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THESE WERE THE NIGHTS:

A CREATIVE COLLECTION BY A MISUNDERSTOOD GIANT OF A BROKEN THING

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By

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A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

These Were the Nights: A Creative Collection by a Misunderstood Giant of a Broken Thing is a collection of creative non-fiction and short fiction meditating on Black, multiracial identity, family trauma, and the effects of depression through loss and conflict. These works were written, revised and compiled between the fall of 2021 and spring of 2023.

Critical Introduction

Behind the Collection

"So much for bones to pick

So much for fear

So much to fill you in on

Now that you're here."

– Dan Mangan, *Jude in the Mountains* (2014)

Depression is an illness that affects tens of millions of people around the world. According to data collected by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the prevalence of a major depressive episode was highest among individuals aged eighteen to twenty-five. The study also showed that the prevalence of a major depressive episode was highest among those who identified as two or more races (National Institute of Mental Health). My mother is both Mexican-American and Italian, my father is Black, and I was twenty-five years old when I made the life-altering decision to check myself into an inpatient facility to prevent myself from attempting suicide.

Throughout the creative process of this master's thesis, I have deepened my understanding of mental health and the harmful coping mechanisms that have ultimately failed me. Using a combination of personal narrative, reflection and introspection, I delve into the complexities of mental illness and offer insights into how others like me can potentially find

resilience in the face of depression. This master's thesis will also examine my familial relationships. Specifically, I will spend time coming to terms with the end of my relationship with my half-brother while mending the relationship with my biological father. For the latter, this painful journey has served as both a source of conflict and a point of reconciliation throughout the course of my life. I begin with a scene in *These Were the Nights* that illustrates a conversation I had with a professor at the University of Oklahoma in 2015. It was a significant moment for me because it ultimately became the start of my great internal struggle. Before that, I had experienced my share of depressive episodes. Between my parents' divorce and my grandmother's passing, I was no stranger to intense emotion by the time I was sixteen. Occasionally, I felt sad, but usually I was angry. The sadness won out in the end, though. I have never felt as powerless as I did the night I walked into Red Rock – a mental health crisis center in Norman, Oklahoma. Before I made the phone call to save my life, I was certain about the end. There wasn't a doubt in my mind. Permanent relief from all the pain and stress was only a mile away. I knew that, and that terrified me. So, instead of driving home, I put the keys down and picked the phone up. I probably wouldn't be in this master's program if I had done otherwise.

Even though chronologically the events in *These Were the Nights* happened before *Red Rock*, I wanted to frame my thesis with that critical conversation because it was the first time I ever shared my thoughts of suicide with someone else. For most of my childhood and all of my adult life, I've been keenly aware of my depression. It's as much a part of me as my first name. Talking about my mental health hasn't always been easy, and some days it still isn't. However, I can say that it has been therapeutic. Whether I'm voicing my frustrations or writing down my misery, the simple act of letting it out has had a profound effect on me. It's cleansing. It's healing. It doesn't always work that way, but it's been the effort that makes a difference.

From that opening scene in *These Were the Nights*, I break away to my younger years when I wasn't as emotionally taxed as I would end up becoming later in life, yet the seeds of that overwhelming pressure were already being sowed. As I allude to in *Memories of a Life*, my mother and father's constant fighting led to their eventual separation. Soon thereafter I began getting into my own fights at school. We moved away from my first home – the place where I grew up – at a time when I was just starting to discover my identity. *A Portrait* lays the foundation for the rest of the pieces, providing context on my mental state throughout high school and into college. In *Footsteps of a Family*, I wanted to slow down and properly introduce some of my closest family members. I have affectionately referred to my grandmother, my mother and my sister as the three pillars of my life. I couldn't have asked for a better trio of role models, even though it was my father who I found the most natural similarities with. *Five Things I Love About College Football* is a classic example of a hermit crab, which is a style of creative nonfiction that intentionally models the structure of one kind of writing – such as a nutrition label, a doctor's note or a shopping list – to tell a personal narrative. For this piece, I adapted the form of a list one might see on a personal blog. I used this familiar structure to recount my growth into young adulthood through my fascination with college football.

With my grandmother established in the narrative arc of my thesis, *What I Couldn't Say* examines the first major loss of my life. While I had already been through a number of traumatic events before losing her, that experience shook me in a way that was entirely foreign to me. I was emotionally distraught beyond my own belief, and it was only compounded by my lack of closure. Through writing that piece, I was finally able to remedy those feelings of regret that I've held onto for so long.

I followed one life-changing episode with another in *A Stolen Bicycle*. Although my biological father has missed out on some crucial milestones throughout my youth, he was able to confront his own weakness with alcoholism and re-enter my life at a time when I was skeptical about how much his presence would offer me. Though we may never be as close as we could have been if it weren't for his prolonged absence, forgiving him for what he has done and welcoming him back into my life has truly been an unexpected blessing.

Before I delved into the heaviest moments of my journey, I wanted to reach into the depths of my mind and reflect on who I have become through the use of a brief literary interlude. Although the neighborhood I grew up in wasn't the safest, nor was it peaceful, *62nd Street* represents a time in my life when my mind last felt undisturbed. My external environment may have been loud, but on the inside, things were much quieter back then. As for *A Musing*, I wanted to use this opportunity to create a lyrical essay that meditates on a number of topics that have been routinely on my mind over the years. As it leads into the final stretch of the nonfiction portion of my thesis, this is also intended to serve as a bit of a mental buffer.

I've written about the fallout between my brother and me in a fictionalized story in the past, but *Closing Scene* shows that memory in its truth. For as much as I gained from welcoming my father back into my life after all he put the rest of us through, I am still navigating my way to that point with my brother. It's not a relationship I am eager to restore, but writing about that night and the fond memories I have of him from before that night has helped to keep that possibility alive.

The three days I wrote about in *Red Rock* gave me more perspective than any other form of therapy ever could. I remember feeling terrified and ashamed when I first walked into that center, but in just a few days I felt liberated. Seeing both of my parents there was also something

I didn't know I needed, and ever since then I've made more of an effort to keep those lines of communication open with those that are closest to me.

To wrap up the creative nonfiction portion of this thesis, I picked up where I left off in *These Were the Nights*. In doing so, I wanted to bring attention to my mental health issues and the impact they've had on me. Self-harm can be a triggering subject, but for my sake I needed to bring it to the light so that I no longer have to suffer alone in the dark. I ended the essay with my take on living with depression, from what it looks like to how it feels. I wanted to conclude Part I on that note because it's a truth that has remained constant in my life for nearly two decades. It was true when I was sitting in front of my professor all those years ago, and it's true now. I can only presume that's how I'll feel tomorrow, but I'm okay with that because I don't have to manage these issues alone anymore.

Part II of this thesis is comprised of two fiction pieces I've been working on since I entered the master's program. The first, *Sunseeker*, was inspired by some of the struggles my mother went through while going through her separation with my father. *Black Iris* was also inspired by a close source, this time being my father, who despite his past mistakes, has come back into my life and made amends for his transgressions.

Creative nonfiction, as a genre, has provided me with a unique opportunity to explore my own depression and to discover some of the broader factors (i.e. age, race, etc.) linked to my struggles with mental illness. By sharing my own experiences with depression and reflecting on the ways in which they have impacted my life, my goal is to further the conversation that too-often excludes Black and brown men my age. There is a stigma surrounding the seeking of help and treatment of mental illness for those who look like me, and to this day that stigma persists. Through personal narrative, my mission is to wield the tools of creative nonfiction in order to

unearth the psychological toll depression extracts and to reveal the moments of grace and resilience that I have enjoyed along the way.

The three major themes that I have confronted in this thesis include coming-of-age, family and trauma. In my experience, each theme is closely connected to the next, and I've learned that one could not be portrayed without the presence of another. From the time I was a child on the southside of Oklahoma City to the moment I made Norman my indefinite home, I've grown in ways I never expected to grow. As I've become my own man, my family has grown smaller, both in number and in essence. Much of that stems from the wide range of traumatic experiences I've endured over the years. Additionally, I have also made a point to meditate on the complexities of forgiveness, especially when it comes to my present-day relationship with my father and half-brother.

With this thesis, I share a deeply personal and nuanced look into mental illness with the hope that it can provide some healing for myself and anyone else who would happen to read it.

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These Were the Nights

She asked me, “Where do you see yourself in twenty years?” I looked down as if the answer was at my feet, but all I could think about was the last twenty, not the next. What is it about hard truths that makes them so hard to face? I couldn’t maintain eye contact with her, but at least I was honest.

On the surface, this seemed like a standard question that a mentor or potential employer would normally pose, but she was neither to me. She was, however, my professor, and this rather ordinary question of hers was really only meant to generate a conversation about my life’s ambitions, my long-term career goals, and how I plan to reach them. I had undoubtedly answered questions like this many times before, and my typical response usually included something about a woman with my last name, children who take after her and a man cave with at least four TVs. I can’t imagine it gets any better than that.

When the answer finally formed itself in my head, I took a look around the room. I could see the lateness of the day through the large windows behind her. There were stacks of books on rows of shelves along every wall. Some old, some new, typical of the professionals in her profession. She was obviously well read, but it was no surprise to me that her years of study did not prepare her for this narrative sitting before her. I envied her position, both in that space and in this life. I wanted to be as accomplished as she was. I wanted to be anything other than the

truth. There she was, sitting on that side of the desk, staring at this misunderstood giant of a broken thing. Decades went by in seconds, and I let go.

