Farewell Songs of a Pessimist

HASS 400A

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Spring 2024

Contents

Address

Last semester I read Kurt Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan*, and this semester I read his little book of letters, *A Man Without A Country*. I've always been impressed with Vonnegut's ability to present everyday truths with a veneer of sarcasm and wit that makes those things seem utterly ridiculous. And while *A Man Without A Country* still carries Vonnegut's humor and charisma, it's with a sort of pessimism for the way the world was when he wrote it. It was during the Iraq war, and I can't help but feel his words resonate just as true now as they did back then.

Kurt Vonnegut passed away seventeen years ago now, at 84. But oh how I wish I could hear his words describe upside-down world we live in today.

One of the little tidbits that Vonnegut offers in *A Man Without A Country* resonated so strongly with the way I've been feeling lately: "We are on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different".

Vonnegut drops this silly little line after going off on an epic tangent about sending a manuscript to his editor, about the stack of papers he'd take to the post office, the people he'd meet and talk to along the way, the small but serious risk that, were the manuscript to get lost in the mail, it would be gone forever.

I do a bit of photography in my free time, every time I go somewhere interesting, and sometimes just around campus or Golden. Lately I've preferred working with film, analog photography, which when I tell people they seem a bit confused about. "Why would you go back to the hard way?"

The hard way presents a more interesting and fulfilling experience, a more kinesthetic and error-prone process that is attached to reality in a way digital could never be. I've ruined plenty of rolls of film, with what I imagined were full of wonderful photos, and I'll never get those back. But it's that very loss that makes me cherish each picture that comes out perfectly balanced, beautiful.

We have so optimized the negativity and loss out of our lives that I think we may have forgotten what the goodness really means. Everything at our fingertips, with technology, the internet, make and distribute things with no risk. Is this good?. To send a manuscript to your editor now is to click a couple of buttons on your computer. If that email fails to send, no harm done. Click send again. Sit back in your office chair and take a swig from the bottle, pull out your phone with the time you would have spent walking to the post office, talking to the postal workers and then wondering where your manuscript is.

I seek a return to form. Something more human, indignant of the so-called progress of the world around me, here to fart around and do things with my hands, engage with the world around me.

I've decided, just now, sitting eating lunch and writing this on the day this portfolio is due, to fart around a little bit, go print this thing, and bring it to you. If you are reading it today, I hope you smile at this sentence. Good luck reading all… 47 pages??? Sorry, I hope this is a positive experience for you. And thanks for all your hard work and honesty.

Writings

First Submission

Statement

This is a piece about a restaurant, about the owner of one, and the lives of his customers and employees. The first draft looks at the restaurant in the days up to and after the suicide of its owner, whereas the revised version investigates the effects of this suicide on the employees, or more accurately, the group of workers connected by this place. I see the revised version as a far more realistic depiction of character and the way this could have played out, and the first draft as a piece more focused on the changing surroundings of the characters and their reactions to that. Those characters, I think, were underdeveloped and lacked a clarity of conscience or reasoning.

In that first draft, I really enjoyed the symbolism and direction of story I was getting at, but I failed to actualize that motion with character driven moments. Things sort of *happen to people*, rather than them doing things and those things having consequences. This is something I touch on in my reflective essay.

In the revision, I focus directly in on the characters and build the world up around them. Most of the writing is focused entirely on the relationships between characters, the ways they feel about each other based on past actions, and how a single tragic action taken by one of these characters reverberates through the rest. The commentary on the world has to happen through the lens of the narrator, Nae, and the way the world works is illustrated almost entirely through experiences and reactions. This makes the story more about its characters than its world, which I think gives it a different flavor that didn't end up saying everything I wanted to, but one that certainly works better. Most stories are necessarily specific, and so their message can only be

generalized so far, and as a fan of big general messaging, I struggled at first to whittle down the reality and specificity of this story. But as I continued iterating, I found where the pieces fit together -- like how Nae ended up with the restaurant, why Jen seems to struggle with Ty, where Louie fits in as a piece of Nae's life and the story at large.

I didn't perfect any of these components, but I feel that this landed in a much better place than it started -- a much more fully-fledged, realized story that genuinely feels like the vignette it's supposed to be. This is a moment in time, a complex fabric of character, world, and relationships. And while I think some more iteration is needed to arrive at the truth of this story, I certainly ended closer than I began.

Cook

I organized them by date first. I thought maybe I could put together a story from the bits and pieces, some discernable history based on the recorded purchases of a man in crisis. The liquor store, at regular intervals, after work. A few shooters last week. Really? A cash withdrawal, $500, seemed like once a week for -- five years? That's an outrageous amount of money, right?

Occasional outings to department stores, a confusing amount of clothes and jewelry. Not for himself.

He got a car wash last week, evidently ignoring the whole interior. Murph's car was full of receipts and the remnants of their purchases. Hundreds of crumpled paper ledgers, dated, signed, numerized. A commercial dataset on a man I thought I understood.

All accounted for at the restaurant, we were a team of twelve. Eleven now, I guess. I only knew a few of the waitstaff, since these days their turnover was so high I often didn't even get the chance to know their names. What every happened to Katie? Or Mitchell? Myself, Louie, Ty, and Jen were the old folks, the legacy team. Jen was thinking about leaving. Louie, too, and I'd inevitably follow him. I wasn't sure how I could stop them, but I guess it might be easier without Murph.

Back in the good old days, Murph would push away a pile of to-go boxes, cuttings boards, and bowls and gather us round the prep table in the back after an intense dinner rush. He'd croon out this ridiculous congratulatory song before unveiling a case of whataver cheap beer they had at the nearest liquor store. Louie and I joined in his singing one day, probably a decade ago now, and his eyes lit up, like he'd been waiting for it his whole life. He let the two of us share in the drinks even though we were just nineteen then, we swore he was the coolest boss who ever lived. I can still feel his hand on each of our shoulders, butting our heads together like siblings.

Once every season, when we changed our menus, Murph would plan some big staff dinner to celebrate all our work. About six years ago was Ty's first dinner with us. It was where I

first got to know him, his stubborn conviction, his remarkable palette (I always ask for his recommendations at restaurants I've never been to), and his infuriating modesty. It was immediately obvious he was the best cook among our staff, but he still let Jen walk all over him. I think she was envious of his talents, his raw affinity for pulling recipes out of thin air. That's not to say Jen's not talented -- she's just only good at making sandwiches. Which, to her credit, are the entire reason we get a lunch rush every day. Thankfully, Ty ran dinners.

Ty told me on that evening so many years ago now that he'd been looking for a place like this, where the staff were like family and he was free to try new things. Murph let him run wild, and Ty turned the place around, from a homey little joint with good, regular lunch and drab dinners to an iconic neighborhood lunch mainstay and dinner experience.

But at some point over these last few years, Murph grew tepid about his experimentalism, "Why don't we take it down a notch? I've heard street tacos are trendy!" I thought this change in behavior to a desire to grow the business, a need for cash, some mid-life crisis he felt pursued by, like if he stopped chasing his margins his life would be over.

He bought a new car, started dressing differently, and he seemed hellbent on throwing us these unbelievable seasonal dinners. He'd become this gaudy macho man around the restaurant, warming up to those well-dressed customers who tipped so generously. He'd hired a bunch of young waiters, paid them like crap, ignored their requests for a longer break or a tip shares.

Most recently he took us out on a yacht he rented -- a fucking yacht! I found the receipt for the rental, it was like fifteen grand. That's not to mention the band playing, the huge family style dinner out on the deck, I couldn't believe it. All this money he was making and he just throws a party with it?

All that effort, the meal, the ocean air, the music, and still I felt the air was stifling. What was once Murph's boisterous storytelling and heartwarming toasts felt rinsed of their authenticity. He was distant, his eyes sunken and his ramblings detached and uncharismatic. We all complained about the day to each other and chatted, but it just wasn't right. We were all

exhausted from work, and Murph was the only one the drinks seemed to reach. I could tell he wanted to tell us all to smile, to laugh, to sing, to tell stories, reach over each other for food, family style.

We did, sometimes, but it was after dinner, without Murph.

He wasn't willing to prepare the same grandiosity for his final exit as he did for dinners. No last hoorah, no firework show, no speeches.

