Holden. “My grandma used to call them that. Course, she also called skunks polecats.”

“Shit,” said Danny, laughing without moving his lips. “It’s hazardous to everything else.”

Holden looked over at him. Danny was staring off into the night, his head back against the rocker. He had the same shaggy mess of raven hair he had back when they were kids, down jagged in his eyes. The tattoos had come later—blues, greens and blacks mixed down his arms—and of course, there was the addiction. The aching that started like a snowball and changed into a boulder somewhere along the down-slope of his life. He still looked young, like a teenager with a haggard face. So much different from Holden, who had grown into a man, gray eyed and quiet most of the time. A man who didn’t reveal thoughts with a wrinkle of a brow or the twinge of a lip.

“Hey, you remember that time you, me, and Owen Jennings went down to that holy roller church out in McGrady?” said Holden, taking the joint from Danny. “The one Owen’s old man went to? Remember?” He waited, when Danny didn’t say anything, he said, “Yeah, we found out the preacher met this big boned bitch on the internet and was fucking her behind his wife’s back. Remember that? Come on, you got to remember that.” Danny seemed to be listening to the hum of the insects. “So we found this sweat-hog’s picture online, printed out flyers and stapled them up on the outside of the church. Remember? They said, ‘Lost’ with a big picture of her in the middle, and said, ‘Last seen taking it up the ass from Preacher Frankie Wood.’ Remember that? Then we busted inside, they were all in there dancing around and whooping and hollering, and we shouted—”

Danny seemed to smile, as if he remembered. Holden waited, hoping there was a flash. But Danny said nothing. He took the joint from Holden when he passed it back, brought it to his lips and puffed, but he said nothing.

“We busted in, called the preacher a pig fucker and ran away,” said Holden, flat and monotone. “I can’t believe you forgot that, Danny.”

“I’m thirsty,” said Danny. “You think there’s anything in the house to drink?”


The house reminded Holden of where his great-grandparents used to live. Mostly because of the tin roof. Of all the things he hated about the country, tin-roofed houses were never counted among them. There was nothing more peaceful than sitting beneath a tin roof when it rained. But it wasn’t raining that night.

“You know, if they knew what was going on in this house,” said Danny, bringing a joint to his lips and taking the smoke slowly. “They’d probably just move right along.”

Holden could feel it on his skin, the stuff cooking in the basement. Yellow and vile. making his jaw clench. He took a breath of the country air, cleansing himself, listening to the sounds of the forest, and said, “You think it’s hazardous to the health of cicadas?”

Holden couldn’t help but smile.

“Shit,” said Danny. “It’s hazardous to everything else.”

Holden Miller had known Danny since their daddies got locked up together back in ‘89.
Danny didn’t say anything.

“Don’t get up,” said Holden, sighing. “I’ll get us some beer.”

Holden walked inside. The air inside the house was stale and offensive. There was bad lighting, bulbs flickering over the green linoleum floors, tabletops and counters cluttered with beer cans, dirty ashtrays and leftover food. Then there was that smell, that underlying odor that followed him no matter where in the house he was. The smell that clung to his clothes and got stuck in his hair. Smelled like cat piss in a chemical closet.

Holden fished through the refrigerator—mostly empty—and found a half spent case of Busch pushed to the back on the bottom shelf. He grabbed two and walked outside again, greeted by the fresh night air, and the music of the cicadas. He handed Danny his beer, waiting for him to notice it, and then sat down again.

As Holden cracked his beer can, he heard an odd noise, and had to look up. Danny was laughing about something, still looking off into the darkness.

“Owen Jennings,” Danny said, as if it had just clicked in his head. “How old is that boy now? Seventeen? Eighteen? He was there when that cop busted us for skateboarding. He ran like a motherfucker, too. Sure was funny.”

“He’s twenty six, Danny,” said Holden. “Just like us. Remember? We went to high school together.”

“Yeah,” said Danny. “Wonder how he is.”

“I guess you haven’t heard.”

“What’s happened to him?” said Danny, still not looking over. “Something happen to him?”

“No, not to him. You remember his sister? Tasha?”

Danny shook his head, barely.

“She was about two years younger than us in school. Real pretty girl, redheaded. Freckles on her nose. Filled out pretty nice too, from what I remember.”

“I guess you haven’t heard.”

“She was about two years younger than us in school. Real pretty girl, redheaded. Freckles on her nose. Filled out pretty nice too, from what I remember.”

“She died,” said Danny. “I heard she died.”

“Yeah,” said Danny. “How is she?”

“He’s about a week ago,” Holden said. “Upgraded to heroin and didn’t know how to handle her shit.”

There was a quiet between them, filled with the roar of the cicadas. Danny absently sipping at his beer, staring off at nothing. A slight breeze rolled through the trees, making the branches sway. It brought gooseflesh to Holden’s bare arms, and made him forget about the knot in his stomach for only a moment.

Danny was picking at a circular scab in the crook of his arm. A needle puncture.

“You don’t remember ever shooting up with Owen’s little sister?” said Holden. “Maybe how you got that scab on your arm?”

Danny sipped at his beer.

“You think we going go to Hell when we die?” said Danny.

Holden had to stop a minute, wondering if Danny could sense it. Wondering if he had heard about Tracy, about what happened the night before. Wondering if he knew why Holden was here. Danny acted slow most of the time, too high to comprehend a lot of things. Like his mind was swimming in a vat of ooze, like everything had become slow motion for him. But he had flashes. Epiphanies. Like a light bulb attached to a camera, they flashed quick and burnt out.

“There ain’t no Hell,” said Holden. “Only life.”

Danny puffed at the joint, seemed to smile, and said, “What we do? What’s in that house? Maybe this is Hell.”

“Maybe,” Danny, he said. “Maybe.”

II.

Tracy Marie Griffin had spent her afternoon swinging the pendulum. She started out when the afternoon was young, breaking up two Oxycodone pills and snorting them down. They’d mellow her out, make her feel real good, but gave her the energy to clean her momma’s house. Making her feel useful while her mom was away in rehab. She’d clean a few hours, feeling good, waiting for the feeling to wane, then she’d go to her closet—she kept her favorite piece there, a pink blown-glass bowl she called “Gorgeous” and she’d pack it full of top-shelf green. She’d smoke until it brought her down again, make her feel sexy, make her ready for company.

She had been a pretty girl back when she was young—still was, depending on how you looked at it. A blonde girl, aged faster than the years had taken hold. Skinny but with a gut that couldn’t be hidden. Bruises down her arms and legs, purple on milky skin, scabs in the crooks of her elbows. Blue veins lined the way, like dead roads, up and down her arms. But she still had her eyes, her favorite feature, bright and green. And her curves hadn’t completely left her, either. They were still there, just broken up by the lump of her tummy.

By the time Tommy, Erica, and Johnny Boy showed up that night, she had rinsed and repeated—swung the pendulum—twice. She was glass-eyed and toasted, feeling the lines of her body like they belonged to someone else, someone prettier. Her hands on her arms, then on her legs, caressing her stomach. She liked the sensation of being touched, she could feel little sparks of energy jump from her fingertips to her bare skin. Sometimes, when she couldn’t find company, and when Tommy didn’t feel like fucking that night, she’d just lie in bed and masturbate. Liking
the way it felt to simply feel anything anymore.

Tommy showed up with a case of Coors, his greasy brown hair down to his shoulders, hadn't shaved in a week. He laid the beer on the coffee table in front of the ratty couch, where Tracy was sprawled out, and went straight for the weed. She was lying in Tommy's arms when Erica and Johnny Boy showed up, both already blitzed off something that made them giggle a lot.

"Should we wait for Corey to start?" said Erica, a pudgy girl with pimples well into her twenties. Tracy smiled at her, eyeing her curling ruddy locks, her scabby lips. Erica was already unrolling another bag of weed when Johnny Boy brought out a bubbler. "He still coming, ain't he?"

"F*ck Corey," said Johnny Boy, a skinhead with bad tattoos. A man who hadn't worn sleeves on a shirt since he was a boy. "You know how he is. Specially now he's all blitzed on ludes. Sits around on his grandmā's couch and watches porn all day. Don't never get out."'

"Yeah," said Tommy, taking a hit off Gorgeous and slowly releasing the smoke. "Corey ain't going to show up. He owes me money. Never shows up when he's got a debt."

"Hey, Trace. What about your boy?" said Johnny, popping the top of a Coors can. "He bringing the good shit?"

Tracy's eyes felt heavy, she was resting her head in the palm of her hand. The room was starting to spin, but she didn't mind it. She said, "Texted him earlier. Said he'd be by later." She shrugged. "That was a couple hours ago."