"I don't see myself in twenty years."

Memories of a Life

Fear

I am three years old. I am climbing inside my dad's blue car with my twin sister, and she goes first. We think as one, or at least, that's how it feels inside my head. I climb in second, closing the door behind us. The heat starts to take my breath away. I feel the hot surface of the black dashboard. I feel beads of sweat roll down my forehead and cheeks. I feel the panic wash over me. Our cries for help feel unheard. Minutes feel like hours. Through the windshield, I see my neighbor, an elderly woman, walking up to the front door of our house. A rush of cold air hits me as my mother opens the car door.

Pain

I am five. I am in the only bedroom of our tiny apartment. It's dark, it's late, and once again I don't know what they're fighting about, I just wish they'd stop. I've been trying to fall asleep for minutes. Has it been hours? It's impossible to rest with all the yelling and screaming and shouting. My heart skips out of my chest. Someone has slammed the front door. At least now the arguing has stopped. Cigarette smoke slowly fills the room, then my lungs. I start to lose my breath. I know I'm having an asthma attack because I'm wheezing like all the other times. The dark room blackens, and now I can't breathe. This feels like death. This feels like I'm dying. My mom helps me down the steps and rushes me into the back seat of her car. I don't know where

my dad is. I hate going to the hospital. The floors are dirty, the lights are too bright, and it takes forever. I just want to go to sleep.

Happiness

I am ten. My stepdad lifts a brand-new bicycle out of the bed of his dusty old truck. The bike is shiny and green, and it has a million switches to change the gears. I don't understand what all the buttons are for, and I don't care. I just know that I have a brand-new bike, and I can't wait to show it off. I grab the handlebars, set my feet on the pedals and race down the street. At least, I try to. It's a lot heavier than my last set of wheels, but I quickly adjust. As I reach the end of the street, I make a left turn toward my friend's grandma's house. Yesterday he told me he'd be there today. Sure enough, I see him sitting in the backyard through the chain link fence. I wave at him as I ride around to the front door.

Anxiety

I am twelve. We're all moved into our new house, and now I'm getting ready to go to a new school and meet people I know nothing about. I'm nervous, but I'm also a little excited. I hope there are kids who like the same things I like. I still collect trading cards. I still watch cartoons. So far, I haven't found any of that in my neighborhood. I hope my sister has better luck with making friends. She didn't have the best time at our last school. Some of the girls were mean to her, and that upset me. I won't let anybody make her feel bad this time. They'll have to deal with me first.

Sadness

I am fifteen. I've been placed in a counseling program called 'Coping.' I think it's supposed to be a nicer name for anger management. They say I have a temper, and as much as it hurts to admit it, I think they're right. I was suspended for the eleventh time last week for the same thing

I'm always suspended for. As usual, I didn't start the fight, but I finished it. I don't know how to control my emotions. I don't even know where they're coming from. I just know the problem's getting more serious because I'm getting older. I want to stop, but I don't know how.

Worry

I am seventeen. I'll be graduating high school in June. I guess I'll be moving away for college at the end of the summer. I've been to Norman, Oklahoma before, but I never thought I'd ever live there. Part of that excites me, but I'm also nervous about how I'll do once I'm there. School has never come easy for me. I don't have strong study habits, and I've always had trouble staying focused on my work. Mostly, I just don't want to disappoint anyone if I fail. I don't want to disappoint my mom or my sister.

Lost

I am twenty-five. I am checking myself into a mental health facility, and they tell me I'll be here for the next few days. I am scared, and I am lonely. I don't know how things got this bad, but here I am. I wanted to hurt myself again, but instead I brought myself here. My shoes look funny without their laces, and my shorts are barely staying on without my belt. I miss my bed. Maybe coming here was a mistake. Maybe I can pass the time by sleeping. If only it were that easy.

Hope

I am twenty-seven years old. I asked someone on a date last night, and she said yes. I don't know much about this girl, but what little I do know makes me smile. She seems like the kind of person I can imagine myself having a future with. We're meeting at a coffee shop called Stella Nova. I don't even drink coffee, but I'll figure something out. I'll keep you posted.

A Portrait

He had never been west of where he lived. He was born and raised in the middle. He was the eldest twin. He identified himself as a part of two, and certainly never whole. He grew used to this phase. He grew out of this phase. He made friends everywhere he went. He was surrounded by them. He was lonely, despite this. He was always smiling. He was always laughing. He was always joking. He wanted to make others happy. He learned how much their happiness would distract them from him. Each new year meant new friends to come, new memories to make, and new pain to get over. He wouldn't understand the pain until later. He *couldn't* understand the pain until later. Until then, he buried the pain. He buried it deep, but he didn't bury it deep enough. He got into trouble – often, he was in trouble. He pushed and he shoved. He punched and he punched. He knew what he had done was wrong, every time, but every time, he couldn't get out of his own way. He would look over at his other half, his twin, and her eyes would tell him to stop. His body wouldn't let him. He felt helpless in his own body. He had a visible problem with being told what to do. He had a visible problem with being told he was wrong. He had invisible problems that nobody could see. He was lonely, and he was angry. His teachers would talk to him after class. His teachers would send him to the office. He grew older. He continued to make friends. He continued to make them happy. Sometimes his friends took advantage of this. Sometimes they would push him to his limit. Why would he mind? He's Seth.

He's happy. They would make offensive jokes. They would poke him in the back. They would put things in his hair. They would call him names. They would exclude him from the fun they had without him. Sometimes he told them to stop. Sometimes they wouldn't listen. If they didn't listen, he always made them stop. He meant what he said. That much, they knew to be true. He upheld his words, and he was remorseful every time. Every time, he was remorseful. Despite the pain he buried, and despite the pain he inflicted, he was never desensitized by it. Years went by. Patterns persisted. He was placed into a program to manage his aggression. He didn't belong there, he thought, not with those other boys. Those were the bad boys. Those were the boys with no aspirations, no drive, no futures. He thought he didn't belong there, but he did. He stayed in the program. He made an effort. He learned from the experience. He left the program with a fistful of invaluable lessons. He continued to be a friend. His friends grew in numbers. He kept his friends at a distance. He realized that his goals were different than theirs. He realized that this was okay. He played games with them. He ate lunch with them. He cracked jokes with them. He met a girl. He asked her to prom. She said yes. He was excited to go to prom. She changed her mind. He changed his, too. He graduated. His friends graduated. He stayed in school. His friends stayed home. His summer break went by far too quickly. He wasn't ready for college. He wasn't ready to live on his own. He wasn't qualified to do this, but he did it anyway. He had a roommate – a baseball player. The baseball player made for a nice roommate, but not much else. He never missed a day of class that year. That was the best advice he had ever been given. Years went by. He made new friends. He was still lonely. He was still angry. He was still unhappy.

Footsteps of a Family

There's a lot that I remember about my Lita. She lived life on her feet. She never learned how to drive, so she walked to church every Sunday and Wednesday. She also walked to the store and the bingo center, and she never once complained. After keeping on her toes for a lifetime, I still remember the last time I saw her on her feet. She left with my mom to go to the hospital. She was the strongest woman I'd ever known, so I didn't expect anything to be wrong – but I was wrong. The next time I saw her, she wasn't on her feet. She was in bed and in a medically induced coma. She didn't make it much further than that. There's a lot that I wish I would've said, but I can't retrace those steps.

For as long as I've known her, my mother has walked with a purpose – always has, and I'd like to think that she always will. She's a rather short woman, but she covers a lot of ground with a lot of steps. If you were to ever stand in front of her, she'd move right around you in a hurry without making much of a fuss. The best way I've learned to slow her down is to remain quiet until she turns around to find me. I'll usually be back there somewhere, idling in her wake. As I've watched her grow older, I've noticed how she's lost a step or two. Still, she outpaces me with relative ease despite the waning conviction in her gait.

Just like my mother and her mother, my sister also walks with haste. I guess it runs in the family – at least on the women's side. Despite being seven minutes older than her, my sister's

always been ahead of me. She was already running while I had braces on my legs. She aced her driver's test while I did just enough to pass on my second attempt. Growing up, no matter where we went together, or what we planned to see, she'd usually experience it first because I was trailing so far behind. It's okay though, because nowadays she'll turn off the jets to match my speed. As an unexpected yet welcomed result, we're able to talk more, although in reality we don't talk nearly as often as we used to when we were younger. Today, she walks with the purpose of my mother and the experience of one, too.

If I had to pinpoint it, I suppose I'm more like my dad when it comes to my physical movement. He's tall and long-legged, and his slow march matches him perfectly. In my head I can see his wide strides plodding his large body forward. Outside of my head, I don't see much of him at all. A few times here and there throughout the year if I'm lucky, but the stretches we go without seeing each other were bound to happen after he walked out of his family's life. I'm glad he found his way back, but the time we lost will never be recovered. I imagine he'd like to retrace his steps if given the chance, but he can only go forward and never back. I guess I'll have to do the same.

All my life, I've really never been in a hurry. I like taking my time. Actually, I enjoy it very much. It helps me to think, or to not think, I think. My partner is also faster than I am, and like my sister used to do, she's constantly having to wait up for me whenever we go anywhere. I guess I just feel overwhelmed mentally when I move faster than I'm used to. Come to think of it, I've been feeling overwhelmed a lot, lately. Perhaps I'll go for a walk.