On Saturday he was there to sing his song, which these days was more of an exercise of withholding our embarassment than any sort of joyous serenade, and Monday afternoon they found his body washed up two miles from where I'd found his car that morning. The receipts tell me he made a final $500 withdrawal on Sunday night, then filled his gas tank, and that was it. He'd left a key on his driver's seat, and a note regarding the will he'd prepared.

Maybe it was the fact he left his failing business to the family none of us had ever met, or maybe it was that he seemed to have been making every shift more and more miserable for the staff the last three years, but I couldn't help but feel like his departure was for the best. I asked Louie to come to the restaurant that night so I could tell him the news. We traded stories of the old Murph over two autumn cocktails Louie had been working on, sat at the bar and tried to cry.

He was pouring a gin and tonic when he said, "Nae, Do you remember how we started working here?"

I smiled. It was so stupid, it's hard to believe that's how this all started. Neither Louie nor I spent much time at home as kids, we just hung out most days. We were practically joined at the hip since middle school.

Through high school we'd come in and buy Jen's sandwiches for lunch (back when it was cheap, but still amazing). Murph convinced us, maybe it was through the occasional free meal or just pure charistmatic energy, to give some work a chance. He seemed to admire something about Louie and I. In all our time working for him he could never grasp what is was that made us

so close, as if growing up around one another was not explanation enough for the familial bond we shared.

Jen had been working there a few years before us, so she was only so much older, and as we aged that gap seemed to close in on itself. Nevertheless, she always held her chin high around us. Louie hated getting orders barked at him, couldn't stand someone he saw as more or less the same age telling him to sweep the floors. But I was usually done doing all that stuff before Jen even got the chance to tell me. Pretty soon I was the one telling Louie to get his ass cleaning, and Jen must've been afraid of getting replaced, because after a while Murph put us both in his office and said, "Jen, you're staying on lunch. Nae, we're gonna train you to help cook dinner." He yelled out the door, "Louie!"

He poked his head in, "Yeah?"

"You wanna learn how to serve drinks?" He never would have dreamed of separating us.

"Oh. Alright," Jen paused over the phone when I told her about Murph. I'd lost track of when her quiet respect for Murph turned into tired indifference. Maybe it was never respect at all, maybe she was just more willing to pretend way back when Louie and I were so close with him. She was a statue at dinners lately, she'd quietly have her plate and then sneak out before you could ask her how she was doing.

"When did we stop enjoying his company?" I had asked Jen this while she smoked a cigarette on the deck of the yacht, leaning on the railing watching wave crests glisten against a black sea of indifference.

She shrugged. "I think it was when he hired that little scientist." She was talking about Ty, and it was true that the business blew up then. It's also true that Ty demanded more from Jen, or Murph did ever since Ty suggested a rotating lunch menu to match the seasonal dinners. It struck a nerve in Jen, that some newbie should come in and suddenly open the door for the

creativity she'd been told to keep under wraps. Lunch was all that kept the business alive before, and Murph was never willing to risk big changes until Ty showed it could succeed.

"I think it was something else. Something he didn't tell us," I looked at Jen. That night her eyes spoke a subtle truth, like she knew something I didn't.

But now I could hear quiet breathing on the other end of the line. I felt again like she wanted to tell me something. "Will we open back up Tuesday?"

"No," I said. We opened on Wednesday.

At least three people were no-shows then. A new waiter, a prep guy we'd hired last month, and Ty. I imagined him standing on that bridge Murph leapt from, looking out over the river and asking what he was trying to find in that murky water. Asking where it all went wrong.

I'd been wondering if the new owners would show up that day, I'd been planning out exactly what I'd tell them. "It's tragic, I can't imagine what this is like for you."

Nothing seemed proper to say. What do you tell a family who's lost its most unreliable and misguided member? I wasn't even sure what they'd look like, I'd never properly met them before. I only even knew they existed because his daughter used to sit at the bar every now and then while Louie and I got lunch in high school, and Murph would talk to her with his hands waving around in some vague defensive gesturing. She always left with a worse look on her face than she came in with, and one day she left and didn't come back.

They came at lunch, though, when one of the waitstaff pulled me aside and told me "his family's here". My stomach turned upside down. I approached the table in a half-daze, unsure of whether to cry or run away, maybe duck and cover? Murph's wife wore a red blazer, sat upright in the most uncomfortable way like her chair was covered in spikes. His daughter sat across from her, slouched over with her chin on her hands, watching the cracks in the tabletop.

The wife locked eyes with me, and before I could find any words to say, she summoned a slip of paper and laid it flat on the table. "We want to give you this place. I'm done taking gifts

from the likes of him." I wanted to ask about Murph, what had been happening to him for the last few years, but the wife's silence was so imposing I had to let them leave.

When Murph's wife turned to leave, she stopped, turned around, as if remembering something. "Expect a visit from another interested party. You can blame him for that little gift, too."

They let me keep his car. Paula (that was his wife's name, as I'd learned from the contract) said it was "the ugliest vehicle I've ever laid my eyes on". It *was* a bit ostentatious, the bright blue BMW. I kept digging in there, and found several receipts for a storage locker rental across town. The earliest I could find was from five years ago. When I arrived there I handed the key he'd left to the clerk and he led me a tiny garage door and walked off. He didn't even ask my name.

I got a visit from a couple of suits the next day, the sort of folks who walk with a grossly confident stride that could only come from family money. No doubt this was who Paula warned me of, but I swore I recognized them.

"We will be pursuing legal recourse on this. I hope you understand," he was using that tone of forced politeness, like the angel on his shoulder pleaded with the devil asking him not to thrash me at the shoulders. What he put on the counter was a contract, with Murph's signature, to sell the restaurant, piece by piece, to them. Apparently the deal was voided by Murph's will turning over the rest of his yet unsold shares to the family, then them to me. They wanted to buy my shiny new majority stake.

"It's only fair," the other one made an even worse attempt at politeness. "We are really just looking out for you here, this business needs the helping hand of someone like us. We're doing you a favor, really, you're going to make plenty more money this way."

So Murph was making all this big money from these assholes. It explains those outrageous dinners. Also explains why we got so much busier all of a sudden, why Murph started controlling Ty's experiments, why us legacy folks all worked harder with less hours, why we hired all these younger, underpaid waiters, and why we all seemed to start hating this place at the same time.

Those receipts for jewelery, clothes -- at first I thought he was humoring the whims of a mistress or some secret lover, but it makes more sense to me that he would be trying to win over his family with petty offerings. I can't understand why he thought he could win you over this way, with material alone -- like he could lie to your face but leave you a gift and it would all just be okay.

I found Ty on the bridge on Thursday morning. I at least knew he wasn't there to jump -- he understood he could talk to me before making big decisions. I looked out at the washed-out banks, the mangled trees hanging listlessly over the water's edge.

"I don't know what he wanted me to do with it all," I was talking about the cash in the storage locker. I counted somewhere around $150,000, which explains his weekly withdrawals. It was disappointing, actually, that he would so readily leave us such a large sum of money, but not a single word to any of us before he left.

"Fuck what he wanted," Ty's hair tumbled in the breeze. I wondered if he knew how beautiful he was there, if it ever occurred to him that he might be better off somewhere else. Why was he still here? Was he chasing after something we used to have? Was it me, Louie, Murph, or the food, or was it just the only place he had left to go back to?

I wanted to slap him across the face, to tell him that Murph was just looking out for us, but I know that's not true. He said he loved us, and I believed him always, but really I never could tell when he was lying. And as much as I hate that bag of cash he gave us, that money was the only reason we could afford *not* to sell back to those little suit-and-tie imps. Was Murph playing some long game to outwit the man, or did he just regret selling out and wanted to pay us

back? He could have just told us what was going on, just dropped that façade for one day, and maybe we could have come together like the family he wished for so pitifully.

"What did he tell you the reason was to take your work off the menu?" I figured there must have been something there, some nugget of truth in his ridiculous excuse.

"He said to give the people what they want."

"And that was good enough for you?"

"And he gave me a raise. Of course it wasn't good enough," he put his face in his hands. "Do you think all that money counts as a goodbye? How'd he think this works?"

I put my arm over his shoulder and watched the sun creep up in the sky. "He must want us to keep going. But you're right. I'm not supposed to care about what he wants."