"Shit," said Tommy, sliding down in the floor, sitting at Tracy's feet. Johnny Boy and Erica had plopped down on the carpet, on the other side of the table. "Can't rely on nobody these days."

They went on that way, as time sped up and slowed down, talking about people they knew and things they heard. Things that were important to them. Johnny Boy had been fired from the window at Bojangles, he'd been working there for a better part of four months, said his stepdad was going to boot him out of the house for sure. Said fuck it, Erica'd take him in until he got on his feet. At some point in time, somebody put the Postal Service on the stereo, nobody really remembered who did it. The song playing some mellow electronic beat. The song called "We Will Become Silhouettes."

"Hey, you hear about Mark?" said Johnny Boy, taking a break from the bubbler. "Got busted last week. Passed out in his car on the side of the road with the goddamn needle still stuck in his arm. That dumb shit, don't know how to handle."

"Yeah, I heard about that," said Tommy. "I heard the cop had to bust a window just to wake him up. Woke up and said, 'Who the f*ck are you? Why are you in my room?' Fucking burn out, man."

Erica said, "You know he stole eighty bucks from beneath his grandmā's mattress about two weeks ago? My momma works with his aunt down at the hospital. Told me all about it. She said Mark's grandma was asleep in a recliner, watching Jeopardy. Didn't know nothing about it until she was going to go buy some bread. Couldn't find her money, thought she misplaced it. She's eighty one years old. His grandma. She forgets things."

"That f*cking idiot rolls up about two days later," said Johnny Boy. "He was high as a kite. I knew it too, cause my cousin lives right across the street from Mark's grandmā. Said that old Buick that Mark drives nearly took out his hedges."

"Where you think that money went, huh?" Erica said. "Joey hadn't had the cash to shoot up in two months."

"Right into his fucking arm," said Johnny Boy. "You better believe."

"Remember somebody broke into that Ruritan Club down Myrtie Road a couple weeks back?" said Tracy, a Coors can in her hand. "Heard that was him. Looking for money, but there weren't none inside. Stole a few pictures off the wall, and there was some awards in a display--he took them, too. Don't think he got no money out of them, though."

"Dumbass," said Johnny Boy. "If he wants to do it big, break into a church. You find where they keep their stash--you know, for rebuilding steeples or some shit? You can make out like a f*cking bandit, you better believe. How much you think people pay them every Sunday? Just so they don't feel bad Monday morning. That's where it's at, I'm telling you."

"Come on, now. You know they don't keep that mess in the church," said Erica. "I bet they deposit it or something."

"On a Sunday?" said Johnny Boy. "Honey, what bank you know stays open on a Sunday? Use your head, woman. Break into that shit Sunday night, there'll be a pile of money somewhere."

"Tommy said, "I bet somebody takes it home with them. Nobody's stupid enough to leave money just laying around like that."

"You'd be surprised how stupid people are," said Johnny Boy. "Look at Mark."

"Amen to that," said Tracy, throwing back the rest of her beer. Tracy listened to them go on like that, waiting, until the knock came at the door at around one thirty in the morning. The one she had been waiting for all night. Her legs were stiff from not budging form the couch in over an hour, little needles pricked her as she stood, bounding towards the door like a ballerina on the stage. A smile was on her face. She grabbed the door handle, straightening her high school t-shirt over her sweatpants, and opened the door wide.

"Hey, Danny," she said, hugging him around the neck and kissing his cheek. 'Thought you'd never show.'
Danny Caudill stood in the dark, on the outside, shaggy hair in his eyes, in a black t-shirt advertising a metal band. His eyes were heavy, and he was swaying noticeably when she let him go. He offered her a smile, a lip ring tucked in the corner of his mouth.

“You bring it?” she said.

He held out the bag, filled with white powder.

“You got the money?” he said, his words dull and slurred.

“Yeah,” she said, shoving a hand into her pocket and bringing out a wad of cash. Dry and wrinkled, smaller bills. “Most of it.”

“Most of it?” he said, letting the bag go limp at his side. “Honey, I ain’t running no charity.”

“Yo, Danny,” said Tommy, repacking Gorgeous. “Why don’t you come in here and hit this shit?”

Tracy looked back at Tommy with drooping eyes, smiled, and said, “I’ll be right back.”

She shut the door behind her, disappearing into the dark with Danny. She was gone for about a half hour, but when she got back, no one seemed to notice she was ever gone. The living room of the small house—no bigger than a single wide—was filled up with smoke, and some other song that nobody really recognized droned away on the stereo.

They took notice of her when she held out the full bag of cocaine, her face flushed, her blond hair disheveled. But no one really seemed to care about that, not even Tommy. She got the coke, she came through. And they were smiling at her. She smiled back at them, giddy, running back to the couch and laying the bag on the coffee table. Having to slide spent beer cans out of the way to make room. She got a razor from the bathroom and started divvying out lines.

Everybody seemed excited, focused, no longer talking and caring little about anything else going on in the room.

Tommy was the only one not to snort a line. He didn’t snort, it made his nose bleed. He preferred to smoke rocks, stick needles in his arm. He shied away from anything that went up his nose. He watched the rest partake, diving head first towards the table with handmade straws, and coming up with flittering eyelids.

“Goddamn,” said Johnny Boy, closing a nostril and sucking down the remnants clinging to his sinus cavity. “That is good shit.”

They all finished their lines, and Tracy waited for it to take effect. She felt her heart begin to flutter, begin to beat like a war drum. At one point in time, she thought she was going to scream, but didn’t. The music began to irritate her, too much stimulus, too much going on. Why wouldn’t they all be quiet for a minute? Just for a fucking minute? She wanted to go outside and take the air, her veins burned with life. Her heart beat faster.

Then it began to hurt.

III.

“I thought about skateboarding again,” said Danny, rocking on the porch, smoking a cigarette. “Last time I got on a board, I fell and sprained my ankle. Just rolling it on asphalt. Hadn’t done it since.”

“You’re too fucked up, man.”

“I was fucked up before.”

“Yeah,” said Holden, lighting up his own cigarette and sucking in the smoke. “But not like this.”

There was another quiet, Danny seemed unable to refute the point. He smoked his cigarette and listened to the cicadas. Rocking back and forth. Holden watched him, taking pity on him. A man who was once a boy with a bright future. No longer.

“I don’t think I want to do this no more,” said Danny, his eyes opening just a little, as if a flash bulb had gone off again. “I mean, who we really helping? Ain’t no future in this. Make a little money, buy more drugs. Cooking shit in the basement, cutting shit in the kitchen. You know, I heard that shit’s getting passed around in elementary schools now. You believe that shit? You remember elementary school? What we did? Shit, most trouble we ever got in was dropping cherry bombs in toilets. Now they using needles. It’s a fucked up world, man.”

“You know,” said Holden, smoking, “there used to be jobs around here. Lots of them. People didn’t have any problem finding work when work was needed. Everybody left us. Just the nature of it, I guess. Textiles and factories couldn’t make money, labor got shipped overseas. My daddy made mirrors all his life, one of the biggest factories in the nation. Went under. Lost his job.”

“Yeah?” said Danny.

“Nobody cares about us, Danny. We make our own way.”

“But is this it?”

“Jobs left,” shrugged Holden, “meth houses took their spot. Guarantee, go down any dirt road in the county, there’d be at least one.”

“I don’t want to cook meth no more,” said Danny. “I don’t feel good no more.”

“Then stick to cutting the coke,” said Holden. “You do still cut the coke, don’t you, Danny? That’s pure shit we get down from Miami. Pure fucking shit. If you don’t cut it, man—bad things can happen.”
“They go on like that all night,” said Danny, listening to the cicadas, smiling. The flash bulb had dimmed once again. “Just chirping away.”

Holden sighed. He thought he had him for a moment, the real Danny. Then he was gone again. Holden might never truly understand how it went down that night. What exactly Danny had done. Maybe that was for the best.

“It’s getting chilly,” said Holden. “I’m going to go grab a jacket from my car. You good?”

“Yeah,” said Danny, staring off at the trees. “I’m good.”

Holden could see Danny still, as he walked towards his car. Danny sitting there rocking, listening to nature’s cacophony. At one point in time, Holden thought he could see a tear in Danny’s eye, but maybe that was just the glaze from the drugs. He heard Danny say, maybe to nobody, “Don’t remember a time when the jar flies was so loud. Like they don’t care who hears them. Could be anybody out here. Don’t matter, the jar flies still sing.”