Five Things I Love About College Football

1. The Rivalries

There's nothing better than your team having scoreboard over its most hated rival. It's the ultimate trump card in any college football debate, and it doesn't matter who leads the all-time series or who has a better record or who signed a higher ranked recruiting class. All that matters is who won the last one.

2. The Tradition

Whether it's Auburn fans rolling Toomer's Corner, the Ohio State marching band dotting the 'i', or Clemson players running down The Hill, traditions in college football are as wide-ranging as you'll find in any sport in the world.

3. The Upsets

Perhaps the most exciting part about college football is knowing that anything can happen on any given Saturday. Parity in the sport is at an all-time high, so upsets are as inevitable as they are surprising.

4. The Highlights

I never really followed sports growing up. During my sophomore year in high school, a group of my friends were always talking about football. Their intense discussions may as well have been a foreign language to me. It was mostly about the Dallas Cowboys, but occasionally

they would harp on college football as well. OU, Oklahoma State, and yes, even Texas. When the season started, I figured I'd try to check out a game. Even though I barely knew what was going on, maybe I finally wouldn't feel so left out.

My dad scored us a pair of tickets to see the Sooners take on the Miami Hurricanes. I'll never forget the feeling of walking into that stadium with eighty-thousand crimson-clad fans roaring at the top of their lungs. Chants of "Boomer!" and "Sooner!" filled the air from east to west, and I had the perfect view from my seat behind the north end zone. Minutes into the first quarter, a light shower fell from the gray sky and forced us into our ponchos. We came prepared because us Okies like to watch the weather. I don't remember all the plays that were made or who the standouts were, but I know that Oklahoma dominated 'The U,' and somehow, I knew that I would never be the same again.

The next time I saw my friends at school, all I could contribute to the conversation was that this Sam Bradford guy apparently played pretty well for Oklahoma. By the way they were all talking about him, he seemed like a big deal, but that was the first college football game I ever sat and paid attention to all the way through, so mine was far from an expert's opinion. In any case, it was just fun finally having something else to talk about other than playing Halo or Paul's annoying ex. I haven't missed a Saturday since.

Over the next couple seasons, I successfully became a casual fan of the game. I was familiar with the top teams and the best players, and I spoke my share of trash like most fans are known to do. Soon, I'd experience the hardest loss in my young fandom's lifetime. I have Tim Tebow and the Florida Gators to thank for that. A month after OU's excruciating defeat in the BCS National Championship, I experienced another tough loss, but this one hurt the most. I lost

my grandmother. My second mother. My Lita. They gave her two weeks. She didn't make it two days.

For a few years, my sister would watch most games with me, and from the very beginning she was just as emotionally invested as I was, if not more so. If that was debatable, what couldn't be argued was how serious she took her education compared to me. While she studied and took notes and read her books every night, I spent most of my time on the couch watching movies or playing video games. I figured I would do just enough to get by in school. Life beyond high school never really crossed my mind. Planning ahead just wasn't in my nature.

Fortunately, my sister had always been exponentially more responsible than I ever was growing up. She made sure I did what I had to do to ensure I could continue my studies beyond the city limits of Mustang, America. She signed me up to take the ACT three different times. She didn't have to, but I'm glad she did.

When it finally came time to choosing schools to apply to, there was only one choice I had in mind. Sure, I could have done the smart thing and applied to multiple universities to increase my chances of being accepted and to give myself options, but I never saw myself thriving in a collegiate environment in the first place, so I figured I might as well enjoy the place for however long I ended up lasting there.

So what did I do? I applied to the University of Oklahoma. Why? Because I was a fan of OU Football. That's all the logic I needed, and so far it's turned out to be the best decision I've ever made.

After a few semesters, I was practically a pro at being a college student, and considering how far I'd come, I was damn proud of that. Life was moving a million miles a minute, but I kept up. Then I met her, and everything else slowed to a gradual halt.

She was a year older than me. I don't know why, but I liked that a lot. Her light brown eyes had a sleepy-like quality to them. They entranced me in my sleep. Her voice was smooth like melted chocolate, and she was beautiful by every measure I could see. From her hazelnut skin to the scar down the middle of her chest, she was a work of art. The day I met her, one of her textbooks hadn't come in the mail yet, but there was a chapter quiz coming up at the end of the week. I overheard her talking about it with her lab partner, so I offered to have copies made from my own. She accepted, and after class we walked to the library together.

We had some time to kill in between our microbio lab and our physio lecture, so I asked her if she'd like an impromptu tour of the campus grounds. I'm quite sure she already knew her way around well enough, but much to my delight, she agreed anyway.

I remember it being an unusually chilly September morning. I carefully wheeled my bike along between us, making sure not to bump her shins with the sharp edges of the pedals. We walked down the sidewalk across the street from my favorite place on campus — the football stadium. Between you and me, it's my favorite place in the world, but I never told her that.

There, I introduced her to Heisman Park — an area with larger-than-life statues of some serious gridiron superheroes. I told her everything I knew about each of them. I probably rambled on, but she seemed to enjoy what I was saying. Heck, she was laughing and smiling almost as much as I was.

We crossed the street and found an open gate on the east side of the stadium. We made our way down to field level and had the entire place to ourselves. Being there without a stranger in sight was haunting, but in a good way. The loudest space in my universe was now mute. I stared at the sea of green before us and the infinite rows of metal and concrete around us. The sky was gray, and the palace was empty, but I could feel it.

I took it in, then I asked her, “Do you feel it?”

She looked up as if she expected drops of rain. After a moment she finally asked, “Do I feel what?”

“The magic.”

Luckily for me, ‘Sooner Magic’ is an actual term people around here use, so I was able to pretend for just a little bit longer. For the record, I’m not what some would call the ‘romantic type’. I either put on too much mustard or not enough. Still, I knew what I was feeling in that moment. I felt it in my chest. It was more than the magic I told her about. It was more than a funny sounding term. In time, I came to fall in love with this girl, but that’s all that ever came of that.

Without college football, I am in no way the man I am today. It might sound silly to some, but becoming a fan of this game has helped shape my life’s experiences. It gave me a reason to feel more like one of the guys. It gave me an excuse for seeking an education. It’s taught me one of the most valuable lessons I’ll ever learn — perspective. With every season, wins and losses become less important to me, yet I find myself enjoying the game more and more with every snap. I remember the times I lost my voice in celebration, and the times I wanted to break every breakable thing around me. If I had to describe the first quarter of my life as a football play, I’d say it’s been a three-yard run up the middle on second and ten. It’s not a clip for the highlight reel, but at least my next down is a little more manageable.

5. Bowl Season

The most wonderful time of the year is bowl season. It’s your team’s final chance to end the season on a high note. Best of all, even if your team doesn’t win, all is not lost, because there’s always next year.

What I Couldn’t Say

I couldn't say what was on my mind. The words were there, sitting just right there, lodged in the walls of my throat. If I could, I would have told you how much you meant to me. I would have told you how much it meant to have you to come home to when my own mother was at work and couldn't be there. I was a loud, reckless, difficult boy, and you loved me like you loved all your grandchildren - with every wisp of your soul.

I couldn't tell you what channel your favorite movie was on so you could watch it in your room. You always liked watching movies. That's probably where I get it from. And you were never shy about which actors you thought were the most handsome, or which actresses you felt were no good at all. I still remember going to the movie theater with you and Mom and everybody just to marathon movies all day. It didn't matter what movie it was. If it was starting in five minutes, we were hustling to our seats so we wouldn't miss the previews. You loved having a row all to yourself, and you shamelessly enjoyed a whole to-go box of teriyaki chicken that you’d snuck in from the food court. My favorite part was never the movie itself. It was looking over at you as the theater darkened around us and the screen turned bright. Your gaze was fixed ahead of you as the glare in your glasses reflected the white light. Seeing your smile gave me one, too.

I couldn't remember what city you were from, but I knew you lived in Mexico before you moved to Oklahoma at eighteen years old. I wish I would've spent more time appreciating the childhood stories you shared with me. I'd like to learn more about your favorite songs to dance to when you were a kid. I'd like to hear more about your aspirations before you became a mother. I'd like to know why our family celebrated your baptismal date as your true birthday. I'd like to smell the first flower you ever grew, and see the first quilt you ever made. I'd like to hear the sound of your voice one more time. Now I remember. You were from Monterrey.

I couldn't take back all the hurtful things I said to you when I was angry. I was young, but that doesn't absolve me of my actions when you only tried to guide me to be a better version of myself. Looking back, perhaps I was resentful toward my dad for abandoning his role as a father. Maybe I was confused about why you were around more often than my mom who was seemingly always working at one job or another. Whatever it was, it was wrong of me to take out my unexplored anger on you. In a way I feel relieved that I don't remember all the little things that sparked my violent shouting and cursing and rampaging. I'm just thankful that you saw behind the juvenile aggression. You saw me, your grandson, desperately trying to seize control of my emotions. You forgave me, your grandson, for lashing out, and every time, you did it with compassion.

I couldn't say anything when I saw you in the hospital. I couldn't utter a single word without feeling like I was going to cough up my heart first. We were all around you. At least, as many of us that we could squeeze into the room. I can still hear the whirring of the respiratory machine, the beeping of the heart monitor and the sniffles of my aunts and cousins. I can still feel the pit in my chest as I walked up to you, not knowing if you'd be awake or how I'd react to seeing you. You were asleep, medically induced, and that made me relieved for a moment.