What he wants. I should've stopped caring about that before I took this job, before I sang that song with him, before I took his business over.

"Fact is, we have what he gave us, and we have the restaurant. Forget Murph, we've got Louie and Jen, we've got each other, right? Can't we keep going?" I looked in his eyes for some fragment of hope. He smiled sweetly.

"You're right. Murph brought us together, but he doesn't have to tear us apart. Maybe we can get by, at least for a while." Down below, the river spurned, ran high at the banks, pushing and pulling at the clay and dirt, roots of ambitious riverside trees exposed by the current. We stood there a while, the world kept turning.

Three Days at the Intersection of Fifth and Vine

The Street Coroner was a little gray brick building on the corner, flanked by VINE VAPE AND GLASS and a gym called UP & ATOM: NUCLEAR FITNESS, which a year ago was a brand new art gallery and studio run by a starry-eyed couple from across town. Folks often speculated that Cook named the place “Street Coroner” in an attempt to make it an unappealing choice for visitors. He also made numerous attempts to scrub it off the internet, as if hoping it might handicap the business.

Cook lived in a tiny box sat neatly atop the slightly larger box of the business. Between these two boxes one could fit Cook’s entire life. The smaller one had a bedroom and a bathroom. Every day, Cook creaked down the old steps to the main floor into the kitchen to start baking. As the first rosy lights blossomed out over the buildings onto the street, Cook was pulling from the oven tray after tray of round, puffy croissants, golden brown biscuits, and thin little chestnut-hued ginger snaps. With the pastries neatly arranged on the bar-top by the register, Cook stared long and solemnly at the bleeding sky.

At precisely 7AM he unlocked the heavy glass door at the front and welcomed in Old Lady Martin and a wave of construction crewmen. Old Lady Martin used to come with her husband and they would sit and play cards at the corner booth. Now she sits alone, always at the same table and always facing the door. Cook used to give them coffee on the house. Now he gives her breakfast, too.

This year the crewmen were under contract with some big company from out of town. Most asked for a black coffee and Cook had learned to make a few dozen doughnuts each morning this time of year to appease their endless appetite. They took up all but one of the cracked navy blue vinyl booths along the window and chewed and grunted until they left for their shift.

As usual, Cook had sold out of pastries by 9AM when Nae came in, her eyes drooping and darkened but sturdy and mindful in her stride. She slid around the faded oak bar and nodded to

Cook, slipping smoothly past him to the line of coffee pots along the wall between the kitchen and the dining room. Nae pumped a mug full to the brim, hiding it under the counter. She swung open a cubby beneath the coffee pots and whipped an apron free of lint and particulates before fastening it tightly about her waist. By the time the lunch crowd rolled in, she flew about the place like a hummingbird.

Cook closed shop at 4, and reopened for dinner at 5. Nae liked to stick around during that hour and study Cook's movements behind a glass of whatever he'd put on tap for the night.

The metallic gray butler doors swung open from the kitchen as Cook pressed back-first through them before spinning around to face his employee. He laid on the bar two sizable bowls of chili. Cook placed his palms on the bar, arms wide, head down, and sighed.

"I feel like things have changed," Cook lifted his head and looked at the ceiling.

"Maybe," Nae said with a mouthful of chili. "Been gettin so busy I can hardly remember what happened in a day. Then again, I don't really mind the hustle and bustle. Sure, it's busy, but we get by."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" Cook seemed to immediately regret asking this question. He pushed halfheartedly at his chili with a little spoon.

"Re-in-car-what?" Nae reacted as if Cook had been possessed by some unfamiliar spirit. "What're you goin' on about?"

"You know, like rebirth. You die and you wake up the next morning as a bear in the woods or something."

"Oh, gimme a break, Cook," Nae pushed her already-empty bowl away and folded her arms. There was a knock on the front door -- the bartender. Nae turned and dropped off the barstool, rolling her eyes as she jogged lazily to the door and unlocked it, then returned to her seat, collecting her things. The little bell atop the door jangled as the bartender clambered inside and fought the door shut against the cold wind howling. With a heavy *click* he locked the door behind himself. Cook let out another sigh as Nae tossed him her apron.

"How was the morning?" the bartender said this like an alien practicing human speech.

"Not terrible. You bring those papers?" Cook was referring to the new employee paperwork. He'd grown tired of asking such questions of bartenders.

"Crap. Hold on, I'll go grab 'em. They're in my car." he once again fought the door shut awkwardly, shaking his head and swearing under his breath as he marched down the street to where he had parked. Nae turned and looked at Cook disapprovingly.

"Why don't you just stop doin' dinner, Cook? All this ain't worth it."

"I would if I could, Nae. I stop running dinner and it all goes to shit."

"It's already goin' to shit, Cook."

When the door opened again the bell shook violently in a gust of wind and snapped off its housing. With an awful clanging of metal it struck the floor and the three unfortunate victims of the noise startled and jumped like frightened cats. The bartender leaned back into the door to ensure its proper closing before grasping at his hair in frustration.

"Damnit, sorry guys," he looked down at the bits of resonant metal on the floor.

"It doesn't matter. Just pick that thing up and let's get ready," Cook resigned to the kitchen. Nae threw on a pale orange overcoat and nodded to the bartender.

"Good luck out there!" she called to the kitchen.

"Yeah, yeah. Bye Naomi," Cook's muffled voice echoing out the kitchen sounded like it came from the end of a tunnel. Nae slipped out the door, opening it just narrow enough so that it closed softly behind her before she put her head down and walked home in that concrete dusk.

Some dinner rushes were better than others. This particular night, a group of six out-of-towners came to The Street Coroner. Of all the places they could have chosen, Cook thought. The man who paid the bill said he had heard about it from a friend.

"I guess it's more of a small group place, but thanks anyway!" his grating voice reverberated in Cook's skull. It was hot inside and a haze had settled over the dining room. The

bartender winced every time he felt the cold air from the opening of the front door. He buzzed around anxiously, asking every question twice and repeating to himself the answer over and over while another nagging voice chased after him. “No, I didn’t order that.” “Oh, I think that’s hers.” “What is this?” Cook occasionally stepped out of the kitchen to shorten the line of annoyed faces.

By the end of that hellish service, The Street Coroner was empty besides the bartender. He sat exhausted on a stool, his cheek to the wood surface of the bar stinking of hops. He pushed around a wet napkin in front of him and watched the scene outside the front window. Cook was standing out there, pretending to listen to the landlord whose head barely reached Cook’s shoulders. He shuffled idly while the landlord’s face contorted and head bobbled. Cook put his hands up and then dropped them to his sides. He said a few brief words and then marched past the landlord back into the building. The bartender and Cook stood there, resigned to their place, floors unswept and dishes piled into bustubs and paperwork unfiled and the air nauesating.

The following morning, Old Lady Martin waited patiently outside the locked glass door. She wore a great big pink coat with a fur-lined hood that covered her short, wispy white hair. She tucked her arms close to her body, and looked around the street, first rays of pink and orange sunlight touching the concrete. She turned and peered into the door, cupping her hands around her eyes against the glass. Not a light on in the place, not a single thing moving. She stood waiting for an hour, and then she left. The construction crew was across the street at Starbucks.

The police arrived before Nae. The landlord had found Cook’s note on his bed. The bathroom door was pried open by the fire department, and now Cook lay in the back of an ambulance parked on the corner, wrapped in a black bag sat wrinkled and unmoving like a discarded idea crumpled and tossed at the trash. Nae sat ghostly white on the curb, little droplets frozen out her nostrils onto her upper lip and the wind whipping her hair in vicious

circles about her face. She did not move, just closed her eyes as gravity tugged at her head to fall to her knees.

The two remaining Street Coroner workers sat shoulder to shoulder against the blue vinyl, Nae's head in her folded arms on the table and the bartender dazed and uncomfortable. Across from them, the landlord picked at a split in the skin around his left pinkie nail.

"I'm sorry, guys," he did not look at them. "I can't believe he would do something like this. You have my every sympathy."

No one moved, or ventured to speak. The air filled with ugliness and the glowing sunrise outside the window had morphed into a smoldering gray haze. the bartender sniffled. The landlord shifted in place and gazed about the room. He studied the ceiling for dirt and cracks.

"What's gonna happen to this place?" Nae had finally lifted her head just out of her arms.