“They do,” said Holden, coming back with a light gray jacket wrapped around his shoulders. His hands were dug deep into his coat pockets. Sitting back down on the rocker, Holden said, “Remember when we were talking about Owen Jennings a few minutes ago?”

Danny didn’t say anything.

Yeah, said Holden. “Well, since we talking about people and all, you remember Tracy Griffin? Went to high school with us? Used to run with us for a little while. Pretty girl, blond hair?”

Danny thought about it a minute and said, “Yeah. Saw her about a week ago.”

“It was last night, Danny.”

Was it? he said, staring off. “Shit.”

“Hear about her?”

“No,” said Danny, not turning his head. “What happened?”

“She died, last night,” said Holden. “Hit some heavy shit, her heart couldn’t take it.”

“Two other people were hospitalized. Johnny Brooks and Erica Wagoner. Remember them, Danny? We went to high school with them.”

“No,” he said.

“Yeah, they ain’t looking so good,” Holden said. “But there was one other person there that night, Danny. Boy named Tommy Faw. Went to high school with him, too. He’s alright, apparently didn’t snort none of it. Police got hold of him now, I think they want to know where they got the shit from. What do you think, Danny?”

Danny didn’t say anything, just kept listening to the cicadas.

“How many people you sell to last night, Danny?”

“Huh?” he said, maybe looking over, Holden couldn’t tell.

“I said, how many people did you sell that shit to? You sure you cut it?”

“That’s a hell of a way to go,” said Danny, dreaming about something, “I wouldn’t want to go that way.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Holden, standing to his feet. “You won’t.”

He pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket and shot Danny in the head.

IV.

Holden paused for a moment, wiping the sweat from his brow. The hole was almost filled, a dark patch of earth about the size of a full grown man. Beneath the soil, Danny was no longer troubled.

Holden, never much for religion, said a few words beneath his breath and tossed the last few piles of dirt onto the grave. As he thrust the blade of the shovel into the dirt and rested his elbows upon it, he noticed his ears were ringing. No, he thought. That’s not right. It was the cicadas. Danny had been right, he never remembered a time they had been so loud.

“Jar flies,” he said, chuckling despite himself. The woods were infested with them.

Holden gathered the last of the lime, throwing the shovel over his shoulder, and tried to follow his path back out of the woods. He was guided by the moon, ambling lightly back to the house. It took him almost an hour to get back to the house, where the old tin roof reflected the moon through patches of rust and decay. He could smell the meth still cooking in the basement, could smell it for miles. He had dragged Danny through the woods until he didn’t smell it anymore, and that’s where he had buried him.
Holden tossed the lime and his shovel in the back of his trunk, next to the suitcase he had packed. He didn’t know where he was headed or who would take him, but he had to go. He remembered one time Danny mentioned the Grand Canyon, how he’d like to see it one day. Maybe Holden would go there.

Holden climbed in and started the engine, his cracked and bleeding hands resting on the wheel of the old Chevy Nova that was new back in ’73. It used to be his daddy’s. Holden backed it out of the driveway, and took it out onto the country roads.

The cicadas still sang, but nobody listened.
The Writer watches as the light from the building and the light from the sun melt and dance across the Doctor’s face. The light casts his features in stone, his smile frozen in the twin lights of the morning. A thought flashes through the Writer’s mind, lightning on a dry plain, and catches fire. A thought he fights to deny, and fails.

“Okay, I’m really going to be late now.” The Woman moves quickly her shoes rapping out a frenzied pace. The Writer shakes the thoughts out of his head and jogs to catch up with her. They walk in silence, a silence with a history, moving down the same old roads. They had been together before they had met the Doctor, long enough to know what is being said when it is quiet.

Her clipping shoes say, “We should have left earlier. I hate being late.”

His swishing coat replies, “I’m sorry. You will do fine. I’m here for you.”

Her swirling hair snaps, “Stop it. Stop saying that you are here for me and actually be there. Stop forgetting about me.” Her wrinkled brow adds, “It’s not the same. Everything is changing. It’s your fault.”

His gray eyes quietly say, “I’m sorry. I’m trying. Please.”

The Writer drifts beside her. He knows she is unhappy with him, some petty fight that remains unresolved. A shirt left on the back of a chair, a late light bill, a broken plate: something he is responsible for, these things he has done while they work and he writes. “Get a real job,” she has said to him before, the first crack in their relationship. He knows she thinks what he does is easy, that he is lazy for not writing more. Secretly, when the others are sleeping and he is awake worrying and writing, he hates her for it.

“Ok.” The Woman stops at the foot of a stone staircase. Behind her the Writer studies his red plaid shoes. “Wish me luck.” She doesn’t ask him, she tells him to. “Luck,” he says. He does wish her well. He loves her enough to give her that, even when he hates her.

“Hey.” The Woman has moved to the top of the first step. She smiles at him and he remembers what they once were. He moves without thinking, stepping into her arms and kissing her. She pulls away from him and laughs, that same sunny laugh. Her smile touches her eyes and she kisses him again. He pulls away first, taking half a step back to look at her. Her hands rest on his shoulders, her eyes level with his. “I love you,” she almost whispers. “I know,” he gently kisses her cheek and turns away from her.

“See you tonight.” His steps carry him back the way he came, down those same old roads.

She watches him go until he turns a corner and is gone. She stays standing on the step, seconds sliding into minutes as she stares. She is going to be late, but she still she stares. She wants him to come back, to come running around the corner and take her up in his arms like he once had. She wants him to come back and tell her that it’s only her, that he only needs her to be happy.

The Writer rubs his eyes, his glasses floating above his head on a wave of curly blonde hair. His computer glares back at him, challenging him to try again. He has been writing since he left the other two, a handful of pages, a hundred lives rising and falling at his fingertips. He rereads, deletes, adds, transforms, and adjusts anything to make the pieces fit. He stops, satisfied for the moment. He stands and moves through the apartment. The gray light of the morning had been burnt away by an orange autumn sun, the same sun now sinking behind the buildings of the city. The Writer drags his bare feet across the cool wood floors as he walks, aimlessly back and forth.

He smiles as he lets his fingertips glide across the countertop, his eyes falling on the clock. Ten minutes. They will be home anytime now. He begins to cook, letting habit guide his hands while his mind counted the moments to their arrival.

As he cooks the door swings open and the Doctor and the Woman step in laughing. The Writer spins towards them smiling. They chatter and catch up, their words meaningless, the feelings and smiles all that matter. They eat and laugh, their lives spilling out and over each other, binding them together. Dinner ends, plates and leftover disappearing into bins and cupboards.

The Doctor moves to the open computer, the Writer’s work left open and begins to read. The Doctor moves behind him, places he hands on his shoulders and waits. The Doctor’s eye move slowly, reading each word carefully reconstructing what the Writer has built on the page piece by piece in his mind. The Woman notices and quietly watches, waiting for the blow up, waiting for a fight, hoping.

The Doctor finishes the page and thinks. He rereads a line here and phrase there. “It’s good, but…”

The Woman smiles and turns away to hide it. She loses the Doctor’s words as she steps down the hall and into her room. She is grateful for her own space for once, grateful that she can nurse her feelings in the dark.

The Doctor continues to speak, declaring his likes and dislike of the work before him. His words are kind, he wishes to help.

The Writer smiles as he listens. He understands that what is being said is not meant to hurt him, that he is being told what he lacks because he is loved. “Thank you.” He nudges the Doctor out
of his chair and begins to change things, change his world to the Doctor's suggestions.

The Doctor moves to his office. He opens a notebook and begins writing, notes from work being rewritten into a clearer hand. His pen moves quickly and surely never missing a stroke.

There is a knock at his office door. The Doctor looks up to see the Writer standing in the doorway. The Writer stands with his hands in the pockets of his pajamas, his eyebrows drawn together. He pulls his right hand out of his pocket, his thumb and first two fingers stained with ink. He brings his index finger and thumb together twice quickly, as if he were using chopsticks. He does it again. The Doctor's eyebrows rise in reply, he does not understand.

"My pen. " The Writer brings his fingers together and hold them still, waiting.

"Oh, of course. " The Doctor brings his hand to his pocket. He looks down to realize his pocket remains in his jacket. He stands and steps quickly to the door, reaching out with a steady hand to pull his jacket off the hook. He pats the pockets. He looks inside and pats it again.

The Writer begins to pace. He needs that pen. That pen that inked out his first story, the pen that earned him his first paycheck, the pen that made him a writer.

The Doctor has moved to check his desk, his pants pockets, he checks everywhere searching.

"You lost it?"

"No."

"Where is it?"

"I'm looking, just hold on."

"You lost it."