The last time you saw me was the night before you were there in that hospital. I was up late, same as you. That's just how you and I were. We were a pair of night owls. That's when we'd get most of our puzzle building and video gaming done, and we did it together more times than I could ever count. You came into my room and sat down on the bed next to where I was laying. You didn't tell me to go to sleep or to turn off the TV, you just sat there quietly and watched with me. After a few minutes, you squeezed my blanketed toes, stood up from the bed and said "I love you, mijo. God bless you."

I couldn't free the words, but if I could, I would have said "I love you, too, Lita. God, go with you."

A Stolen Bicycle

During my first semester of college, I took a public speaking course scheduled at an ungodly hour. Fortunately, I only had to make that long, winding trek to Burton Hall twice a week, but I still dreaded that walk every time. One morning, a cyclist pedaled past me as I sleepily trudged down the sidewalk. I counted the seconds it took him to reach the corner down the road and compared it to the time it took me to do the same. After processing my rough calculations, I came to an emphatic conclusion: I needed a bike. Besides, I figured the time I could save for sleep alone would be well worth the investment. Within a couple weeks I finally had my own wheels. It was a steel behemoth: curiously heavy for something with so many open spaces. As far as bicycles go, this one was quite ordinary, but it was enough to get me going.

But then it was stolen. After months of riding in style, I made the poor decision to leave my bike unlocked in the racks outside my dorm building. The thief must have come by in the night and checked each one until they found a bike that wasn't locked up. Unlucky me.

I had no one to blame but myself for leaving my bike in such a vulnerable position. On a related note, blame has played a significant role in my life. There was a time when I blamed my father's actions and inaction for all the misery I inflicted on the world. Officially, he and my mother separated when I was five, but even in those formative years, I don't really recall a period when I truly felt like he was doing his part as my dad. There were probably a few times when

that was the case. Times other than the loud, violent episodes that only ceased when the living room was destroyed and he finally passed out. Times other than the nights when his drunken rampage forced my mother to uproot her two children in the middle of the night only to help get them ready for school the next morning in a truck stop parking lot. The truth is I'd have to think long and hard to come up with a decent list of dad-worthy moments, but that just sounds like an exercise in futility.

As I matured – physically more so than emotionally – I developed one hell of a temper. That landed me in the not-so-good graces of my teachers and principals. Name calling led to gasps for air. Spitballs led to broken noses. Other than that, middle school and high school were mostly humdrum. I dissected a few animals, most of my friends were under the influence, and I almost went to prom. I've since grown into my own man without a biological father's guidance or wisdom. Sure, I would have preferred his presence for all the times I acted out in class, or that one time when I made the honor roll, but I have since forgiven him, even though my mother never will. I don't blame him anymore, but I can't blame her either.

It would be four years into my life as a college student before I heard a word from that man. My father, I mean. His absence from my life no longer hurt; I was flat-out indifferent. That radio silence came to an unexpected end one stormy afternoon. He called me while I was examining a human heart in my anatomy lab. I couldn't believe he had called me in the first place, but I also couldn't answer at the time since I was knuckles deep inside the chest cavity of this cadaver, so I let the call go to voice mail. When I finally listened to the message he left, I learned that he had wanted to meet me somewhere for lunch. I called him back later that evening, and we met up the following weekend. Even for as large as I am – tall and slow moving – I have always been amazed by how small I feel whenever I'm around him. When I walked into the

diner, I didn't see much of myself in him, but I could hear myself in his voice – a voice that shook my spine. That made me feel happy.

After this visit, he'd call every month or so, and I'd see him about half as often as that. Every time we would meet up, he'd give me money. Nothing outrageous, usually twenty or forty dollars. I came to understand it as his way of making amends where amends couldn't be made. Two years later, he invited me to travel with him to New York for a Thanksgiving family reunion. I figured his hope was that this trip would help us build a closer relationship as father and son. After a week of exploring the Bronx, I learned a lot about him. I learned that his laugh is quite contagious, which is how others have affectionately described my own. I also learned that he can small talk with the best of them, his snoring is violent, and he's still crazy about his Pittsburgh Steelers. We spent one of the days roaming around the Empire State without a plan or a sense of direction. I eventually had to help him navigate the public transit system; otherwise, we'd have both been lost. By the end of the trip, we had shared countless stories that made me laugh until I cried. Best of all, I survived several awkward auntie kisses on the cheek. When we returned to Oklahoma, he gave me money like he usually does. It was about the usual amount, but this time it meant something a little different, because in a roundabout sort of way he finally did something meaningful for me, albeit unknowingly. I used that money to buy myself another bike.

While it reminds me of my last bike in terms of looks, it has yet to be christened with the mud and scrapes of life. It rides smoothly, but almost too much so. Most nights, this latest two-wheeler of mine is propped up inside the safe confines of my tiny bathroom. If it's not there, it's out on the balcony, though Oklahoma's inclement weather doesn't bode well for bicycle brakes and chains. And like my life's chapters of bicycles past, I anticipate that over the course of my

time with this bike I shall experience more sidesplitting laughter, more chances at love, and more agonizing hardships. Though I'm on my third bicycle, odds are I'm not on my last. And even though it might not be much, I've learned that it's enough to keep me going.

62nd Street

I dreamt about you again last night, but I don't remember all the details. What I do remember is that you were you, and I was yours. Just a reckless, carefree boy without a cause. That's how you knew me then, but you wouldn't recognize me now.

Looking back, I always knew you weren't perfect. I knew you were flawed. Twenty years later, I see that now more than ever, and yet, I haven't stopped missing you. The further you fade into my memory, the more I dream about that little brown house tucked between Hillcrest Elementary and OCCC. I long for the days when I could step outside without a phone or a wallet and have the time of my life. Despite stepping on broken glass or finding needles by the stop sign, I never felt more at home than I did when I was with you. Despite waking up to late-night screaming matches or the sound of triggered car alarms, I was never more at peace than when I lived on 62nd.

2002 was a good year for us, maybe the best. I turned 10 that summer, and my stepdad bought me the sweetest mountain bike I'd ever seen. It was this tall, green, steel-framed beauty, and it made me a believer in love at first sight. I couldn't wait to race down the block and show Joseph my new wheels. I didn't care if Slimer the Rottweiler was loose at the corner. I didn't care if those punks in the red Honda saw me. I didn't care because I knew they'd never catch me. I was flying.

Riding to the end of the street took no time at all, but walking that same stretch after school felt like an eternity. It seemed like everybody parked in the street, whether they lived there or not, and since there weren't any sidewalks, it was either walk in the middle of the road or cut across everybody's front yard. I didn't mind, though. Most of my friends were there, and a couple of them lived only a few houses down from mine. Miguel was the first of us to move away, but at least he stayed on the south side of Oklahoma City. I wasn't as fortunate.

As I reflect on my youth with the kind of wisdom only distance can offer, I've started to understand why it was necessary for me to leave you. Don't get me wrong, I'll always miss the friendships and freedom you fostered, but if I was to ever reach my full potential, I had to say goodbye to you. My mother knew that at the time, and now so do I. As I physically outgrew that bright red bunk bed, my ambitions outgrew May Avenue. I suspect I'll dream of you forever. You gave me a crash course in growing up, but you also taught me a valuable lesson in how to be a kid. That's something I'll never lose sight of no matter how many years pass us by.

A Musing

on sleep

You've never been a fan of alarms. No matter how early you set them, you always awake just before they sound off. It's an occurrence you suspect you'll never fully understand. You've heard about circadian rhythms, but this is a little different. You can set your alarm for two hours after you plan on falling asleep, and even with such little rest, you'll still beat that alarm to the finish line. It's beyond maddening. Those precious minutes forever lost. How much better your life could have been had you had more rest. With more rest you would have more energy. With more rest you could have more dreams. These are the kinds of things you think about when there is nothing more to ponder. You've always accused yourself of thinking too critically, over-analyzing every detail that penetrates your tympanic membrane. It's something you've tried to improve upon. Perhaps the best you can do is to become the best you can be. And what better way to begin such an immense quest than to start it with the sun?

on music

The original melody came from within. Our biological predisposition synthesizes such beauty. It is a natural occurrence that can also be learned. It can tell a story in a way no other method can. It's the resonance within our hearts, a rose-colored aura emanating between those who share it. It's a force that tugs on our souls, a bridge between dissimilar minds. It's the only dance that is

never observed. Never seen, but always felt. It's a beautiful corridor within our world, a universal warmth amongst advanced beings. Such orchestral harmony, it soothes the disturbed. It feeds the joyous, it nurtures the ignorant. It is certainly a most phenomenal phenomena, and yet, perpetually indescribable.

on living

You stand in line, waiting for this exhilarating moment. There are many others before you, others who have been waiting longer than you. Beads of sweat roll down your forehead. The faint sound of laughter inspires you. As time elapses, you move closer toward the front. Such an immense structure, it blocks out the sun. You frequently gaze upon its tremendous stature, wondering what it must be like atop this little blue world. But the glare from the sun causes you to squint. Occasionally, there are those who cut in line. Occasionally, there are those who leave the line. No matter the others, you've reached the gate. You cross the threshold, you hesitate. Momentarily pondering your seat of choice. Much like the contraption itself, each seat has its ups and downs. Its own pros and cons. It's up to you to make such an important decision. You choose the front; the opportunity just too tempting. You buckle up, take a deep breath. You're alone in this seat, but not on this voyage. You rattle on, onward and upward. You brace for the worst and hope for the best. The sun, once again, blinds you during your ascent. You reach the pinnacle, only to halt. Now is when you enjoy the view, relish the air, begin anew. There's only one path to traverse from here. But from here, the same will be questioned. Life is a ride, are you tall enough?

on distance

I look at the night, the stars, they twinkle. Each of these stars, a time I thought of you. You inspire me to ponder, I think the night. The air is cold, our history, colder. I would see my breath

if you hadn’t taken it from me. There is no sound but the whispering wind. A tree, its branch, We are in front, we are behind. Worlds away, dependent upon where you stand. The breeze, it comes, it goes, unabated. Adjusted are my eyes, the night is wide. Unknowingly floating, the planet is still. A soulless solstice, this night is. Without haze, without motion. Suspended in space, the literal too. The bugs have gone, the birds have followed. Pointy edges, a treelined silhouette. I can’t escape this terra, nor the memories above. Not for impossibility, I simply choose not. You are there. I am here. We are everywhere. We are the night.