"Well, that depends. Do either of you want to pay the rent?"

Silence.

"Didn't Cook leave behind anything?" Nae stumbled over choked breaths, "Assets or a bank account or somethin?"

"Well, he left behind a rather substantial debt to me, but I wouldn't make you pay for that," the landlord lowered his brow in thought. "Just let me know before the end of the week, please." He knocked on the table and slid out of the booth clumsily before swooping a windbreaker over his torso and marching swiftly out of The Street Coroner.

The next morning Old Lady Martin stood still as a statue, squinting at the paper taped on the inside of the front window.

CLOSED PERMANENTLY. RIP THE BEST DAMN COOK WHO EVER LIVED.

She mouthed the words to herself like a priestess muttering some divine incantation. She turned away and began to hobble slowly back the way she came. Then, the jangling of the bell on the door. Old Lady Martin rocked about to turn back toward the dead place.

“Mrs. Martin!” Nae called out.

“Oh, Naomi!”

“Come on in, let me tell you what happened, get you something to eat.”

Nae had prepared a batch of cinnamon rolls Cook left unbaked in the fridge. She carefully lifted one of the steaming buns away from its friends and its sides tore easily from the bunch and the silvery icing dripped off like molten pearl. They each had a coffee and were quiet and still at that corner booth while the sun slipped upon the clouds and lit the sky in that magnificent way that stole your eyes and the two mourners sat looking.

“Why would he leave all of it?” Old Lady Martin shifted her head slowly toward the abandoned woman across from her.

“Didn’t see a way to make it right, I guess,” Nae sipped from her ivory-colored mug and watched the steam bellow from that watery tar.

“But he wasn’t like that. He would have started again someplace else,” Old Lady Martin lifted her hands listlessly.

"If I know Cook it wasn’t just the money eatin’ him alive,” Nae shut her eyes and breathed in deeply. “I hate to ask this, Old Lady Martin, but could you afford to keep this place running?” Nae felt a twist in her stomach.

“Oh dear…” the poor old woman trailed off. “I don’t know, honey, I haven’t much left.” Her eyes swelled in a way she had forgotten. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to do.”

Nae switched to the other side of the booth and put her arms over the crying woman. She lay her head gently on Old Lady Martin’s shoulder, bobbing softly with each whimper. Nae looked out the window, watching the vibrant peach sky rot to gray.

Second Submission

Statement

This story was born from the coalescence of a few separate ideas -- the most important one for me personally being the ending. On the first draft I don't think I earned the ending I wrote in the first draft, but that's all the more reason to fix up the story. I ended up shifting away from the music's importance in plot and considered it another facet of mom's thematic "hold" over the characters and their needs and desires.

This revision is far less all-encompassing or ambitious than that of my first submission. This is for a few reasons -- it started out more fleshed out than the first story, I had less time to revise it, and I was more invested in the general flow of this story than I was of the first one.

The most important change in this revision is the rebalancing of the story toward mom. I would almost call her the main character -- or more accurately, she's the central mystery of this story. I can't say I accomplished everything I needed to with this revision, but I definitely created something more coherent and real in mom's character and backstory. That which was felt unearned in the first draft feels… *less* unearned in the revision. I'm still not sure I got there with the buildup to the end. There needs to be a broader tonal shift as the story moves along that just doesn't come across in the writing.

I will continue to work on this one after class is over and done with.

Judge

I taught myself to read sheet music from a book Father Lyle brought with when he first arrived here. Mom always scoffed when she saw me pull out a piece of paper music. She'd point to her chest and tell me "God's music is in here". All she knew were the songs Father Brand taught her as a child, memorized in careful, sequenced repetitive motion and proper form. Dad always told me to be careful asking about for details, that it was best I just learn the music she wanted to teach me and try to practice sheet music in my own time.

Father Lyle rode into town on the back of a wagon a few years back, welcomed gladly in the absence of Brand. I remember vividly the glittering cross on his neck, his hand touching mine as he passed our house to the church, his neat black shirt and pants, his white bald head covered neatly with a black widebrimmed hat. Brand had been missing for months then, what few things he possessed collecting dust in the preacher's little white house across the street from the church. It's where I found most of my sheet music. Or, it's where Father Lyle discovered the collection of sheet music we now kept in the church.

At Lyle's first service, mom played her usual songs -- *Amazing Grace* at the end, but her rhythm uncharacteristically off-kilter and sluggish. Lyle spoke a few words to her after the service ended, his towering stature made all the more glorious by the glittering white of the robes he wore at processions. Mom stood like a mouse at the feet of a giant, but scowled indignantly no less.

When Brand disappeared, she seemed to withdraw into herself, to cork up the proverbial bottle of her emotions. Most nights she secluded herself to her study. She kept a large bible neatly on the desk in there, notes scrawled in the margins of each page, ornamental figurines and photos hanging like charms from the ceiling, swaying lightly while she sat hunched over the leaves of scripture.

"That manchild makes a mockery of our Lord," mom's voice split through the room. Dad was fearfully silent.

Lyle seemed to have uncorked that bubbling disdain in mom, and since then dad hardly even tried to get through to her. It began to feel as if just about any question or comment in remote conflict with her desires was tantamount to a physical attack, each word a further transgression against her godliness. We couldn't even mention Father Lyle without a five minute lecture on the "good and proper ways of our Lord". I would retreat to the pastures to watch the animals graze in the fading dusk, and dad would join me some time later, silent in the dark.

I asked him, one of those nights, why mom was so deeply offended by Lyle's ways.

"Is it because he lets me play sheet music?"

"Yes, and no. Mom has her ways, Brand's ways. And Lyle seems an affront to her whole idea of a preacher."

"What's so different about him?"

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. "He's here for more than just her," he looked off at our wandering little herd. I felt through his huge palm some distant longing, a hanging about like autumn leaves dangling in their last moments before death.

"Is she angry at him for blessing the cows?" Lyle loved blessing things. He blessed newborn babies, he blessed crops for good yield, he blessed shoes to last longer. He said it brought the light into focus. He offered to bless our home, but mom wouldn't have it.

"Well, yes. But not for the reason you'd think," looking behind us at the church, dad clicked his tongue. "Why don't we have him bless the piano? We don't have to tell mom."

I'd grown quite attached to that old spruce piano. I knew all its unevenness, each scratch on its surface, which keys to touch lightly and which to hammer down on, the overtones and intricacies of each string behind each key, but I could only play while Father Lyle was around. He'd lock the doors and walk across the road to the little white house when he was done tidying up. He'd stay a good while, Father Lyle kept a tight ship, but never past sundown.

One night in September I snuck out of our house, crossed the yard to the church and tried prying open the little window by the piano. The cattle watched with curious eyes from the fence behind me while I pulled fruitlessly at the edges. Walking back, the lights flicked on at the little white house. I scurried back to my room.

There was a towering stained glass window at the back of the church hall. It housed a colossal image of Christ, beckoning with his hand outstretched, fingers poised delicately, and his other hand upon his heart. Underneath his gaze the next day I scoured the church for a set of spare keys while Father Lyle eyed me suspiciously from behind a bible in the back row of the chamber. I told him I was looking for more old sheet music. If he believed me he'd have told me it was useless, that we'd certainly found it all. Instead I heard his voice echo off the walls, "I can give you a key, Eli."

I wanted to pretend to be surprised, feign some confusion about the suggestion, but as I approached Father Lyle's outstretched hand, I just nodded and took the little piece of metal.

"You have a gift, Eli. It's the least I can do to give you the space to use it," his gaze was warming. It felt as if it were completely dark inside that chamber besides the spotlight of his eyes upon my downturned head. He continued, "Don't worry about your mother."

He smiled as I looked up at him and nodded again, "Thank you, Father." He was wearing his out-of-service black garments, just that little square of white on his collar recalling his community with higher power.

He turned to sit back in his place, but hesitated, and faced me again. "Do you know why Father Brand never offered that sheet music to your mother? Or you, for that matter?"

"I guess not. Did Brand dislike sheet music? Like mom?"

"Well, he didn't know how to read it. But your mother did."

I thought I'd misheard him. "What do you mean?"

"She played sheet music from memory at church, all those songs she'd been collecting and hiding away in the attic of that house. Brand never knew about it all, he thought she'd been touched by God. He'd give sermons to the tune of your mother's playing."