"You know what that pen means to me and you lost it. " The Writer stares, his face blank, his eyes glazed unseeing. He backs out of the room, a shadow.

The Doctor, unsure if he should follow or continue his search, slumps down on his heels. He sighs, his hand coming up to massage his temples. He tugs at his hair with his hands. "What did I do?"

The Writer moves through the apartment slumped and hollow. He trusted him and he was let down. He gave him a piece of himself, an actual physical piece of himself and it was lost, cast off as if it were nothing. He feels broken, his trust shattered. He knew it was just a pen, but at the same time it is more than that, a symbol of himself and his craft.

"No. " He shakes his head. It is just a pen, but in his secret heart he knew it wasn't. He forces himself to turn around, to go back to the Doctor's room. "It's fine, it's just a pen. " He repeats the lie. Makes it the truth, a puzzle piece that doesn't quite fit forced into place. He believes it.

The Doctor sighs again, apologizing profusely. He takes the Writer's hands into his and kisses them, one finger at a time. He notices the ink on the Writer's fingers, kissing the tips of those stained with the ink from a second rate pen. He promises to buy a replacement, to make it right.

The Writer smiles, accepting the apology. He forgives the Doctor for his offence, he values his love for him more than his pen. He tries to forget it happened, he accepts the idea of a new pen with grace, but in his secret heart he remembers.

* * *

The Woman lays in the dark, thinking. She tosses and turns, her thoughts poking and prodding her. She sits up, her eyes straining in the dark and glances at the door. A crack of light under the door signifies the others are still awake, still out there, still together.

Her chin wrinkles as she slides out of bed. Her hands move with practiced ease to the knob, the lock clicks with a deft flick of her thumb. She stands with her back against the door, the cool wood on her back, a cool flood of relief on her heated mind.

In the dark her fingers find the light switch. After a moment of wincing pain she sees again. Her coat lies draped over her desk, she glares at it. She takes three quick steps to it, her hands clenched tightly at her sides.

With trembling fingers she slides her hand into a pocket. Her fingers brush against something cool and metal. She clutches it in her hand and removes it slowly, cautiously, from the deep pocket.

The light catches the object in her hand, a silver pen glows in the harsh light. It was easy enough to take, she did so impulsively rashly. She hates herself for it, but it had to be done.

She has created a crack between them. One single splintering piece of truth that could end things. She hopes, she hates that she hopes for such a thing.

The pen spins slowly in her hands, silver arcs of light dance and shift along the walls and ceiling of her room. She stares hard at the pen, decided that it must be done and slips the pen back into her pocket.
The blue haired crone glared at me over her rhinestone studded glasses. She sucked her teeth suspiciously while I searched the binder for a price check. The binder, held together by three strips of ancient, crumbling duct tape, threatened to explode with every page I turned. The yellowed receipts, vendor lists, and inventory sheets were so softened and faded they couldn’t menace the fastest fingers with paper cuts anymore. I could feel her cold eyes, which never left my face, searching for confirmation that she was being overcharged. Little did she know there was no price list in this binder, there was no price list anywhere in this entire building; never had been, never would be. Our vendors determined their own prices arbitrarily and could change them on a whim.

“She’s sorry,” I said. “There doesn’t seem to be a price listed on here for that...item.” The hesitation was because I didn’t know what she was holding. It could have been anything: a plastic, yellowed soap dish, a mottled smoke-smudged ashtray, a flat and melted butter dish, only the vendor would know for sure. I tried not to sigh as I stepped out from behind the counter and took the ‘item’ from the wizened old woman, trying not to stare at her rattly, stained cardigan, buttoned to the throat, and her home-knit beret. Flipping over the warped plastic I looked at the bottom for the vendor number. 73. Mrs. Gray-Whitney. Serves Mrs. Gray-Whitney right, I thought as the teeth-sucker continued to practice her pastime, shuffling behind me towards the vendor tables in the back. We squeezed around a scuffed armoire and under a hand-painted sign that said “Tie your Wagons Here”. We meandered through a maze of rejected kitchen items, rusted farm implements corralled in musty wine barrels, racks of stained and mended “vintage” clothes that had been discovered in attics and basements, displays of gaudy costume jewelry your spinster great aunt who everyone was secretly afraid of may have worn, and pushed our way through hoards of people arguing, bartering, and touching things with little gasps of reverence and awe. This wasn’t anything new; after all, it was a Saturday at the Mecca of Junk.

Saturday, the day little old ladies with blue hair dragged their small, yapping dogs up and down the aisles looking at things they had all probably owned at one point in their lives but were now about to spend their social security checks on. The day fat, bald men with loud shorts and cameras around their necks listened to a million piercing screams from their tall, gratingly different from mine so maybe you can get him his own booth?”

Not that I should be complaining. As a student I knew I was lucky to have even found a job in this town but things always sound better before you get involved. I mean nine dollars an hour plus discounts seemed like a great deal before I realized the kind of people I would be dealing with... or the stuff that was being discounted. I know, I know it’s an antique shop for goodness sake, what kind of stuff did I think they would be selling. But the truth is I did it for the books. I always do it for the books. In my mind an antique shop is crowded with glassware, dishes, pottery, other random cast-off items, and shelves and shelves of books. Books that never give you a paper cut, that soothe your soul and make you forget that your professors hate you and you don’t have a boyfriend. I mean, what is wrong with me? I have a dog, I’m semi-athletic. I don’t sweat a lot, have a weird deformity, or even have very high standards. Why can’t someone find me attractive or give me a passing grade on a quiz? I was going to have to face the facts; my scholastic career, my job, and my life were pretty sucky and there wasn’t much that could help me escape; escape school, finances, reality and....

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“Excuse me, miss?”

The tooth-sucker was back and, once again, I was threading my way through the crowds, heading for Enid’s table. She was one of the few vendors that rented space in our building that I actually liked. She sold real antiques, not just yard-sale rejects that had been dropped a few too many times and were now being passed off as authentic objects. Enid, like her merchandise, was the real deal.

As we reached the table, she glanced over at me and the old man standing with her looked over too. He looked like he could have been her brother; same I-cut-it-myself bowl haircut (though the top of his bowl seemed to be missing), same Polish nose and bushy dark eyebrows that didn’t match the rest of their eager faces, same laugh lines and perennial bright smile. He was gesturing emphatically toward a cracked, leather satchel at his feet and Enid was smiling and nodding. He could have been threatening to kill her and put her in the satchel and she still would have been smiling and nodding.

“Just the lady I was hoping to see,” Enid said, deftly taking the hideous (but signed) gravy bowl from my hand and turning her bright whites on the crone behind me. “This is my cousin, Bernard. He just came to the US a few weeks ago. He was staying with our family in Pennsylvania but as you can well imagine, a few weeks was long enough and he’s with me now. Just for the summer. He has a few little bits and pieces he wants to sell but his trinkets are pretty different from mine so maybe you can get him his own booth?”

Letting out a sigh I told Bernard to follow me to the front desk and I would see if there were any vacancies available. He smiled and nodded and stayed right where he was. Rolling my eyes, I grabbed the edge of his sleeve and hauled him a few steps forward. Smiling and nodding some more, he marched after me to the front desk where we kept track of table vacancies and renters contact information. He stood to the side of the register while I looked through the binders and rang up the odd paying customer.

“How big of a space do you need?” I asked him, realizing that the sharing of information could
be difficult. True to form, Bernard just nodded and smiled. I pointed at his satchel and made hand gestures showing ‘tiny’ and ‘large’. His eyes lit up and he gestured back “large”. Luckily for me, there were several empty cubbies in the back so I tugged him once more and we headed back in that direction. The senior citizen was still perusing her table so I pulled Enid off to the side to get her brothers contact information and to tell her where he could set up his wares. She explained the directions to him in Polish while he, surprise, nodded and smiled. Then, hiking his bag over his shoulder, he beamed at me, said “Danks” in his gruff, accented English, and shuffled off towards his new job.

I headed back to the front to man the register and fulfill my true calling as Protector of Treasures. People were lining up to check out, clutching their purchases as if to protect them from the glances of others in line. I wrapped, taped, and confined each treasure in a box or bag and didn’t get even a bathroom break until the campus bells rang twelve noon. I checked on Enid and Bernard before heading out to lunch.

Enid was sitting on her stool in the midst of her possessions munching on kielbasa and drinking wine having bought something worse than the sausage. She chomped happily and regaled me with a short story regarding all the china that she was able to pawn off on the geriatric woman in the cardigan. I agreed with her, remembering how long it had taken me to protect all that glassware on its way out, and told her I was going to peek in on Bernard, see how he was getting on. She waved me on as a young couple with a stroller approached her table and I threaded my way deeper into the back of the store.