End of Interlude.

Closing Scene

When I was twenty-one, I nearly killed my brother. By the end of it, I could barely recognize him. Just a pulpy mess lying on the living room floor. His eyes were swollen shut, and his cheeks were raw and puffy. I heard his son's cries – a baby boy – wailing from the bedroom at the end of the hallway. I smelled the iron on my stained knuckles. I forced my fingers to unstick when I opened my fist.

I don't know this for certain, but I imagine his life was made more difficult after our mom divorced his dad and married mine. He was twelve when I was born, and from what I remember as a kid, he was the kind of big brother I was happy to have. By the time he was twenty, he was already a father and a husband, and he joined the Army soon after that. Unfortunately, his marriage didn't survive, and he's no longer in his son's life. Still, to me he was the most intelligent person I knew, and he never failed to make me laugh until my cheeks hurt. I looked up to him, even after the time he lost his temper and had our mom, my twin sister Ashley and me cowering on the front lawn in the middle of the night. Even after I saw him push his unconscious girlfriend out of his car in the driveway, I thought of him as my friend.

One December, my brother lost his job and couldn't afford to pay his utility bills. At the time, he was living with his girlfriend and their infant son in the same house I was raised in. We

had since moved west of Oklahoma City, but our mother agreed to let him have our old house when we moved out. However, since they didn't have money to pay for heat or electricity, she also agreed to let them stay over through the winter while he continued to look for a new job.

I actually enjoyed having him around more often. I had already completed my course prerequisites, so I worked part-time as a sales associate while I waited to hear back from the OU College of Dentistry. It was a rather boring stretch of time for me, but having my older brother around was more fun than I anticipated. After coming home from work, we'd dust off the Sega or watch whatever indie film he wanted to show me. With everything going on in his life – raising a baby, losing his job, and managing his bipolar disorder – I suspected he was struggling with a lot, mentally, but he rarely let it show.

I had the house to myself that night. Mom was on her usual seven to seven at St. Anthony's, and I remember feeling excited when my sister came over after her shift to watch the game with me. It was Bedlam basketball, and we've both been indoctrinated into Sooner sports fandom. At some point during the second half, our brother came home from a celebratory night out with his girlfriend and their son. Earlier that day, Mom told me that he'd been hired at AT&T. I knew that meant he could start providing for his family again, and that they could finally move back into their house. I was happy for them. I was happy for him.

Now for some time, I suspected he hadn't been taking his prescribed medication like he should have been, but nothing about his behavior alarmed me before this night. That changed when he walked through the front door. I could immediately tell that he was drunk. Given my feelings toward my alcoholic father, I could feel my anger start to swell, but I knew I needed to stay calm for my sister's sake. Unfortunately, instead of going to bed to sleep off the drinks, he came into our space and sat with us in the living room. For minutes he roughhoused with the

dogs and spoke belligerently about nonsense. His eyes were glassy, and his expressions were crazed. I could see that my sister was uncomfortable in his presence. She kept her eyes down and remained quiet.

"Are you on something?" I asked him.

"Yeah!" he said. He was almost drooling with how proud he was of his answer. I stood up from the couch and walked over to him.

"You need to leave."

I wish I could say he listened. I wish I could say he left us alone, but he didn't. He refused to leave, and instead he tried to wrestle with me. Being the size that I am compared to the size that he is, realistically there was no way he was ever going to overpower me. I stayed mindful of that in the moment, so retaliation was out of the question. On the other side of the living room, I could hear my sister on the phone calling for the police. He eventually released me when he wore himself out, and as he stumbled down the hallway, he repeatedly shouted the most charged word in the English language from the top of his lungs. I don't know if that's how he's always felt about me or if that was the alcohol speaking, but in that moment I was no longer his brother. To him, I was just my father's son. To him, I was just a Black man. It hurt to hear that then, and the years of distance haven't numbed the pain.

Despite the mayhem coming from the end of the hallway, I thought the dust had finally settled, but I was wrong. With my back turned, he caught me off guard and managed to drive me into the big screen. There was something about crashing through my parents' seventy-inch TV that ignited all the rage I intended to keep under control, so I reacted with force. I let loose on my own brother. I didn't hold anything back. Blow after blow, I could feel the bones in his face

fracture under the gravity of my fists. As he lay there motionless and wheezing in a pool of his own undoing, I sensed that would be the last time I saw him. Turns out I was right.

"Grab his hand," mama said in the PetSmart parking lot. I was five, and he didn't hesitate. As I closed the car door, my brother walked toward me and reached out his hand for mine. The touch of his clammy palm grossed me out, and I think he knew it, too. A lather of warm sweat greased between my fingers, locking me in a wet brotherly glove. I looked up to see his face, but I could barely see past the glare of the two o'clock sun. I knew he was smiling, though. I could hear him laughing.

Red Rock

There wasn't anything particularly unusual about this night, and that's what worried me the most. I sat alone in my car, parked in front of a 7-Eleven. It was dark, and it was late, but I couldn't go home. Call it a hunch or call it intuition, I just knew that I could not go home. What if this was finally the night? After two failed attempts, what if this third time was the final tragic charm? I was running out of options faster than the thoughts were running through my head. I quickly grew desperate, and I needed help from somebody – anybody. For me, that was easily the scariest part.

The doctor asked me if I was feeling suicidal. Little did I know that was the question that would ultimately seal my fate for the next seventy-two hours. I thought long and hard about my answer as it boiled in my throat. *How honest was I going to be tonight? I mean, I'm already here. I already made that phone call. Hell, it's almost two in the morning. Why would I change my mind now?*

I stared at the scuffed linoleum at my feet. I noticed every speck of dirt on the surface of that blue-gray floor. Even as he was sitting, I could tell he was tall, like me, and the edges of his leather shoes were worn and weathered. It was an interesting contrast to his starch white shirt

that he definitely ironed that day, probably around the same time he pressed his pants. I could feel it bubbling up.

"Yeah," I confessed.

That first night was mostly a blur. Once it was determined that I was going to stay there for the foreseeable future, they let me write down a few numbers and send some last-minute texts to my mom and boss before confiscating my phone. They asked me a million questions, took my belt and shoelaces and gave me plastic zip ties to replace them. If that wasn't embarrassing enough, I recognized the security guard who escorted me to my room as someone I once went to school with. He confirmed that he knew who I was as well, but he told me that it wasn't "a big deal." Easy for him to say.

I didn't bother turning on the light as I entered my room. I sat on the edge of the small bed and took in my unfamiliar surroundings. Even at a glance, I knew that tiny pink blanket wasn't going to be enough to cover me all the way up. I had to remind myself that I put myself in this position, so I had to make do. I laid on my side, hoping I could find an hour of sleep, but the coppery glow of the incandescent lamp outside my window kept me awake long into the already long night.

The next morning, I was finally introduced to daily life at Red Rock. Before my stay, I had never even heard of this place, but there I was, a patient inside a mental health crisis center. Immediately outside of where my room was, there was the men's lounge that consisted of tan recliners, a medium-sized TV and a bookshelf overcrowded with riveting titles like 'The Salesman's Handbook' and 'Biological Systems.' Beyond the boundary line was the communal area, where we all ate our meals, received our meds and colored extravagant images from a thick

stack of printed pages. Past the opposite boundary was where the women's lounge was, and as far as I could tell, it was just as remarkable as the men's, too.

I really was not interested in mingling with any of the others, so I tried to keep myself busy as best as I could. After some trial and error, I found that coloring dragons and butterflies was my most effective strategy. One of the care coordinators found me at the art station and told me I had a visitor. Up to that point I realized that I hadn't even thought about the idea of visitors because I wasn't planning on being there for much longer. I asked him who it was, but he didn't tell me. The mystery would be solved soon enough though, as I followed him down a hallway and through the swinging silver doors.

After navigating my way to the other side of that fluorescent labyrinth, I saw my mom sitting alone in a room with several tables and windows. The biggest smile took over her face as soon as we made eye contact, and when the coordinator let us be, she gave me a hug that I wish would've lasted forever.

Looking around the room, I remember the outside views were quite serene. There were all kinds of plants and flowers in every direction, like a botanical garden. My mom made a similar observation. Addressing the elephant in the room, she asked me if I felt sad or lonely. I said "Yeah, sometimes." I also told her that despite my weekly therapy sessions for the past four months, my depression only became worse. I couldn't explain why, but I know I wasn't being entirely open or honest with my therapist either. To go there would be to go against nature, and that's not something I was ready for.