"Why would she have to hide it? And why doesn't she want me playing it?"

"I'm not so sure. It seemed to me that Brand believed in a certain holiness in song, that to transcribe and replay it was to take in vain that which God channels so carefully through the honest musician. Like a priest speaks some echo of the word of God, a musician may broadcast the incomprehensible flutterings of the heart of the Lord. One day the music changed, Brand's sermons became cold and rigid with the silence of the piano, and your mother had a terribly lost look about her."

He stopped, and gazed around the hall. His eyes landed back upon my guffawed face, and he must have sensed my utter disbelief.

"Eli, I must confess, this is not the first time I've lived in this town. I used to come to this church with my family. I recognized your mother's face in yours, and I knew you must be the child of the pianist raised by the preacher Brand. I have hoped that I could do better in allowing you to flourish than Brand did for your poor mother."

When I finally left, I wasn't sure I hadn't been dreaming. It would have been suicidal to ask mom if it were true, it certainly would have endangered Lyle.

The next night I ate my dinner quickly. Dad waited with his hands in his lap. Mom crossed her arms from across the table, "I want to come with you. I want to hear you practice."

I pursed my lips, "Mom…"

"That Lyle better not be giving you any ideas. You are the only one keeping God in my church now," her voice broke slightly. She tried to keep her face commanding and composed, but her eyes glistened behind the fiery gaze.

Dad stirred in his seat. “Honey, it’s okay.” He tried to defuse her mood and I saw the fury boiling beneath her puffy eyes. Dad got up and touched her shoulder. She swiped his hand away.

I let the silence hang. Mom stewed and stared at me from under her brow. She glanced off over my shoulder, and her expression fell to disappointment. She waved me off and scoffed. I left without another word. Outside, the lights were on in the little white house.

Evening sessions were more of a spiritual experience to me even than playing during a service. Something about the darkness, the enormous sarcophagus of the church hall and the subtle warm tones of the echoes off the walls, spoke to me words of musical liturgy, a sermon of sound and color. I would stay long enough to know that mom was in her study, return home to the quiet living room where dad sat watching the fireplace unblinking, whiskey in hand. He’d never move when I entered, just lift his left hand in acknowledgement as I saw myself to bed.

One evening in November I unlocked the church doors and pushed open the heavy slabs just enough to slip in and shut them behind me. The rafters looked down at me, painted strangely by the morphing sunset through the glowing image of Christ in the window. I opened the cabinet on the piano, lifted the keylid and exposed that pale face of ivory. I opened the little window by the piano, the cool autumn air washing over me with the sweet smell of hay and rain.

Across the yard I saw our back door close. Lights flicked on behind the curtained window to mom’s study. Was she watching? Listening?

The closet door was left slightly ajar, and, stepping into the musty little room, it looked like a tornado came through and swept all the books onto the floor, and, to my dismay, my little binder of sheet music was nowhere in the mess. I cursed my mother under my breath.

Fury gave way to music, and something in it stirred up the livestock. Chickens hung around outside under the windowsill, goats bleeted responses off in their pens, and dad’s little herd of cows gathered, packed close against the fence like a gleeful concert crowd. Their heads

swayed lightly, my fingers glided across the keys, I felt the cold ivory push back gently on my fingertips. The music felt close to me that night. It flowed through me to the keys, and then out the window and over the herd.

Not long after dad killed one of the steer. When he addressed the grand twenty-foot table in the church at Thanksgiving he said it was the most magnificent animal he'd ever put to slaughter. I could hardly disagree.

Dad cared for the cattle in a way not unlike how he cared for me. He saw to their illnesses, watched over the calves. He knew each animal just by looking at them, they knew his voice and the way he'd say their names. When it came time to put one under the knife he would spend all day in the church, then put the cow down gently in the night and give it a proper dressing in the barn the next morning.

When I'd had my fill at Thanksgiving I stood and looked at mom. Then, the piano.

Her face went from apathetic to appalled. "No you're not. Not now, not any time, you spiteful little -- "

A hand fell on her shoulder from behind. Father Lyle smiled, "I think that would be lovely, Eli." She winced, and quieted.

I'm not sure if I was more shocked at Father Lyle's audacity or the fact that mom let it slide. The noise of the crowded table drowned out whatever she sat there mumbling through gritted teeth. Dad bowed his head to the priest as he moved on to converse with the other guests.

I continue toward the piano, but mom grabbed me by the wrist. I could not help but look in her eyes. They burned right through my skull. She shifted her gaze behind me and her grip eased, and I pulled away and continued, feeling the hand of the stained glass Christ beckon me toward the piano.

The morning after Thanksgiving, mom's dissheveled hair hung loose over her breakfast. "You will not continue this descent into darkness, Eli." Her face turned upwards, strands of dark wiry hair over her eyes. Tears stained her cheeks. "I will not allow you to continue to desecrate the house of God."

I sat, eyes down, fingernails digging into my palms under the table. I wanted to jump across the table and grab her by the neck. I wanted to get Father Lyle. The wind howled outside, distant chimes on neighboring porches twinkled. I felt dad enter the room.

He tried to bargain with her. He offered to talk with Father Lyle, even to cut ties with him. "What good would that do," mom cried, "that you would abandon the church entirely? We are stuck with that awful man! Trapped!"

He asked what on earth could possibly be done to make her feel okay about me playing my songs. She looked out the window. "I want your herd." Her face relaxed suddenly, the spilling anger washing away into some relaxed epiphany.

Dad looked at her, vexed. "What do you mean?"

"I get to choose which are slaughtered, and when. And Eli can choose his songs. An eye for an eye, my love."

I could see the life leaving him, his posture fell and his eyes sunk deep in their sockets, like a man condemned. "Okay. If that's what it takes to keep you both happy."

Mom seemed satiated by the exchange, like the pouring of some of her bottomless dread and unhappiness into the vessel of her husband had saved us from a less trivial outburst.

After that, dad started to listen with the cows when I played. He'd sit perched on the fence watching the sun touch the horizon, patting the cows on the head while they mooed happily. With a soft shimmer the music would end, the sun disappearing behind the outstretched hills beneath a splinter of orange, and with careful hands I would softly shut the keylid.

I can't imagine why dad let her walk all over him. Lyle would have granted an anullment. And if it were all for me, he'd have ended it a long time ago. The days were shorter now, the sun set faster. I'd watch his breath hang in the air above his broadshouldered silhouette.

Before he married mom, dad was something of an untamed man, a drifting western caricature of uncertainty caught between his own self-interest and that of the world. Father Brand reeled in his wandering soul, so he said, under the wing of the land, of God, and trained him in the ways of raising livestock. It was in that blooming adolescence he first heard the song of Brand's adopted daughter, my soon-to-be mother, from the window of the church while he moved cattle and tilled fields.

Brand had opened that window, and thereby tied together the threads of two lost souls bound for some sort of love. By the time I was born, they were married, living simply, nextdoor to the preacher who'd brought them together. Dad seemed conflicted about Father Brand, though, each time mom would praise him dad would look at her pitifully. He always told me it was the cows who told him to seek the music of the church, that Brand was but a necessary teacher, a protective keeper of knowledge dad saw as worth the trouble for the sake of love and livestock.

In those sunsets on the piano bench by the window, dad never looked back at me. One night I looked out and he was gone. The herd shuffled uneasily. The lights were on in the barn. I counted the cows -- and missed his largest bull. And that was the last I ever saw of my father.

We held his funeral on Christmas day. I played a requiem from the little white house collection. Mom spoke but a few words of the hard work he'd done before his untimely demise, the beautiful animals he'd raised. The irony he'd been gored by the bull couldn't have been lost on her. I clenched my teeth and played all the songs she used to know while she pretended to have loved him. Outside, the herd had more to say than anyone else, mooing at the great window like a choir accompaniment to my playing.

Father Lyle stood before the long black coffin with his arms raised over it. His blessing spoke better of dad than mom even tried to. Christ shown in the window, arm outstretched in peace toward the congregation of dad's friends and the people mom grew up with. Mom stood now in the front row with her hands folded and her eyes closed, forehead against her fingertips, muttering to herself. Turning her head up, she stared at Father Lyle, tears in her eyes.