I was still some ways away from the back when I caught a strain of music. It sounded sweet and folksy, somehow pushing all the murmuring chatter and hum of conversation into the background. It was quiet but commanding and I found myself walking faster to discover its source. I pushed my way through a beaded curtain that looked as if it had been made by someone’s preschool aged child and stumbled into a crowd of silent watchers. They were all gathered around Bernard’s table and the atmosphere was breathless anticipation. Bernard was sitting on a small, three-legged milking stool in front of his table with his hat sitting there next to him, his head shining under the muted lighting. He had a wooden instrument on his lap and was languidly strumming, eyes closed, humming to himself and slowly tapping his foot in time. Everyone else was standing silently, their eyes glued to him. Mesmerized, the tourists were not taking pictures, the elderly were not elbowing people out from in front of the bargain bins, and even the hippies were swaying soundlessly, all under the spell of this wizened Polish man who was unaware that he even had an audience.

I focused on Bernard and felt something I hadn’t felt in a long time, since moving into a place of my own and starting school. I felt home, safe, comfortable, at peace. As he broke into a quiet warbling song in Polish I felt the tears spring into the corners of my eyes. I dashed them away hoping that no one had noticed, but they wouldn’t stay away. As he ended his song and opened his eyes Bernard was happily surprised by a crowd of well-wishers and fans, loading down his hat with coins and paper and poring over his table of instruments. He looked confused for a moment by his hat, then took the money out, into his pockets it went, and the hat he crushed back onto his round little head. I shot him a quick smile and slipped away, giving Enid the “thumbs up” on my way out to get myself something to eat before my lunch break was over.

On my return to the shop, I made my way to the back and began looking over Bernard’s wares. I had never seen so many instruments. Wood, nickel, painted, and stained they were all different and all beautiful. He wasn’t selling much but the tips he was making from playing would buy my dog food for a month. He was rearranging small wooden flutes in a corner of the table when he saw me. I had just picked up a tiny, red harmonica and blew one sweet note through its little metal teeth when he erupted in a flurry of gestures and Polish. I was trying to explain myself as best I could when a voice at my elbow said, “He said be gentle with that one. It isn’t for sale.”

I turned to see Enid smiling at me. “He just showed that one to all the people,” she said. “He wouldn’t sell that. He got it from the Devil.”

I dropped the harmonica like a hot potato, took a quick swirl of coffee, and wiped my mouth on the back of my sleeve. My mind was racing. Was he serious? And if so, how did one get rid of devil spit? I continued gulping coffee in an attempt to flush my system from my accidental French kiss with Satan while Bernard continued to spit rapid fire Polish in my direction.

Enid ended my reverie by nudging me in the ribs. “You want to hear the story?” she asked.

I couldn’t answer, just took a bigger gulp of coffee and nodded while Enid settled herself on Bernard’s stool and began to translate his strange story of the Devil’s harmonica.

“This happened back home, in Poland. It was about three winters ago, the coldest winter we had seen in decades. It was snowing all the time, with flakes so thick and fast you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. All the people in my town were worried about food since we had no idea how long the storm would last and on my last trip into town for the winter, they told me they were worried about me too.

“We don’t want to have to come and haul away your frozen body in the spring, Bernard,” said Anya Norwicki as she loaded her wicker basket with candles, blankets, and canned goods. “You should stay here in town with someone ’til the storm lets up.”

“Yes,” chimed in Mrs. Wieczor, another of the town’s busybodies, “and if you don’t die of cold or starvation you will surely be ’szalony’ come spring. I would hate for them to find you running around in your underwear.” she laughed.

I thanked them for their concern, paid the grocer for my lamp oil and tins of fish and with their cheerful reminders ringing in my ears, headed back to my little house.

I lived on the outskirts of town, close to the woods that I love. My wife was buried there, deep in the woods under our favorite tree and I would not abandon her for the winter months when there was nothing living to keep her company. Besides, I was not worried about the snow or
the darkness because I had enough peat for the fire, oil for the lamps, potatoes in the cellar, and tins of fish to last me through to summer. It might not be an exciting winter but I would be safe, warm, and full until I could get back to town come spring.

I spent the first two months at home practicing my instruments, reading by the fire, and eating god only knows how many potatoes. It was quiet, the kind of quiet that is only achieved by Mother Nature blanketing the world in a snowy shroud, forcing us to stop, contemplate, and relax. There was no wind, no sound, just me and the snow. And it was beautiful.

One night, well into the third month of the snow, I was wakened by the sound of a wild wind outside my door. It seemed as if the earth was afraid, attempting to protect itself from something, and it sent its cold fingers around the edges of the windowpanes in my bedroom. I got up, wrapped myself in a coarse wool blanket, and was stoking the fire at the foot of my room when I heard something more than wind outside my door. It sounded like a mournful bird or a wounded animal. I got up and lit the lamp, listening to the melody as it danced and turned through the wind.

The moon was bright and through the whirling snow I could make out a shape, a shadow approaching the house. It seemed to be the shadow of a man, but taller than anyone I knew. And no good Polish man would leave his hearth in the dead of winter to meander the fields playing such haunting music. I continued to watch his approach, fascinated rather than fearful, until he stood just in front of my door. The wind died for a moment and the moon fell full on his face as he looked up at me in my window and called “Bernard Workowski, come, let me in.”

He had the face of an angel, every line in perfect symmetry and a look of compassion and understanding in his dark eyes made me trust him immediately. He radiated all that was good but I was never meant to feel them as strongly as I did. It was as if I experienced the depth of his emotions within my very being.

He bounded inside, tossing his heavy coat onto my threadbare couch and throwing his arms around my shoulders. “Ah, Bernard,” said he, “thank you. It is colder than a witch’s teat out in that wind. I can tell you.” He was pacing around the room with such vigor and enthusiasm that, for a moment I felt out of place in my own home. I still could hardly tear my eyes from him but when he paused to examine a portrait of my late wife it was as if she smacked me in the back of the head from beyond the grave.

“Tea,” I asked in a voice still raspy from sleep, “or coffee maybe? Something to warm you?” I stoked the fire in the stove and put the kettle on.

“Something stronger perhaps, Bernard,” said the stranger, who seemed to have shrunk since entering my home. “Surely you have some whiskey? Vodka? Something to warm the blood.”

He let out something like a laugh after this last statement and seemed to shudder a little. I went to the cupboard over the sink and brought down a bottle of whiskey and two small glasses. My strange visitor had wrapped himself in another of my colorful wool blankets and had removed his boots by the door, stretching his feet towards the warmth of the stove as it begin to hiss and pop with heat. I was pulling out cold dishes to serve and I tried not to stare for his feet were different from any of those I had seen before. If he noticed me looking, he paid me no mind but poured himself a drink and tossed it back almost recklessly. Setting the plates of potatoes, fish, and a few vegetables onto the table I studied him from the corner of my eye, a note of panic creeping into my chest. He seemed to have the feet of a goat or a fawn, cloven in the middle like the hoof of an animal. This was a strange sight and I poured myself a drink to steady my nerves.

He must have noticed my slight feelings of alarm for he pulled his legs back under the chair and began to eat the food I had laid out. His face, too, seemed to change in the light of the fire. It was still beautiful but I could see underneath a hard edge, an evil line that seemed to cut through the beauty with every flicker of the fire. My mind, which had once been so enamored with this stranger, now began to fill with questions which swirled around my head like the wind outside my door. I could sense his unrest growing, filling the room with melancholy and an uncomfortable silence. As always when I feel out of sorts, I reached for my instruments. He seemed to brighten as I lifted my fidel plocka from its peg on the wall and settled onto my stool. I closed my eyes and began to play, strumming softly and slowly. For a while I lost track of time ‘till I was returned to my living room by a gentle wailing tune. I had not realized that I had stopped playing and to fill the silence, my visitor had taken a harmonica from the pocket of his suit and was playing the saddest song I had ever heard.

I watched him as he played, his eyes closed, his body swaying as if his very soul was in the music. He seemed born to create it, as if it came from him not through him. I was mesmerized by the sorrow of the tune; it spoke to me of loss and anguish but underneath again, I sensed something else. Pride and anger and a jealousy that burned brighter than the fire that threw his writhing shadow onto the wall. I began to fear this man I had let into my home, fear him but pity him as well. And out of this feeling of pity, I began to play with him.