At the end of the visit, she said "I love you," and gave me another big hug and an even bigger smile. I could see tears welling in her eyes, but I never saw them fall to her face.

The next day, I was scheduled to meet with one of Red Rock's psychiatrists for a mental evaluation. According to another patient, this meeting was going to determine how early I would be allowed to go home. The pressure was on, but I didn't let the possibility of staying longer affect my attitude. I focused on being honest about my feelings, my inpatient experience, and my outlook on life. By the end of it, she reassured me that I should be able to leave after my three days were up as long as I showed them that I could clean up and take care of myself. I knew what I needed to do, but first I needed to make a call.

Thankfully, one of the numbers I wrote down before I turned my phone in was my roommate's. I was nervous about having to tell him where I was, but I needed someone to bring me a change of clothes. To my surprise, he was really cool about it when I explained the situation to him, and he agreed to bring what I needed later that day. Interestingly enough, that wasn't the only surprise waiting for me that day.

That evening, when I was told I had another visitor, I fully expected to see my roommate standing on the other side of those tall glass walls. However, when I rounded the corner, I didn't see him. No, I saw my dad, instead. That was the first time I had seen him in about a year, which was normal for us. As I sat down at the table, he handed me a bag of my clothes.

"Your mom asked me to pick these up for you," he said in the same deep, thunderous voice I always remembered him having. "When I got there, your friend said he was about to take 'em to you. I told him I'd go ahead and do it."

I didn't know how badly I had missed my dad until that moment. He's never been the perfect dad, and he never will be, but at the rock bottom of my life when I felt hopelessly alone, unloved and unwanted, he was there. In his visit, we didn't talk about why I was at Red Rock. I don't think he knew how to approach the subject, and I certainly didn't know how to start it.

Instead, we talked about what we usually talk about – the Lakers and the Steelers. Sport is our language, and on that day, it was enough.

The following morning, I took a shower, took my meds and had a bagel for breakfast. They didn't have any cream cheese or knives for me to use, so I had to bite into the side of that thing like a wild animal. Nothing could bother me in that moment, though, because I knew I was going home.

When I was finally released, I went out to the lot where I had parked my car. Three nights before, though I was sitting in that same place, I was in a completely different head space. I dreaded the time I spent inside those walls, but I am forever grateful for the perspective I gained along the way. Admitting to myself that I needed help allowed me to finally see whose love in my life was already there. For once, I was ready to let that love in.

After meditating on my decision in the deafening silence of my car, I elected to make the call for help. I wasn't looking for someone to talk to; no, I was in pain. This was an emergency by definition, so I reached out accordingly. It wasn't long before I saw those all-too-familiar lights pull into the parking lot. Flashes of red and blue danced without the accompaniment of sirens. I felt my heart rate climbing by the second. For a young, Black man like myself, watching a group of police officers approach me is never the most comfortable feeling, but neither was my circumstance. I wasn't raised to show fear or vulnerability. I was never supposed to express my feelings or lament over my unending sadness. After a while, I guess I just grew tired of pretending.

These Were the Nights (continued)

I don't see myself in twenty years. The words echoed in my head.

And that was the truth. That was my harsh, painful truth. For so long, I felt like I was stuck in the fast lane, and the only way out was through the concrete barrier to my left. I wanted to scream. I wanted to die. I wanted to cry, but that only happened at night. I looked down again, but I could feel her gaze. I could feel her pity. I never thought I'd be here, wherever this was. I thought of a lot of things, but never this.

The quality of my schoolwork gradually plummeted, and my grades followed suit. That was the least of my concerns, though. I wanted—no, needed—someone to talk to. I was distressed. I was lonely. I was angry. Walls and headboards just didn't do it for me anymore. I struck myself repeatedly with force. Still, no blackout. It always happened at night, and it always happened in the dark. I never bothered with the light, so I could never distinguish between the blood and the tears. It all came from the same place anyway. And these weren't just a few nights. These were the nights.

After meeting with my professor that day, I made the decision to speak with a professional. Admittedly, I was reluctant at first, and not because of any stereotypical stigmas I had heard about therapy. I just figured that she wouldn't understand me. I mean, how could she? She was forty years my senior. She had a ritzy office in the upper-class part of town. She was a

white face in a white world. How the hell was she supposed to level with this poor, Black, juvenile mess? And why the hell did I have to pay someone to save my own fucking life? All I wanted—no, needed—was someone to talk to.

I used to place blame on everybody but myself. I blamed my father for every time I smashed another kid's face into a pulp. Growing up, I routinely had uncontrollable bouts of aggression because he didn't teach me how to manage my emotions. He picked up the bottle instead of responsibility. His presence made my mother miserable. His absence made me the same way. I thought blaming him would take the pressure off of me, but all it ever did was give him power over me. I recognize that now.

I blamed my twin sister for not quite measuring up to our parents' expectations. She's always been the self-starter. She's always been motivated, driven, bursting with intelligence, and she has the degrees and awards to prove it. If she wouldn't have set the bar so high, perhaps I could have actually felt like I accomplished something in our parents' eyes. Perhaps I could have felt like what I was doing would make them proud. Constantly comparing myself to her was one of the most self-destructive things I have ever done.

I blamed my mother for my lack of independence. I never took my education seriously. I never felt the need to apply myself beyond the bare minimum. She would always boast about how successful my sister was, but she didn't say those things about me. She would tell me, "Cs get degrees." She never pushed me, but I could always sense her disappointment. I could see it on her face. I could hear it in her voice. I probably would have graduated in four years instead of seven if only she had pushed me to try harder. I would have made a better man of myself if only she had pushed me to do so. At some point, I realized blaming her for my shortcomings was wrong. I learned about accountability, and I've started to hold myself to it.

Depression is…sobering. It wipes out any semblance of a good mood you once had. It can flare up inexplicably, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. You walk into a room and greet people with a smile on your face. You're polite, you laugh, and you die a little more because you know you're failing to convince yourself that things are actually better. Do others know you're pretending? You'll never know if they do, and that's enough to make you question everything. Your sickness runs off every friend you've ever had, one by one. You muse about love and other forms of self-harm. You bottle every emotion until you're overflowing. You release the valve in peace. Half of the damage is visible. The other half is painful. You know you'll feel better in the morning, if only you could fall asleep.

Sunseeker

"Mom, have you seen my music?" Kai asked. Rows of fluorescent lights buzzed overhead at Mason's Station, a local truck stop, aiding this thirteen-year-old on his quest to find buried treasure in the trunk of his mom's car. Unfortunately, there were no chests of gold nor precious jewels waiting to be unearthed within the overflowing mess. Nevertheless, he figured this bottomless canyon of shoeboxes and tote bags was the perfect hiding place for something valuable.

His mother, sitting inside the toasty car and away from the biting autumnal air, stared into the rearview mirror in search of any imperfections on her face that she could find. As the trunk slammed shut, the impact rocked a hanging set of rosary beads into a sway, but it wasn't enough to shake her concentration.

"Hey mom," Kai began to ask again as he sat down in the passenger seat. "Do you know where my sheet music is?"

In one fluid movement, she reached behind Kai's seat and pulled out a dull green backpack. "Have you checked in here?" she asked as she plopped the pack onto the black trumpet case fixed between Kai's knees.

Kai rummaged through the backpack, taking out a stack of worksheets and folders whose usefulness had expired months before. The one thing he never expected to find in that crusty old backpack was his sheet music, and his intuition was on the money.

"It's not in here," Kai said. "Do you remember if I had it with me after school yesterday?"

"Kai, please give it a rest," his mom snapped. "Look, I'm sorry about your music. I'll try to find it on my break, but right now I gotta drop you off if I'm gonna make it on time this time."

Not a minute later, they left the Mason's parking lot and drove down Chelsea Boulevard, passing all their usual spots. There was the good laundromat, the place where Kai's mother would sometimes cash her checks, the bad laundromat, and Ernie's auto shop on the corner. On the next block up there was a Greek restaurant that lived up to its reputation for the best falafel in town.

"Can I wait in here until someone else shows up?" Kai asked as they pulled into the middle school lot. "They haven't even turned on all the lights yet."

"Kai, I already told you." His mom sighed in frustration. "I have to be on time today or else they're gonna cut me loose and send someone else to do the job. It's not always gonna be like this, but right now it has to be this way."

"Are you still gonna pick me up, or am I gonna have to walk to Ernie's again?"

Kai's mother rubbed her forehead like she often did. She looked out through the windshield as if she was searching for rescue, but there was nothing to grab onto in the dark blue morning light.

"I'll be here," she said. "Don't worry, and don't be afraid to ask your teacher for an extra copy of the music."

Kai's day at school went about as well as his morning did. His locker was jammed, he ran out of lunch money, and he failed his algebra quiz because, as his teacher reminded him, he didn't "show the work."

On top of that, he'd completely forgotten about his geography homework. Kai hardly ever wrote things down, but he was almost never this careless. Most years were difficult for him and his mom, but the last few months had been some of the hardest, and it was starting to take a toll on the both of them.

At the sound of the final bell, it was time for Kai to report for concert band practice—that is, if he even qualified. As Kai readied his trumpet, he overheard some of the other students making plans for the week from across the band room.

"Hey man, are your parents still cool with you sleeping over on Friday?"