I was back on the piano bench that evening, watching the sun sink into the earth through the open window. The air was bitter cold now but I left it open anyway. I rested my hands on the keys and breathed deeply, let the music take me. I did not hear the animals. Perhaps were mourning their caretaker.

When the sun had all but disappeared I went to close the keylid, and it slipped. A great wooden thud echoed from wall to wall, and an icy gust from the window ran down my back. I went over to close it, and looked upon the empty pasture outside the window. There wasn't an animal in sight.

I shut the window tight and listened to my footsteps bounce across the great expanse of the chamber as I walked through rows of pews to the doors. Outside, across the street, the lights were on in the little white house.

Through the darkness I heard a cow cry out. My head turned. Some instinctual force guided my feet to the fenceline. I scanned across the pasture. Nothing.

Blades of grass speckled white with dew reflecting moonlight tumbled lightly with the breeze. I hopped the fence into the pasture. The wet grass gave an icy crunch beneath my feet, those dewdrops frozen stiff as the air filled with an unearthly cold. My breath blew cloudy, white over the blue darkness.

There was another cry. Louder now. I followed the fence to the woods, the barren trees' twisted branches like spiderwebs against the stars. The moon cast great silver beams through the spindly limbs like needles piercing the darkness.

In crackling branches and wet autumn refuse, I stopped short, held my breath. My eyes widened. My heart pounded. The blood retreated to every extremity of my body, my arms and legs charged with terror. Before me, a clearing, a pool of shallow water.

Reflecting the moonlight, the bright white robes of a figure on the other side. It slouched over a mass of fur and flesh, blackened in shadow. A bull. It had a hole where its left horn once was, and a left horn protruding from its neck. Around it lay two, four, ten other cattle, laying limp in a dead heap.

The robed figure slowly reared its head. It stood up, hands on its sides. Its face was painted deep crimson. It murmured lightly to itself, brought its hands together. Through the darkness its eyes met mine. I could not move. It looked past me. I turned away.

Trying to run, I tripped over dry thorny brush. I felt my legs push me back up. All I could think to do was run to Father Lyle's. I didn't feel the cold anymore.

I burst out the woods, twigs and rocks slicing at my feet inside my shoes. I gasped for air, tumbled over the fence onto my knees before I stood and kept running.

My feet slammed on the rigid earth with such rhythm I could hear music playing. I thought I heard piano through the blood pumping in my ears. Passing the church, the back window was shattered.

Pieces of the peaceful Christ glimmered in the moonlight.

I stopped so quickly I slipped. Looking behind me, nothing but my own breaths hanging where I left them.

I felt naked where the moon watched me. I rose and ran in quiet stupor toward the broken window, a song coming quickly into earshot. I peered through the broken glass. The white robes shone so brightly I had to squint to see the figure at the piano bench. Dark red hands smashed the keys so hard the cabinet shook in thunderous, terrible beauty, *Amazing Grace*.

She looked at me, her gaze split my skull and my legs fell limp beneath me. Bile creeped up from my stomach. In those eyes I saw the face of a god, a god whose unbending will would surely be fulfilled, who cared not for the silly whims of man or mammal, who knew but one song and sang it so fiercely as to shatter any who might dare to threaten its immutable beauty. Because none could challenge a god unchanging, entirely resistant to bending or shaping, sharpened so and with such uncompromising brutality that it might whittle away humanity to become its perfect servant of senseless ritual and cyclical hatred.

I dropped away from the window, finding again the desperate need to run to the little white house. I turned the corner of the church and fell to my knees on the roadside. A great white tower of flame. In the yard, a crucifix silhouetted black against the fire. Father Lyle screamed to the heavens.

Judge

I taught myself to read sheet music from a book in the church closet Father Lyle found among the dusty bibles and frayed gold tassles of ornamental clothing. Mom always scoffed when she saw me pull out a piece of paper music. She'd point to her chest and tell me "God's music is in here". At mass, she only let me play the songs she'd taught me as a child, the ones she'd learned from John. I once brought to mass a copy of a hymn she'd never heard and she tore it up in front of me. She doesn't even play at mass ever since Father Lyle started preaching.

Father Lyle rode into town on the back of a wagon a few years back. I remember vividly the glittering cross on his neck, his hand touching mine as he passed our house to the church, his neat black shirt and pants, his white bald head covered neatly with a black widebrimmed hat. We'd been short a minister since Father Brand disappeared. What few things Brand possessed collected dust in the little white house across the street. It's where I found most of my sheet music. Or, it's where Father Lyle discovered the collection of sheet music we now kept in the church when he moved into that house.

"Good riddance," mom said. She hadn't been happy with a minister since John passed. John wasn't even ordained, but mom always spoke highly of him, "He was the most godfearing man in this town, always was, never been a more faithful man."

"Father Lyle's quite a faithful man if I ever saw one," dad once said.

"That manchild makes a mockery of our Lord," her voice split through the room. Dad fell silent. I wished he'd try a little harder.

Dad was fond of Father Lyle ever since he blessed the cows. He blessed the window, too. It was this brand new stained glass window in the back of the church that was installed, an arch, pointed at the top, stood in the middle was an image of Christ about six feet tall, hand gently outstretched and palm forward, fingers poised in a strange but delicate fashion.

He blessed newborn babies, he blessed crops for good yield, he blessed shoes to last longer. He said it brought the light into focus. He offered to bless our home, but mom wouldn't have it. Dad suggested he bless the upright piano in the church. We didn't tell mom about that.

I'd grown quite attached to that old spruce piano. I knew all its unevenness, each scratch on its surface, which keys to touch lightly and which to hammer down on, the overtones and intricacies of each string behind each key, but I could only play while Father Lyle was around. He'd lock the doors and walk across the road to the little white house when he was done tidying up. He'd stay a good while -- Father Lyle kept a tight ship -- but never past sundown.

One night in September I snuck out across the yard and tried prying open the huge stained glass window at the back of the church. Dad's cattle watched with curious eyes from the fence behind me while I pulled fruitlessly at the edges. Walking back, I saw the lights flick on at the little white house. I jogged to my backdoor.

The next day I scoured the church for a set of spare keys while Father Lyle eyed me suspiciously from behind a bible in the back row of the chamber. I told him I was looking for more old sheet music. If he believed me he'd have told me it was useless, that we'd certainly found it all. Instead I heard his voice echo off the walls, "I can give you a key, Eli."

I wanted to pretend to be surprised, but as I approached Father Lyle's outstretched hand, I just nodded and took the little piece of metal.

"You have a gift, Eli. It's the least I can do to give you the space to use it," his gaze was warming. It felt as if it were completely dark inside that chamber besides the spotlight of his eyes upon my downturned head. Maybe it was just those shining white robes he wore. He continued, "Don't worry about your mother."

He smiled as I looked up at him and nodded again, "Thank you, Father."

The next night I ate my dinner quickly. Dad waited with his hands in his lap. Mom crossed her arms from across the table, “I want to come with you. I want to hear you practice.”

I pursed my lips, “Mom…”

“That Lyle better not be giving you any ideas. You are the only one keeping God in my church now,” her voice broke slightly. She tried to keep her face commanding and composed, but her eyes glistened behind her fiery gaze.

Dad stirred in his seat. “Honey, it’s okay.” He tried to defuse her mood and I saw her fury boiling beneath her puffy eyes. Dad got up and touched her shoulder. She swiped his hand away.

I let the silence hang. Mom stewed and stared at me from under her brow. She glanced off over my shoulder, and her expression fell to disappointment. She waved me off and scoffed. I left without another word. Outside, the lights were on in the little white house.

One November evening I unlocked the church doors and pushed open the heavy slabs just enough to slip in and shut them behind me. The rafters looked down at me, painted strangely by the sunset through the glowing image of Christ in the window. I opened the cabinet on the piano, lifted the keylid and exposed that pale face of ivory. I turned and approached the great window. I unlatched and swung it open, letting in the cool autumn air.

I went to the closet to pick out something to practice. The door was left slightly ajar, and, stepping into the musty little room, it looked like a tornado came through and swept all the books onto the floor. My little binder of sheet music was nowhere in the mess.

Fury gave way to music, and something in it stirred up the livestock. Chickens hung around outside under the windowsill, goats bleeted responses off in their pens, and dad’s little herd of cows gathered, packed close against the fence like a gleeful concert crowd. Their heads swayed lightly, my fingers glided across the keys, I felt the cold ivory push back gently on my fingertips. The music felt close to me that night. It flowed through me to the keys, and then out the window and over the herd.