I thought of all I had lost, of those who had wronged me. Of every injustice that had ever been paid me and I played from the darkest places of my soul. Our melodies intertwined and soared through my little house, tales of darkness and emotions better left buried ‘till with one piercing note, we finished. I felt ashamed and filthy. Those emotions that had raced through me were powerful but I was never meant to feel them as strongly as I did. It was as if I experienced the depth of his emotions within my very being.

He looked at me and smiled, a smile that didn’t quite reach his burning eyes but showed me his strong, sharp little teeth. “Well played, Bernard. Well played. Shall I make you a proposition?”

He went on though I didn’t answer him, couldn’t answer him.

“I have walked all through this world, meeting with men such as yourself; men who have lost, who have been wronged but none, none have moved me as you have. Your song is what I
have been looking for, for there is no one who could match me as you have done. We have shared our deepest places with each other and I have found you worthy. Come, walk the world with me. You will see marvels that you could not know, be part of stories that are told as legend, you will be immortal.

As he warmed to his speech all that was lovely fell away from him and I saw this horrible stranger for all that he was. The darkness that was in him had eaten away at his body and soul and it was clear to me that I had entertained the devil in my home this night. I was trembling with terror, the sweat began to break out on my brow, and my hands shook as I wrenched my mind to think of a way to rid my home of this monster standing before me waiting for an answer. My eyes darted around my small living room and lighted on the portrait of my wife. Her calm brown eyes and peaceful expression calmed me. And suddenly I was myself again.

"Tell me stranger, do you feel up to a wager?" I shocked myself with the boldness of my speech and the strength of my tone, for no tremble of fear was there. He frowned for a moment as if I had pushed him too far but the wrinkles smoothed from his forehead.

"Try me Bernard," he answered, with that strange little laugh that sent shivers down my spine.

"While what you offer is tempting, I am old and set in my ways. How can you guarantee that once I have joined you I will not grow weary of the world and yeam for my old home here? Instead let us make a bet. We will choose a song each, something that is full of passion and might convince the other to change their mind. If your song convinces me, I will leave with you. But if my song convinces you that it is better for me to remain here, you will leave alone. Tonight."

Again, the anger I sensed in him rose to the surface. For a moment I was afraid that he would consume my soul right there. But, in the back of my mind, a whispered reminder that it was his pride that had been his downfall in times past and it would be his pride again that would condemn him to take my bet. In that second, I was sure that I had won.

"Oh foolish Bernard," he answered me, leaning back in the chair and putting his feet up on the table, "why do you test me? Of course I will take the wager; on one condition. I play first."

I nodded my consent and settled back onto my stool. He pulled out his harmonica, stood, closed his eyes, and began to play a song I hope never to hear again. It was full of hatred and malevolence; evil in every note. It threatened all that was good and right in the world, conjured the foulness of the human heart through all of history and housed it in my small living room.

I peered cautiously out one eye. I was alone. I stood up, looking around my home but every-thing was as it should be, as if my visitor was never there. His great, heavy coat was gone, as were his boots. The dishes from the table were clean and in the cupboard and the kettle was whistling on the stove. I looked down at my disheveled pajamas and my heavy blanket, perplexed. Had it all just been a ghastly nightmare? And then I saw it, a little blue flash of light under the stove, like the glint of steel. I grabbed a long-handled wooden spoon and pulled out the little trinket. It was the harmonica.

I sat in my chair until the sun rose, rubbing the smooth back of the harmonica over and over, sipping my tea and remembering the night before. I knew no one would believe my story, I hardly believed it myself and everyone knows about winters in Poland;"

Enid stood up and stretched, her back cracking loudly ushering me back into the warm summer present. She picked up her big canvas tote bag that rattled and clanged with extra merchandise that she just couldn't be convinced to part with and started to walk towards the exit. "Come on Bernard," she said over her shoulder, "it's closing time."

Bernard had finished organizing his table and had arranged his extra items in plastic storage bins under his cubby. He had his cracked leather satchel slung over his shoulder and was looking at me with intensity. But he wasn't smiling, he was just waiting. Enid stopped and turned to see what was keeping her cousin from following. She let out a warm chuckle looking at us facing off amidst piles of junk.

"He wants to know if you believe him," she said. "And don't lie. He always knows if you are lying."

I looked at the little Polish man standing before me, harmonica in the front pocket of his shirt and I nodded. I did believe him, how could I not? His smile was radiant when he nodded back, and then clumped after Enid who waved over her shoulder and called out, "see you Wednesday."

I ushered out the last few protesting stragglers, gently reminding them of our 3pm closing time.
turned out the lights and stood in the gloom for a few moments. I could make out looming shapes, all gathered through a lifetime and then discarded, and I wondered what other tales might lay behind the facades I saw all around me, at work, at school, in the mirror. Letting out a contented sigh I locked the doors, and pulled the iron gate down over them.

Walking home, a moist, cool wind at my back, I had to turn, to take one more look at this place I had so underestimated. So long, Mecca of Junk. So long, Bernard. See you Wednesday.

E.S. Muove | Dry City (Nonfiction)

When you work in the projection booth of a movie theatre, everything is cast in shadows and silhouettes. When the movies are playing – which is most of the time – the flickering of multiple 10-kilowatt projector bulbs against black matted steel and blank drywall is the only light in the room. Overhead lights cannot be used because they cast a shadow on the screen through the window of the booth. Any sound is drowned out by the ambient roar of 35mm film rattching around the cogs and gears of the projectors. We had seven of these machines at the theatre where I worked. This was a small number at a small theatre in the small town of Anywhere, North Carolina. Seven projectors could easily be managed by one person. At the time it was me.

The projection booth was a long, narrow room, just wide enough for a projector and space to get by it. In the middle was a desk where the projectionist keeps track of each movie's showtime. There's no outside noise or light. And if you add sleep deprivation – maybe you come in to work after a night that went on too long – the shadows and flickers start playing tag in the darkness, leaving the impression of movement. These effects are intensified if you're on methamphetamine.

I was riding the tail end of a meth binge that had bled over from the previous night. Bolts of paranoia snapped through my neural synapses like a signal relay. Sleep deprivation made me more vulnerable to every shadow appear solid and moving and sinister. The projection booth is long enough that when one is standing in the middle, darkness swallows up both ends. This leaves plenty of space for apparitions to dance and frolic just out of the range of sight.

After all the movies were started, I had about an hour and a half of downtime in which there was nothing to do. I needed a cigarette. The trick would be making it down the stairs and out the back door without running into anyone. I was not confident that I could maintain a veneer of sobriety if subjected to any lengthy verbal exchanges with other employees. Luis, the manager on duty, had an uncannily accurate Spidey-sense drug radar that enabled him to spot even waning intoxication from across the room. I had shown up for a 9 AM employee meeting a week ago, and he was able to judge – accurately – from his position twelve rows up from where I was sitting, that I was hungover not just from alcohol, but from cocaine. He told me when the meeting was over.

I crept down the stairs from the booth, fearing that even the lightest footfall would be audible in the manager's office half a football field away. At the bottom of the stairs, I put my hand on the door handle and prayed silently to the patron saint of hourly employment that there wouldn't be anyone lingering in the hallway when I opened the door. There wasn't, but right as I hit the second door – the back door that leads to the parking lot – Luis stepped out of the office at the other end of the hallway. He spotted me instantly.

“Smoking?”

I was afraid to speak, so I nodded.

“Wait for me.”

Well, I didn't really want to keep this job anyway. I thought.

* * *

I had spent much of the previous night with some friends trying to get cocaine, which had proven to be more difficult than usual. It was a few days after Christmas in December of 2005, and, without school – idle time being the sort of playground it is – drugs were a nearly constant necessity. The week and a half that Anywhere High School had deemed an appropriate amount of celebratory family time for Christmas and New Year's had contributed more than its share to the delinquency of several minors, including myself. Cocaine was the thing to do to fill the hours of those long winter nights, but on the night in question we had struck out with dealers all over town.

In desperation we went to Kenny's house because if Kenny – whose house exists as something of a nexus point in the drug matrix of Anywhere – couldn't find coke, then the dealers must be out and the city must be dry. Which wasn't a happy prospect. We were four single guys wading in to the grey area between recreational drug use and habitual, and we were staring down the barrel of a sober night. We'd return to our respective homes at an uncommonly early hour and climb the walls with boredom, which at the time seemed like a fate worse than death.