"Yeah, it's cool. I kinda don't wanna play Fortnite the whole time, though."

"Heard on that, my dude. I still got some paintballs we can shoot."

"Bet."

The very thought of such a time upset Kai. He knew it wasn't his mom's fault, but he also wished they could have stayed with his dad. It was all too much to think about, though, so he grabbed his mouthpiece, blew out a rope of saliva and headed into the band room.

With his music stand propped high in front of him, he practiced his scales as other students filed into their sections. Up and down and up and down, he was smooth with his transitions and quick with the valves. By the time he was all warmed up, there were over one hundred kids in the room making their final adjustments ahead of this crucial practice session.

“When your name is called,” the band director, Mrs. Sharp, announced, “please gather your music and instrument, exit the band room and have a seat in your designated section on the auditorium sage. Wind ensemble will prepare in there.”

The tension in the room was palpable, and Kai, despite all of his daily hard work before and after school, felt the claws of doubt creep onto him. Mrs. Sharp began reading off the names of the chosen ones—the lucky ones. Section by section, she culled the herd with a swift and final judgment.

When it was the trumpeters’ turn, Kai’s heart raced as she continued to announce names. Seven other trumpet players had already been called. There would not be room for many more.

“Carla Nguyen.”

No…

“Kai Watts.”

Yes!

An unshakeable smile grew onto Kai’s face. As instructed, he grabbed his notes and his trumpet and followed Carla to the auditorium. They made their way down the dark and dusty hall, beyond the auburn aisles and onto the stage where music stands and chairs were already set up. Kai could see that some of the other trumpet players were already seated, and much to his surprise, the others waved over to him.

Eventually, all of the seats on the stage were filled with eighth graders. Soon after, Mrs. Sharp walked onto the stage and stepped up to the conductor’s podium.

“Okay guys, flip over those sheets on your stand if you haven’t already. What do you say we get ready for our first rehearsal?”

The group responded with cheers and a resounding applause, including Kai. After everything that happened that day, he felt as if an anchor tethered around his ankle had finally been released.

It was a quarter past six as the late November sun descended behind the field house. It had been more than an hour since the last band student was picked up, and only two cars remained in the faculty parking lot. As the last ounce of daylight began to burn away, Kai sat patiently on a hard, red rubber bench that was as cold as it was uncomfortable. With his clunky trumpet case at his feet and the incoming cold front descending upon him, he fiddled with the broken zipper on his jacket and scoured the horizon like a sailor searching for a shore.

“Hey sir,” a familiar voice called out. He turned over his shoulder to see that it was his band director, Mrs. Sharp. As she approached, she put on a pair of thin lavender gloves and wrapped her neck in a matching scarf. “You got a ride?”

“Uh...yeah,” Kai replied. "Yeah, my mom."

“Excellent,” Mrs. Sharp said. Without hesitation, she made her way around the front of the bench and sat on the end opposite of Kai. “I hope you don't mind if I wait with you. That cool?”

Kai looked off into the distance and nodded in approval. His cheeks reddened beyond the effects of the cold and he continued to fidget with his zipper. To make matters worse, he was now humiliated because his teacher was involved. As the light in the sky faded by the minute, the two of them sat quietly in the dying shadow of this old middle school building.

A car would pass by, then another. The accompanying whoosh on the road was all the sound that could be heard in this space, other than the dancing branches bullied by the occasional

breeze. After what seemed like an eternity to Kai, Mrs. Sharp broke the awkward silence. “Great work today, Kai. You’ve got a brass gift, there.”

“Uh, thanks,” he replied.

“So, have you tried calling your mom? Maybe just to see where she’s at?”

Kai looked down at the sidewalk beneath his feet. “I don't have a phone,” he said.

“Not a problem. You can use mine!” Mrs. Sharp said. “Do you know her number?”

“No, she never has the same number long enough for—”

Kai was interrupted by the sight of headlights rounding the corner into the school parking lot. A tan sedan pulled up to the curb where Kai and Mrs. Sharp now stood, squealing to an abrupt halt.

“See you next week,” Kai said.

“You bet,” his teacher said. “Keep practicing!”

When Kai opened the door, the light inside the car came on, revealing the once thought-to-be-lost sheet music lying on the center console. Also exposed by the light was a large pile of black trash bags that took up most of the backseat. As Kai plopped into the passenger seat and set his trumpet case between his knees, he looked over at his mom who was still dressed in her usual light blue scrub top with a white, long sleeve shirt underneath. She attempted to smooth down the many stray hairs sprouting from her head, but there was nothing she could do about her visibly heavy eyes. Following a brief exchange of forced smiles and half-hearted waves between his teacher and his mother, Kai rolled up the foggy car window as the two of them drifted off into the young night, setting sail for something like home.

Black Iris

Isaiah tidied the living room in anticipation of his son's arrival. He couldn't remember much from the last time he saw Chiron, but he knew he had some amends to make. He loaded all the cups and plates from his bedroom into the dishwasher, threw out the unsightly bags of trash that had accumulated near the back door, straightened up all the furniture, wiped down the glass coffee table and swept the vinyl floor from couch to kitchen. Working almost seventy hours a week as a security guard, he normally didn't have this much time or energy to clean, but he took the weekend off for this special occasion. All he wanted was to make things right, but he was afraid he might be too late.

The sound of a closing car door out front captured Isaiah's attention. He stood up from his old brown couch and walked over to the living room window. Through the blinds, he could see his ex, Deija, walking around to the passenger side of a white Buick LeSabre. When she opened the door to the back, he saw a baby strapped in a pink and gray car seat. As Deija worked to unbuckle the baby, the passenger door opened. Out from the dusty sedan emerged his son, Chiron. He was much taller than the last time Isaiah saw him, and skinny all the way up. He wore tattered blue jeans, a plain white shirt and a black bomber jacket. As he shut the car door, Chiron slung a red duffel bag over his shoulder and waited for his mom to finish tending to the baby.

A nervous Isaiah stood behind the front door, waiting to hear footsteps on the porch, waiting for an inevitable knock. Three loud bumps broke the silence and sent a jolt through his chest. Nervously, he took a few light steps away from the door, paused, then calmly walked back toward the door to open it.

"Hey, Dei," Isaiah said, looking down at the mother of his son. She was a rather tiny woman, but her large personality shone through her hot pink tracksuit and matching nails. He noticed that she no longer kept her nose and eyebrow piercings in, and most of all, he noticed the baby girl that she held in her arms. Before today, he never knew that this child even existed. Before this day, he hardly knew about anything that went on in his former family's life.

"Hey," Deija replied. Her voice was smooth like milk chocolate, a direct antithesis to Isaiah's deep, scratchy notes. "This is Kamauri." Deija turned to the side to give Isaiah a better look at her daughter's face. She was adorably shy with big, round eyes just like her mother's, and she had dark, bouncy curls to match. He didn't know what the father looked like, but in any case, they made one beautiful little girl.

After a lighthearted display of finger waves and sweet baby talks, Isaiah finally looked over at Chiron. He hardly recognized the almost full-grown man standing before him. Even for as tall and burly as Isaiah was, this lanky teen stood nearly eye-level with him. Up close, he could see the effect that the last four years had had on his boy. His jawline was square, just like his old man's, and the edges of his face were sharp and chiseled. A little facial hair was visible above his upper lip, and it looked like he'd already been trimming it.

"It's been a long time, man," Isaiah said in an attempt to break the ice.

"Yeah..." Chiron answered, letting his voice trail off. Isaiah didn't let it show, but the sound of his son's voice threw him for a loop. He couldn't believe a voice that deep could come

out of a 17-year-old. As if he needed any more evidence that this was in fact his own flesh and blood.

Isaiah took a step back out of the doorway. "Y'all come in," he said with a friendly gesture of his outstretched hand. "S'posed to be a cold front coming in sometime tonight."

Isaiah closed the door behind them and walked a few feet into the kitchen area. "Y'all want anything to drink?" he asked. "If you don't want water, I got some juice, but that's it."

Still standing by the front door with Kamauri in nestled her arms and Chiron standing behind his mother, Deija replied, "I'm okay, but thank you."

"What about you, Chi?" Isaiah asked. "You good?"

"Yeah," Chiron said, his voice a monotone.

"A'ight, well help yourself whenever you get thirsty or hungry or whatever. I got plenty to eat."

Isaiah poured himself a cup of cranberry juice and made his way over to the couch. Deija turned to Chiron and gave him a hug and a kiss on the forehead before he followed his dad into the living room. There, he took a seat in an ancient tan recliner and set his duffel bag on the floor next to him.

"Okay, boys, Kamauri and I gotta run," Deija said. "Chi, you still headed to the park tomorrow?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Got your camera case? You know Grant ain't gonna buy you another one."

"Yes ma'am."

“All right then. Isaiah, please make sure he don’t leave the house in the middle of the night.” Deija’s eyes darted back toward Chiron, and she gave him a playful glare. “He think he slick, but he ain’t.”

Deija said her goodbyes and left with Kamauri. Isaiah and Chiron sat in the living room for nearly twenty minutes without saying much. On TV, a few scenes from Bar Rescue went by before either of them made an attempt to break the silence.

“So, you into photography?” Isaiah asked Chiron. “Sound like your mama said you got one of those fancy cameras.”

“It’s a’ight,” Chiron answered.