Not long after dad killed one of the steer. When he addressed the grand twenty-foot table in the church at Thanksgiving he said it was the most magnificent animal he'd ever put to slaughter. I could hardly disagree.

Dad cared for the cattle in a way not unlike how he cared for me. He saw to their illnesses, watched over the calves. He knew each animal just by looking at them, they knew his voice and the way he'd say their names. When it came time to put one under the knife he would spend all day in the church, then put the cow down gently in the night and give it a proper dressing in the barn the next morning. Anything he couldn't use he would offer to the stray dogs in town.

When I'd had my fill at Thanksgiving I turned and tapped dad on the shoulder, "Can I go play something for everyone? This isn't mass," I leaned to look at Mom the next seat over, then back to dad.

Dad hesitated, looked to his right. Mom's face went from apathetic to appalled. She started to say something, but a hand fell on her shoulder from behind. Father Lyle smiled, "I think that would be lovely, Eli."

I'm not sure if I was more shocked at Father Lyle's audacity or the fact that mom let it slide. The noise of the crowded table drowned out whatever she sat there mumbling through gritted teeth. Dad bowed his head to the priest as he moved on to converse with the other guests. Dad cleared his throat and touched my shoulder, nodding subtly toward the back of the chamber.

I stood and started towards the piano, but mom grabbed me by the wrist. I could not help but look in her eyes. They burned right through my skull. She shifted her gaze behind me and her grip eased, and I pulled away and continued, feeling the hand of the stained glass Christ beckon me toward the piano.

The morning after Thanksgiving, mom's dissheveled hair hung loose over her breakfast. "You will not continue this descent into darkness, Eli." Her face turned upwards, strands of dark wiry hair over her eyes. Tears stained her cheeks. "I will not allow you to play those accursed songs anymore."

I sat, eyes down, fingernails digging into my palms under the table. I wanted to jump across the table and grab her by the neck. I wanted to get Father Lyle. The wind howled outside, distant chimes on neighboring porches twinkled. I felt dad walk into the room.

He tried to bargain with her. He offered to talk with Father Lyle, even to cut ties with him. He asked what on earth could possibly be done to make her feel okay about me playing my songs.

Mom looked out the window. "I want your herd." Her lips creeped into a crooked smile and the tears stopped flowing.

Dad looked at her, vexed. "What do you mean?"

"I get to choose which are slaughtered, and when. And Eli can choose his songs."

I could see the life leaving him, his posture fell and his eyes sunk deep in their sockets like a man condemned. "Okay. If that's what it takes to keep you both happy."

After that, dad started to listen with the cows when I played. He'd sit perched on the fence watching the sun touch the horizon, patting the cows on the head while they mooed happily. With a soft shimmer the music would end, the sun disappearing behind the outstretched hills beneath a splinter of orange, and with careful hands I would softly shut the keylid.

I can't imagine why dad let her walk all over him. Lyle would have granted an anullment. And if it were all for me, he'd have ended it a long time ago. The days were shorter now, the sun set faster. I'd watch his breath hang in the air above his broadshouldered silhouette. He never looked back at me. One night I looked out and he was gone. The herd shuffled uneasily. The

lights were on in the barn. I counted the cows -- I wish I could say it was a surprise that his largest bull was missing.

We held his funeral on Christmas day. I played a requiem from the little white house collection. Mom spoke but a few words of the hard work he'd done before his untimely demise, the beautiful animals he'd raised. The irony he'd been gored by the bull couldn't have been lost on her. I clenched my teeth and played all her least favorite songs while she pretended to have loved him. Outside, the herd had more to say than anyone else, mooing at the great window like a choir accompaniment to my playing.

Father Lyle stood before the long black coffin with his arms raised over it. His blessing spoke better of dad than mom even tried to. Christ shown in the window, arm outstretched in peace toward the congregation of dad's friends and the people mom grew up with. Mom stood now in the front row with her hands folded and her eyes closed, forehead against her fingertips, muttering to herself. Turning her head up, she stared at Father Lyle, tears in her eyes.

I was back on the piano bench that evening, watching the sun sink into the earth through the open window. The air was bitter cold now but I left it open anyway. I rested my hands on the keys and breathed deeply, let the music take me. I did not hear the animals. Perhaps were mourning their caretaker.

When the sun had all but disappeared I went to close the keylid, and it slipped. A great wooden thud echoed from wall to wall, and an icy gust from the window ran down my back. I went over to close it, and looked upon the empty pasture outside the window. There wasn't an animal in sight.

I shut the window tight and listened to my footsteps bounce across the great expanse of the chamber as I walked through rows of pews to the doors. Outside, across the street, the lights were on in the little white house. I sniffled and the cold air burned my nostrils.

Through the darkness I heard a cow cry out. My head turned. I walked trepidatiously through the frigid air around to the back of the church. I scanned across the pasture. Nothing.

Along the treeline, my breath blew icy white into the oceanic darkness. Another cry. Louder now. I wamdered into the woods, the barren trees' twisted branches like spiderwebs against the stars. The moon cast great silver beams through the woods like needles piercing the darkness.

In crackling branches and wet autumn refuse, I stopped short, held my breath. My eyes widened. My heart pounded. Suddenly I could feel the blood move through every inch of my body. Before me, a clearing, a pool of shallow water.

Reflecting the moonlight, the bright white robes of a figure on the other side. It slouched over a heap of fur and flesh, blackened in shadow. A bull. It had a hole where its left horn once was, and a left horn protruding from its neck. Around it lay two, four, ten other cattle.

I didn't see one alive.

The robed figure slowly reared its head. It stood up, hands on its sides. Its face was painted deep crimson. It murmured lightly to itself, brought its hands together. Through the darkness its eyes met mine. I could not move. It looked past me. I turned away.

Trying to run, I tripped over dry thorny brush. I felt my legs push me back up. All I could think to do was run to Father Lyle's. It wasn't cold anymore.

I burst out the woods, feeling twigs and rocks slice at my feet inside my shoes. I gasped for air, I tumbled over the fence before I stood and kept running.

My feet slammed on the rigid earth with such rhythm I could hear music playing. I thought I heard piano through the blood pumping in my ears. Passing the church, the back window was open.

No, shattered.

Pieces of the peaceful Christ glimmered in the moonlight.

I stopped so quickly I slipped. Looking behind me, nothing was there. I felt naked where the moon watched me. I rose and ran as quietly as I could back toward the window, a song coming quickly into earshot. I peered through the broken glass. The white robes shone so brightly I had to squint to see the figure at the piano bench. Dark red hands smashed the keys so hard the cabinet shook, and I heard thunderous, terrible beauty, Amazing Grace.

My legs tried to cave beneath me. I felt the urge to vomit. I dropped away from the window, finding again the desperate need to run to the little white house. I turned the corner of the church and fell to my knees on the roadside. A great white tower of flame. In the yard, a crucifix silhouetted black against the fire. Father Lyle screamed to the heavens.

Scrapes

I wrote this piece very recently. It flowed so seamlessly from my mind to words that I figured it must carry some sort of significance. It's awfully personal, but nonspecific, and I don't find it embarassing so much as unavoidably vulnerable. It's a personal narrative, and it's not written in a particularly clear manner. It's not meant to give away much specific story so much as to convey a feeling, and this is a sort of writing I like very much and want to hone in on. It's a fine line to walk, to give away so little information and spend pretty much all your energy on headspace or world, and still have the reader come away with a sense of clarity about what they read. Hopefully this one worked, I'll probably reread it one day and realize it didn't make sense. It's certainly honest, if nothing else.

It's short, about 750 words, but for some reason I have a hard time calling this "flash". It feels to me more like a form of poetry, less concerned with exact rhythm or structure and more concerned with its formation of ideas and feelings.

Scrapes

The scrapes on my knees don't go away like I want them to. Months ago now I opened up that half-dollar wound on my knee and it bled orange, an angry mixture of blood, sweat, dirt, and pavement. I was wearing kneepads, but with a lack of confidence and an abundance of speed I took a dive that managed to ignore those protections.