We hadn't thought to get any alcohol either. Getting booze was a task. Anywhere was a dry city, and would remain so for a few more years. Getting alcohol meant a twenty-minute drive up the road to an even smaller town, one which we believed only existed to serve the alcohol needs of people here. That took gas. And a reliable vehicle. We were all seniors in high school, so it also took finding a twenty-one-year-old who didn't mind taking an hour out of his day to provide alcohol to minors. Which wasn't impossible, but could be difficult. More difficult than
Kenny had no better luck finding coke, and oddly didn't seem to care. We sat in his living room, about four of us, and shook our heads in bewilderment. Kenny, hesitantly, always reluctant to test the waters, mentioned that he knew a guy right down the street who had some other shit. Some better shit.

"Better than the blow we got last weekend?" I asked. "Cause that shit was intense. Probably the best shit I've had."

"Dude, way better," Kenny said. "I'm not talking about coke."

"What is it then?"

Kenny looked momentarily guilty, as if he was about to tell me he'd killed my dog.

"Some crank, man. Methamphetamine. He dragged out the last syllable into an airy hiss.

I looked down at the floor and shifted in my seat. Kenny had drawn a line in the sand that I'd never considered crossing. I thought about turning him down. Then I pictured my bedroom at my parents' house. I pictured lying down to sleep next to a digital clock that read 10:35.

"Who's driving?" I asked.

I paid fifty dollars for a half gram. I had only done cocaine maybe four times at this point, but I had gotten used to paying forty or fifty dollars for a whole gram of coke. Fifty dollars for a half gram of this weird fluffy pink shit seemed ridiculous. That is, until I did a line.

With coke, a line about the length of my index finger was the norm, and about as thick as a USB chord. Kenny showed us how to cut out lines of meth that were maybe an inch long and a fraction of that thick. I watched over his shoulder as he worked in the passenger seat of somebody's Camero, which was idling in the street outside Greg's house. We'd driven to Greg's house after the buy. Greg's house was always where the party was. The party on this particular night had gotten going a while ago, but we'd left in search of some white. We had returned after the buy. Greg's house was always where the party was. The party on this particular night had gotten going a while ago, but we'd left in search of some white. We had returned after the buy.

I couldn't wait to get to the house. I was pumped. I was jazzed. I could feel the charged synaptic overload in my brain. Lightning cracked across my skull. The simple act of walking around our typical weekend high school party talking to people provoked near-orgasmic enthusiasm.

I looked at the front door. I knew them well. I had seen them every time I'd been to this house. But from the street, I would have sworn they were not people, but two four-foot brick columns topped with lights that framed the walkway to Greg's front door. I knew them well. I had seen them every time I'd been to this house. But from the street, I would have sworn they were people.

I only took one more line that night, same size as the first. Greg's house cleared out around three in the morning. Those too drunk to drive home passed out there, scattered limply around the house like dishtowels. Seeking adventure, I left to make a McDonald's run – though I couldn't have eaten if my life depended on it – and returned with food for anyone still awake. There were fewer cars parked on the street than when I had left, but I saw two people standing in the driveway, so I figured somebody must still be up. I parked on the street and walked up the driveway. I didn't realize until I was maybe ten feet away that the two people were not people, but two four-foot brick columns topped with lights that framed the walkway to Greg's front door. I knew them well. I had seen them every time I'd been to this house. But from the street, I would have sworn they were people.

The sudden realization that I was actually alone made me paranoid. I shuffled backward quickly down the driveway, jumped in my car, and sped home. I knew I wouldn't sleep at all.

* * *

The comedown on meth is incredibly gradual, to the point that it's barely perceptible. Unlike coke, which takes you straight up then drops you straight down over the course of maybe thirty minutes after a line – crack is even worse – meth takes you up, then lets you down very gently as the euphoria tapers off. Like hang-gliding as opposed to skydiving. It takes hours.

I was still feeling it the next day – albeit with decreased intensity – when I came in to work at the movie theatre. If there were a tenth circle in Dante's hell, it would be working in a projection booth at the end of a meth binge when the euphoria has petered out and dried up but the paranoia is coming down in buckets. Combined with sleep deprivation, my senses and instincts were dangerously eroded. It's fortunate I wasn't working with heavy machinery. I was,
however, fairly used to coming into work in such a condition by this point in my high school career. Drugs had become the primary focal point of my recreational time, which often seeped in to work time.

Ironically it was because of my job that I could do drugs. I was arrested on three different charges while on a booze run to Randleman when I was seventeen. My mother and father had always taken a laissez-faire approach to parenting, stipulating that if I got myself into trouble, it was up to me to get out of it. In order to pay my lawyer and court fees I needed a job, which I found at the movie theatre through a friend who already worked there. Once the charges were satisfied, probation was over and the fees were paid, I kept the job because I needed the money. Most of the time, the money I made went to gas and food, and any excess went to experimental chemical use. Which soon grew to excess.

Fortunately for me, Luis was waylaid that day at work before he had a chance to join me for a cigarette. Some customer had a problem for him to deal with. I went ahead outside, figuring whatever offense he might take from me not waiting for him wouldn't be as bad as him discovering I was tweaked at work. Luis was a large, sturdy Mexican in his twenties. He always wore a full black suit complete with an overcoat, even in the heat of summer. With his sunglasses, he looked like an Hispanic version of Morpheus from The Matrix, and though he was generally good-natured, he could be intimidating. A few months ago, he had fired another employee for smoking a joint behind the dumpster while taking out the trash. I didn't want to be next.

I went into the private employee bathroom – even though I was alone. I couldn't be sure that the darkness at the end of the booth didn't contain a person, or that the general manager hadn't installed security cameras in the booth on my day off – and used a pocketknife to take tiny bumps of pink powder out of the baggy. Within minutes, most of the fear had evaporated and I suddenly had the best, most rewarding job ever to employ anyone. I didn't want to be next.

In the moment of impact, I saw my life flash past my eyes. Not because I thought I was about to die. Because I was on meth. I had just been in a car wreck on meth. Surely I would be locked up forever. I'd never see the light of day. And if I did somehow get past the cops, my dad would kill me. He would beat me to death. Either way, I'd never be heard from again. Maybe I deserved it. The idea that the deviancy of my behavior would be exposed to the scrutinizing light of day, that there was no way for me to hide, brought home the magnitude of what was done.

I turned the music up louder and stepped on the gas, focusing on nothing else. I was really high. I couldn't picture a more satisfying position to be in. I turned the music up louder and stepped on the gas, focusing on nothing else. I was really high. I couldn't picture a more satisfying position to be in. I turned the music up louder and stepped on the gas, focusing on nothing else.

As a matter of fact, it couldn't be better. I lit a cigarette and rolled the windows down to taste the air of an uncommonly warm January night as I cruised through the green light next to the theatre. A cop passed going the other way, and my adrenaline spiked as I recognized the profile of the light fixture on his roof. He continued on his way, and I turned up the music. Thinking on the drugs in my pocket, and the party I was heading to, I couldn't picture a more satisfying position to be in. I turned the music up louder and stepped on the gas, focusing on nothing else.

The other driver would later swear that his light was green. I would swear that mine was. Five years hence, I can't say for sure if my light was green. I was so wrapped up in the euphoria in my own head that I barely knew if I was driving or flying. What I am sure of is that I did not slow down as I approached the intersection of Salisbury and Park. I did not register any cause for concern, any warning, until I saw the other car approaching fast from my left maybe half a second before the impact. I do remember thinking he must be doing more than the in-town speed limit of 35. The other car rammed head-first into my front left quarter-panel, square on like the front left wheel was a bullseye. My car listed to the right with a tortured screech, rotating about forty-five degrees away from the road. It came to rest at the edge of a gravel parking lot in front of a doctor's office that sat in the crook of the intersection. The other car skidded to a stop a few feet away.

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Fuck. I thought, as another realization dawned on me. I have shit on me! I had about a quarter gram of meth in my pocket. If the frantic look in my eyes didn't do me in, surely that would. Surely the cops would search me. Surely they would search a scruffy-looking teenager in dirty clothes driving too nice a car in a car wreck at midnight. There was no way out. Do I run? Can I get far enough away in time?

I got out of the car after a minute, moving experimentally to see if anything hurt. Nothing did.
The driver's door had to be forced open against the quarter panel, which had been pushed back into it. The other driver was already out. He was pacing back and forth and talking on his phone. He seemed fine. There was no one else around, no other cars on the road. I surveyed the damage to my dad's car, which consisted of a bashed-in quarter panel and a front wheel bent almost sideways.

Before I could begin to formulate a plan, I saw headlights approaching from the direction of the theatre. They were heading the same way I'd been going. This caused more panic, because the wreck was blocking the intersection, and I couldn't possibly see how adding more people would help my situation. More people meant more chances I'd be found out. Maybe if I ditched the drugs now, before the cops showed up...