“Cool, cool. You know I used to draw when I was in school. I liked to sketch. It’s kind of the same thing, right? I mean, it’s pretty much all art.”

“I mean yeah, I guess so, but it’s different.”

Isaiah sat forward to the edge of the couch. “What you mean?”

Chiron paused for a second. “Well basically, the end is kinda the same, but how you get there is different.” Chiron’s eyes remained fixed on the television screen. “Like, with pictures,” he continued, “I gotta look for the art. But drawing is different, like, you gotta make that shi- uh, stuff like…come to life on your own.”

“Makes sense, makes sense. Damn, that’s a good answer, Chiron. I see you got smart since you been up here,” Isaiah said with a chuckle.

Chiron nodded slightly, but his body language stayed neutral. Isaiah wanted to hear more from his son, but he didn’t force the conversation

As the late afternoon light faded behind the blinds, Isaiah heated up some frozen Salisbury steaks and seasoned a pot of red potatoes. After dinner, Chiron migrated to his dad’s

bedroom – the only bedroom in the house. Meanwhile, a tired Isaiah kicked back on the couch, turned on a basketball game and thought about what to say and when to say it.

Just after midnight, Chiron quietly emerged from the bedroom already wearing his jacket and shoes. With Isaiah turned on his side facing the back of the couch, Chiron slipped out through the front door. As it closed, it clicked shut, stirring Isaiah awake. Immediately, he sat up to peek. Through the blinds, he saw Chiron walking away from the house and down the dark street. Deija's words echoed in his head like a poke in his side, but he didn't want to risk pushing his son further away by chasing him down and making him stay home. He decided to leave it alone for the night. He watched TV until his eyelids grew heavy and he could no longer stay awake.

The next morning, Isaiah walked into the kitchen and through the opened blinds he saw Chiron outside with his camera in hand. The leaf-strewn backyard was lined by a short chain-link fence. In one corner, there was an old pile of splintered wooden planks on top of a tattered blue tarp. In the other corner stood a towering pin oak tree whose branches were still barren from the winter. Chiron walked around and appeared to take a few snapshots of each side but continued to wander around the yard. As he turned back toward the house, Isaiah watched as his son's eyes locked onto a bed of black irises growing against the house's weathered white paneling. Their bright green stems were offset by shadow-like petals, void of light yet faintly violet. In the gentle springtime breeze, the flowers resembled tiny ballroom dancers wearing lavish dresses.

"Ooh wee! It's cold as hell out here," Isaiah announced himself as he walked through the back door. He brought his hands up near his face and rubbed them together. "Hey man, where's

your jacket? I know your mama, and she ain't gon' be happy if you get sick while you over here." He laughed.

"Nah, I'm good," Chiron said. "This place isn't as big as I remembered."

"That's 'cause you my size now."

The two of them smiled at Isaiah's quick and dry explanation. Isaiah could see that Chiron was more expressive than the day before.

Isaiah cleared his throat. "So you get any good shots? I know it's not much, but that's why you the artist, right?"

Chiron slowly nodded his head. "It's not that bad, but I don't know yet. I'll find out later."

Another silence fell between them, amplifying the sound of the wind as it pushed the world around them into motion. They both stared ahead, watching the flowering stalks sway in unison with nature's nudge.

"Your mama's mama brought those to me" Isaiah said, gesturing toward the bed of irises. "Well, last time she was up here, some fifteen-odd years ago, she put a great big one right there in the dirt. Shit's amazing. I ain't never watered it or nothin'. They just keep on keepin' on all by themselves."

Chiron stayed quiet as his gaze remained fixed on the dark petals, but his father's words made it through.

"Hey, what's old Anita up to these days?" Isaiah asked. "She still playin' bingo over there on Almonte?"

"She passed last year," Chiron replied. "Right before mom's birthday."

Isaiah closed his eyes and slumped his head toward the ground. The sound of neighboring wind chimes and dried up leaves crawling across the concrete walkway was all that kept the air from a total hush.

"Man…I'm real sorry about that, Chi," Isaiah said. His voice lowered and grew quiet. "She was always good to me. Probably showed me more love than I deserved."

Once again, a lingering silence made itself comfortable in their midst, but Isaiah saw this as an opportunity. As he mustered up the courage to begin making amends, an icy gust of wind howled past the two of them, forcing Chiron toward the back door.

"I'm gonna go look at these," Chiron said, gesturing to his camera.

"Alright, I'll stay out here a little bit longer. Might do some gardening or something," Isaiah joked. When the door shut behind Chiron, Isaiah stood still in the cold, April air, watching the sky as the world turned before him.

Later, as Isaiah spent another night on the couch, Chiron attempted to sneak out for a second time. Just as he made his way to the front door, Isaiah rolled over and spoke up.

"Hey man, what time is it?"

Chiron froze. He stood silent for a moment before finally turning around, only to meet Isaiah's eyes.

"Looks like the Braves game is over," Isaiah said, his eyes on the illuminating TV screen. "It's late, man. I think you should hang back tonight."

"I was just going out for a walk." Chiron stood by the door.

"Nah, I got you. And I get it, sometimes you get tired of sittin' in the same spot all day. I did the same thing. Here," Isaiah said, waving Chiron to come sit on the couch next to him.

Chiron walked up to the couch, tossed aside the quilt Isaiah had been using as a blanket and sat on the end opposite his dad.

"I ain't tryna be strict or nothin'," Isaiah explained, "it's just...not everybody 'round here as nice and friendly as you and me, you know?" I know you know this. I'm just sayin'. Can't have your mama chewing me out if something happened to you."

"Yeah, I feel you," Chiron said.

An infomercial about a multipurpose bathroom cleaner played on the television set in front of them, and Isaiah knew that if he was going to atone for his mistakes this weekend, he was running out of time to do so. He reached for the TV remote on the coffee table and turned down the volume.

"Chi, I know you being back here and being around me is probably hard and weird, and I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry for how I acted that night, and I'm sorry for taking so long to make things right with you all these years."

Shadows danced across Chiron's face as it was brightened and darkened by the light from the TV. He sat still as his father continued.

"I shoulda never let myself get like that around you, man," Isaiah's voice began to break. "You my son, man, and I had no right to take out my pain on you like that. I was hurt because I was lonely, and that ain't never good to mix drinking with."

The wind outside blew hard, causing the skeleton of this old house to creak and groan. Chiron looked around the living room before responding to Isaiah's obviously difficult admission.

"Yeah. So what else do you remember from that night?" Chiron asked.

“You know honestly, all I can really remember is your mom coming to pick you up that night. I also remember she cursed me out pretty good, and rightfully so. I called that next day, soon as I woke up, and she told me what you told her. She said I didn’t hit you, which thank God for that, but I know I messed up. I shoulda never raised my voice at you or threatened to hurt you. I know you were scared, Chi. I’m real sorry for all of that. Just know that I love you, son, and I would never put you through anything like that ever again.”

Chiron looked up from the glow on the floor and briefly met his father’s eyes. “Honestly, it’s not what you said. I was just hurt because I’ve missed my dad. You were like, my best friend.”

Isaiah felt his throat begin to swell, but he fought through the sensation with a loud, forced cough. For years, he’d had an idea of how much his actions and his absence had hurt his son, his boy, but hearing the words from Chiron himself was almost too much to bear.

Rubbing his face from his forehead to his mouth, Isaiah finally responded. “I know, and I’m sorry for that, too. I think I was just too ashamed of how I acted, and I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for that, for letting you and your mom down. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for all of it, son.”

Chiron nodded his head. “Mom said you’ve been sober for a while. Is that right?”

“She told you? I mean, actually yeah, believe it or not,” Isaiah answered. He folded his arms and leaned back into the couch. “I pretty much gave it up for good after that night. Shit was hard, and I’m not gonna lie, I’ve had a couple drinks since then, but I ain’t never got like that again. Never again, man. And I haven’t had a drop in about sixteen months.”

“So why haven’t you reached out to me since you cleaned up?” Chiron asked.”

Isaiah paused then let out a heavy sigh. “Man, I guess it comes down to shame. I been ashamed of what I done.”

“Damn. But you’re different now, though,” Chiron said. “I’m really proud of you.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

Isaiah scooted over to Chiron and pulled him in for an embrace that was long overdue. He didn’t care if it was forced or awkward, because his son was his world, and despite all of his mistakes, his world turned out all right.

Chiron, still yawning and rubbing the crust from his eyes, stumbled into the kitchen and sat at the small table for two in the breakfast area. Isaiah followed behind him with a stack of bowls and spoons in one hand and a gallon of milk in the other. The morning’s menu consisted of Pops cereal and no other options.

As he slurped down the last gulp of milk, Chiron spoke up. “Hey Dad, you think you could give me a ride later?”

“To the park, right? Yeah, yeah, no problem, man,” Isaiah replied with his mouth full. “Actually hey man, you wanna head that way here in a bit? I’m free all day.”

“No, no, it’s all good. Later’s fine. I thought we could go after the game if that’s cool?”

“You sure? ‘Cause I don’t mind taking you up there now. You don’t have to wait around until after it’s over.”

Chiron stood up from the table and placed his empty bowl in the sink before walking back into the living room and plopping onto the couch.

“I know,” Chiron said. “I just wanna watch the game first. Who we got? It’s Lakers-Knicks, right?”

Isaiah's heart swelled with excitement. He put away the rest of the milk and cereal, rinsed off their bowls and spoons and made himself comfortable on the recliner.