Back when I knew you I didn't have these scrapes. I didn't skate, but then again, I didn't do much at all back then. Except when I was with you. It didn't feel like I could do much on my own. But your face, upturned and eager, you tripped me. We fell together as if bound clumsily at the ankles. We fell and the earth caught us, held us close against itself, against each other, I turned my head away and when I looked back you were gone.

Thinking there some error in my ways, I searched for something else that would catch me, since whenever I fell to the earth alone it struck cold and careless. Maybe it always did, but now there was nothing to compare it to, no other pair of arms with which to cling to as the earth scraped away layers of skin and I bled my desires into it like some ascetic at an altar. I deserve this, I thought, and the scrapes haven't gone away. I fall again and they reopen in bitter protest to fact you left.

Maybe if I quit falling and gave them a chance they'd go away, but if I stopped falling I might stop thinking of you, might lose you to that blissful ether of thoughtlessness that I used to live in. With indignation I get back on the wheels, on the tightrope, and fall over and over again, imagining myself falling into your arms, imagining you there with me as I learn to stand.

I only stop falling when I forget you, and I only forget you when I stop falling. The wounds and scrapes scab over and pretend to be healed, act as if there was never anything there at all, until I remember to fall, and it's like I never knew how to stand.

I don't mind falling. I don't mind the scrapes. But is it so much to ask for them to stop reopening like angry rebels to something dead and gone? Maybe it is. There's so much I wanted to ask you before you went, so much we still hadn't done, scrapes that we didn't let heal before

you ripped off that bandage. I should be able to fall into the open, albeit indifferent, arms of the earth, without wishing for you there. I should be able to feel my wounds open and close without looking around for you with the bandages, without longing for your face next to mine laying among the dirt and rocks.

What will I do when I fall and someone else is there, reaching out to me? Will I hold them close, let those wounds open and close, or will I fall off the edge waiting for you to be there as I strike the ground? I couldn't know now, I may not know when it happens. I should trust myself to make the right choice, but everything's different now.

I sat still, safe, I never fell in my whole life. To fall was to fail, and to fail was to be totally defeated, dead. I would have rather sat down in infinity than get up and risk the scrapes. But you got me up, somehow, and now I couldn't live without it. But how do I detach the scars from the one who taught me to fall?

All I know for sure is that I can't stop doing it now. Learning to fall was learning to live, and after all this it doesn't matter who taught me that, the scrapes will heal and you and I will fall into other worlds, other arms, and heal our wounds in our own time. Those wounds open up, they close again, and the miracle of that process is enough to keep me falling into the earth until one day I've stopped, and the scars of ages past have faded away like ash to the wind.

Reflection

(Ego Ramblings)

I have a vivid memory of a day of school in the fifth grade where we were asked the question -- what do you want to be when you grow up? I answered with a list, which my teacher thought was hilarious. I was confused what was so funny about wanting to be a scientist *or* a writer *or* a musician *or* a doctor *or* whatever fifth grade me was into. Personally, I thought it was hilarious that other students could possibly have picked just *one* thing they wished to be when they were older. Laugh at that, Ms. Gerhardt!

That was fifth grade, ten-year-old me. Twenty-two-year-old me still doesn't know what to do with himself, despite what they told me in school. I still love computer science, I still love writing, I still love making music. It's all important to me, and I think it's okay, maybe necessary, to keep doing all the things I possibly can, and I've made writing a particular priority now because you, Seth, helped reintroduce its beauty to me, which was, for so long, lost in the sea of things I was supposed to be doing or coopted into doing or addicted to doing. I'm in the process of revising my whole life, Dr. Tucker. I'm moving to Kansas City, my hometown, after deciding three years ago with absolute certainty that I needed to go somewhere else. And I did need to go somewhere else, for a while. It's how the story goes.

My writings are an inevitable reflection of a life in flux, eddies and unpredictable currents, relationships in limbo, a world rippling about itself and confused, the horror and beauty of change and the emergence of order in chaos. They reflect an alignment of stars, a falling into place of things that you didn't necessarily want, that aren't necessarily good, but nonetheless have landed that way and must be dealt with accordingly.

The willingness to adapt to the world morphing unapologetically around you is my attitude these days, paired with powerful, stubborn adherence to my principles that I myself am

sometimes afraid of. I *have* to do this, otherwise I'm not being honest with myself! That's why I go to protests, that's why I can't work for Lockheed, that's why I tell my friends to get off their phones, that's why I know I probably won't do computer science for very long after graduation, and that's why I feel such at odds with the world I'm living in -- because it's antithetical to some of my most basic beliefs! And so that has to come across in my writing, or more specifically, I demand that I illustrate the contradictions of our world through the art I'm trying to make. I'm not necessarily successful, of course, but believe me, I'm trying. It's just so much of what I think about these days.

What is art if it's not challenging to comfortable perceptions? What is art if it is sees the world's problems as inherent and intractable? The world as it is today is so messed up I feel it would be a waste of my energy *not* to write about it in one way or another. I want my writing to reveal things, to aid in a greater understanding of people, of the world and how we can make it a better place.

And so my writing can, and should, come across as pessimistic. Not because I believe the world is a bad place, or that everything's hopeless, but because it is in the recognition and acknowledgement of negativity that we catalyze positive change.

This attitude has had negative impacts on my writing, I realize, because focusing too strongly on the world and not enough on the characters ends up creating a dynamic where the world just "happens" to the characters, and they seem to have little agency or character. By focusing too much on great big systems and worlds changing, I end up losing the very humanity that world is supposed to have been built upon. Inevitability is the exact opposite of what I want to have come across, I want the problems occurring in my stories to feel like they could have been resolved better, for the reader to involve themselves in the critical thought necessary to address complex issues of character and story and ethics. So in my revision process, I have tried to focus on how characters experience the changes of their world and how that world responds

to their actions, and how it can be very unclear what the correct option is or was, if there ever was a correct option at all.

And although I want my writing to be broadly applicable, readable by a general audience, it is still very personal. This is unavoidable, and in fact I don't really think it's worth trying to avoid. I inject bits of my life, intentionally or unintentionally, and so it is not for everyone. Some lenses and perspectives just don't make sense to people who haven't lived a similar life to me, and that's okay. Still, I do believe that art hasn't become art until it is shared, and your class is what's finally gotten me to share my creative energy for the first time in… a long time! I don't even know how long it's been since I've been willing to take that step of sharing creative work.

Thank you so much for the work you do, for your brilliance (if I flatter you enough you *have* togive me a good grade), your dedication to the craft, your willingness to put up with the work of highly inexperienced writers like myself, and your careful interjections about how to go about improving our lives beyond the act of writing. You are a good person, Seth.

I considered a more interesting form of submission than this -- I'm a CS major who loves video games, so I considered giving you some kind of interactive thing, maybe a text adventure or an explorable environment, to accompany my writing. However, I'd rather spend what little time I have left focusing on the writing. I'm afraid any effort spent on the form of what I turn in would contribute only novelty, rather than proper thematic or aesthetic elements, to this portfolio. So enjoy my many, many pages of writing! And thank you for reading.

Closing Statement

I've learned a great deal about writing, and my relationship with it, through this class. It was a humbling experience, in that I was reminded very quickly how a skill left unattended so easily wilts away. At the same time, though, I've found that training that writing muscle is incredibly rewarding, and somehow I'd missed so much of it before now.

Really, I've only learned to revise properly in the last year or so. And I've only learned how to revise fiction in this class -- how to take a story, investigate its shape and color, its broad strokes and fine details, and to somehow redesign it to align with some fated end result, some perfect manifestation of the idea it was always trying to be.

Many great artists refer to something transcendental that guides their hand, the music flowing through you, the painting just spilling itself onto the canvas, the words flowing across the page like an independent being. And while I don't believe in a higher power per se, I do believe there to be some untouchable artistic idea, a perfect representation of some indelible human experience, that we as artists can aspire to reach out for and pull down into reality, be it through music, painting, writing, drawing, singing, dancing, woodworking, mathematics, cooking -- the list goes on.

What this class did was help me to get in touch with the methods to the madness of the art of writing, a brief dive into a toolkit that may help reach that oh-so-wonderful end goal to create something timeless, masterful. This is something I would be surprised if I ever do, but try I will, because it's a wonderful feeling to write, and even close calls with the great divine thread of artistry are something to behold.