My chain-linked stream-of-consciousness hysteria freight-trained into a brick wall as the approaching vehicle became recognizable under a streetlight. It was a Jeep Liberty. It was a dark blue Jeep Liberty.

It was my friend Jeri's dark blue Jeep Liberty.

Jeri was Kenny's girlfriend, as well as a friend I'd known since seventh grade. I'd introduced them. She was also employed at the theatre. She was part of my crowd, and was probably heading to the same party I was.

I ran into the intersection and waved my arms to get her attention. I could see hesitation, then recognition, and she pulled into the parking lot of the doctor's office.

“Oh my God, Kipp,” she exclaimed as I ran up to the driver's side window, “what happened?”

I jerked my head in the direction of the other driver, who was still on his phone and watching me suspiciously. “Fucker ran a red light and hit me.”

“Yeah.”

“Fucker ran a red light and hit me.” Kenny was sitting shotgun.

“Are you okay?” Jeri asked.

“Well, I mean, I feel fine. I've been tweakin' all night though. I just got off work and was headed to Greg's.”

“That's where we were going.”

“Here. I need you to take this.” I palmed the baggie and rested my arms on the window, leaning into the car. I dropped it into the door handle.

“I don't know if the cops are going to search me or not.”

“Holy shit.”

“Can you hold on to that? You can do some if you want.”


“Keep your phone on. I may need you to pick me up in a minute. For now go to the party, and stash that shit before you come back.”

Kenny looked stricken. “Did you call the police?”

“I'm pretty sure the other guy did.”

“What an asshole,” Jeri said, her voice brimming with sympathy. “Fucker needs to learn how to drive.”

“Yeah. You guys should get out of here, though, before the cops show up.”

“Okay,” Jeri said. “Good luck. Call me.” She rolled up the window and sped off.

I had barely enough time to process what had just happened before the cops did show up. First one, then two, then three. One was obviously in charge. He moved quickly around the wreck site with a clipboard, talking to me, then talking to the other guy. The other guy spoke frantically, throwing glances and gestures in my direction. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I figured it probably wasn't a statement expressing unqualified support of my side of the story. The other two cops, a black guy and a white woman, stood and chatted lazily. All were young, fit, and armed. That last aspect made me queasy. I gave my version of events to Officer Clipboard, worried my fidgeting or nervous eyes would register with his Professional Drug Recognition Instincts and the jig would be up. I had to squint to feel like my eyes weren't bugging out. But he didn't seem to regard me with any suspicion – actually, he seemed barely interested – and he told me to get my license, registration, and proof of insurance out for him while he took a statement from the other driver. As he walked away, I reached into my pocket for my wallet, saying a silent prayer of thanks that a K-9 unit hadn't answered this particular call from dispatch, and was hit with the next heart-dropping, adrenaline-spiking bit of bad news: I still had drugs on me.

Though the comedown from meth isn't bad, it does leave you with a headache and a generally lackluster outlook, a sort of enthusiasm-strangling malaise. To counteract this, I had bought two Percocet from a guy at Greg's house the previous night, had grabbed them on my way out the door to go to work, and had promptly forgotten about them. They were loose, floating around in my pocket. A fresh dose of panic surged through me at this realization. I now had two pills behind my license in my hand and pulled my hand out of my pocket. I turned to face my car, and began examining the damage to the quarter panel. I was in full view of the two officers chatting. They were maybe fifteen feet away. Trying with everything I had to look like I wasn't up to something, I came around the front of the car...
and crouched down in front of it, appearing to be checking underneath the front for damage, and dropped the two pills into the gravel under the car. I paused for a second, but heard no footsteps running towards me, no sounds that I'd caused any sort of alarm. Standing up slowly, I turned to face the two cops talking, leaned casually on the hood of the car, and lit a cigarette.

Though facing each other, I could tell Officers Guy and Girl were both keeping a peripheral eye on me. The woman, with her hands on her hips, said something witty, and the guy looked down and laughed, taking a step back. It was then that my brain was struck by another thunderbolt of realization: I knew him.

One of my friends, Jason, had thrown a huge party at his house the previous weekend. His parents had also left town, leaving the run of the house to him, his older brother, and the forty or so underage drunks they'd invited over on a nightly basis. His brother, Chris, was twenty-seven. He was also a State Trooper. When the house would get too crowded, he would park his patrol car out front on the street so that party-going hopefuls would arrive, see the car, and assume the party was already busted. His best friend Joey, a regular at the parties and an officer with the Asheboro Police Department, would do the same. The two of them had also, to my knowledge, provided all the alcohol. This was, needless to say, a crime, and considering that it was a crime perpetrated by police, it was probably a crime of significant magnitude. I had spent some time talking to Joey that weekend, and it turned out we knew a lot of the same people. We were both pretty drunk, but I remembered his face.

I leaned against the hood of my dad's car, puffing a cigarette, and staring at Joey for a while before I realized he was staring back at me. I watched as his eyes searched my face, trying to remember.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

I took my time answering, and gave him as confident a look as I could muster. "Yeah. I was at Chris and Jason's house last weekend."

His composure dropped for a second as the full weight of that statement settled on him. It was just for a second though. Then he snapped back in.

The officer in charge looked over my license and documents, then sat me in his car and conferred with the other cop. Or maybe he was just trying to be a friend. I don't know.

"I swear that there had been another car and sat with me, explaining what the other driver had said: that his light was green, that I'd been speeding, and that he had a witness to corroborate his story. I swore that there had been no other cars around when the wreck happened, that he'd been on his phone for a while afterwards, and that maybe he'd called a friend to serve as a false witness. The cop didn't buy it.

In the end, I wasn't ticketed, and neither was the other driver. This means that neither of us was found at fault, which I've never heard of happening before or since. Joey may have feared retribution if I was charged – that maybe I'd rat him out for last weekend – and put in a few good words with the other cop. Or maybe he was just trying to be a friend. I don't know.

My dad's car was towed to a garage. I called Jeri for a ride, and the cop let me go when she showed up. She dropped me off at my house, which was just a couple miles down the road from Greg's. I didn't feel like going to the party. She expressed concern for my well-being, and I told her I was just tired and not to worry, and to enjoy the meth. I'd had enough for one night.

When shed gone, I sat on the couch in the living room and tried to process the series of events. Even such a short time after the wreck, I had a little difficulty remembering the step-by-step. I was approaching forty-eight hours without sleep, and everything I'd experienced was recalled through pink-colored glasses that intensified highs to perilous peaks and lows to yawning depths. The adrenaline was retreating and left me with a post-trauma hangover and generally aimless jitteriness. Plus the thought of calling my dad to tell him I'd wrecked his car made my vision swim. I needed to mellow out.

I grabbed a flashlight, got in my car, and drove back to the site of the wreck. The street was deserted. There were a few bits of broken plastic on the ground, but otherwise no sign that the event had ever taken place. I toyed with the idea that I had imagined it for a second. The suggestion that it could have been a dream was not as absurd as it might seem. It was hard to tell at this point what was real and what wasn't. I couldn't even be sure what state of consciousness I was in. That was more the sleep deprivation than the meth, but sleep deprivation is arguably the most powerful drug there is.

I parked on the street a few spaces down and walked to the gravel lot, searching the ground with the flashlight. It didn't take long. Sure enough, like two bits of gold shining up from a prospector's pan, two diamonds in a sea of rough, my Percocet sat lodged among the gravel. I picked them up and – not wanting to press my luck by driving home with them after a close call – popped them on the spot.
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The publication receives submissions, to be reviewed by the respective staff committees—art, poetry and prose. Throughout the school year, *The Peel* received a total of 994 student submissions, including 469 art/multimedia, 362 poetry and 163 prose submissions. Of these works, 179 art/multimedia, 50 poetry and 14 prose pieces were accepted and published in the fall and spring online editions. The print edition includes the “best of,” highest scoring pieces from the two online editions with 18 art, 11 poetry and 4 prose.

Jenna Slawson created the theme and design of the magazine using Adobe InDesign CS5. The three fonts used for copy are Cabin, BodoniUltraFLF and League Gothic. The graphic elements depict the mountainous topography of Boone, North Carolina, to scale. The cover, printed on (waiting for official name of cover paper), displays the topography of Appalachian State University’s campus and Boone landmark Howard’s Knob, while the spine presents an elevation map key. The coordinates on the first page correspond with Sanford Mall, our university’s center.

Mountaineer Press of the Graphic Arts and Imaging Technology department at Appalachian State University produced 500 copies of the magazine using a Kodak NexPress 2100. The magazine, 7.25 x 9 inches in dimension, holds 70 lb. white stock?