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Lost Cause Memoirs

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Connor Batsimm

Lost Cause Memoirs

From the Journals of Nigel Vernay, Poet and Scholar:

I

Since the incident, I feel a piece of glass has become lodged in my brain. And revisiting it serves only to agitate the glass, and wedge it deeper into the recesses of my gray matter. I'm speaking metaphorically, of course. I haven't fallen victim to any wayward explosions, and my head remains intact, at least in the literal sense. I only mean to emphasize the deep, personal pain I have had to endure, to share this story with you.

I haven't written much on my present relationship – and when I have, I confess, the language I've employed has been ethereal at best, and incomprehensible at worst. The reasons for this should be obvious. With Erin's celebrity status and distaste towards interviews, any divulgements of details on my part would constitute an invasion of privacy. Of course I have been tempted. When the sirens employed at HarperCollins publishing house and the New York Times literary gossip column called and begged me to give their readers a glimpse into the private life of the elusive Erin Vernay – they offered substantial monetary compensation too – of course I was tempted. But I always turned them down, with a tepid apology and a declaration of loyalty to my wife.

Now, of course, circumstances have radically changed. When the story broke, I packed a duffle bag with a few weeks of clothes and writing materials, and set out for a small cabin in Northern Vermont, where my family used to visit in the summer. You might remember allusions

to this cabin in my poems “Queen of Silt” and “Coyote.” It’s an important location within my canon, and it now bears a greater importance as my temporary shelter, my little town of Bethlehem, a place of sanctuary where I pen this desperate memoir.

I gave Erin no indication of my intent or the direction of my travels when I left our home. But my departure shouldn’t surprise her, given the circumstances. And I suspect, no, I’m nearly certain, that as I write, she writes too, simultaneously, an alternate narrative with the sole aim of discrediting me. Why shouldn’t she? She’s made her career off chronicling each moment of her life, curating every memory into an airtight collage, laminated and framed for the general public’s entertainment. So why should this incident be any different? It’s personal, sure, but so was her essay on how her brother Edward used to pick his nose.

The drive up to the cabin lasted nearly six hours, all on I-91. By the time I finally make it to the cabin, it’s nearly 4 AM. There’s no furniture anywhere in the cabin, not even a cot, so I line the old wood floor with a few of my shirts and use my duffel bag as a pillow. The cabin is large and drafty with seemingly no insulation, so that a strong gust of wind can blow from one side of the house to the other, causing the framework of the ceiling to rattle and shake.

When I wake up the next morning, I have five missed calls – one from Erin and four from a man named Dale. If you’ve followed the speculations in the tabloids, or the shoddy guesswork in the New York Times literary gossip column, you’ve likely heard Dale’s name, but as a misinformed reference without any real context. Some have guessed that Dale is a lover, some believe we’re former acquaintances with a shared criminal history. To prevent the continued viral spread of these rumors, I’ll give you the honest truth – Dale has been blackmailing me for the past three years. As to the contents of the compromising information at Dale’s disposal, I know the general public will assume the worst. People are schadenfreude-addicted buzzards,

scouring gossip magazines as if they were takeout menus, seeking out the most mouthwatering defamatory headlines to help themselves sleep at night. That's not a condemnation, merely an observation.

My point is, if I were to tell the public the truth of Dale's allegations – that they're a trivial matter, a small embarrassing story that I withheld out of pride and paranoia – they'd be dissatisfied first, then incredulous, then overwhelmed by a righteous anger. They would feel so betrayed by the anticlimax that they would ignore my account entirely and revert to the wild tales of the tabloids. So let's assume, for the sake of argument, a worst case scenario. Let's say I had an affair with Dale's wife, many years ago, and regretted it, and have since become trapped by my own lies, both morally and financially. Can't even the most cutthroat members of the peanut gallery empathize? We all make mistakes, and bearing the burden of an outdated lapse of judgment for a lifetime is a fate I wish on nobody (except maybe Dale, for the sake of karma, if nothing else).

I don't bother listening to Dale's voicemails. He is a mean-spirited, petty man, and whenever I think about him, the metaphorical glass shards press further in. I leave the cabin and walk out into the snow. A racoon carcass lies half-submerged in the ice, teeming with wasps and maggots. The sun is nearing the peak of its rotation, and the forest is quiet and calm.

Poem for a Raccoon Carcass:

Tender frozen paws, stained
with dew and hard blood. The scavenger
has been scavenged, the cavities between
his bones

hollowed out,
emptied by the time
the morning sun frees his tender frozen paws
from the Vermont ice.

-NV

II

I struggle with the conception of this memoir, for a variety of reasons. For one, nonfiction is Erin's genre, not mine. I can barely write prose, and even these sentences seem to me stretched out and bloated, and I itch to break them up into smaller lines. For another, the aforementioned glass. And now, I have encountered an unanticipated number of distractions at this seemingly tranquil cabin. The lack of furniture – not even a single folding chair – has forced me to sit on the floor and lean against the wall, and as I scrawl my anxious confessions into this notebook, I can't help but fixate on the rigidity of the floorboards that dig into my tailbone, and the awkward angles forced upon my sleep-deprived joints.

Some tech-savvy readers may wonder why I continue to write in a notebook, rather than on a laptop, which I am told is the practice of less antiquated writers. Questions like this are why poetry has become a dying form. What would the appeal of a poem be, as a series of bytes on a distant hard drive? The poem is the physical. It demands to live on a page. When left in theoretical terms, it crumples like an unprotected head in the vacuum of space.

Beyond the lack of furniture, I have become increasingly aware of each and every sound in this corner of Northern Vermont. Let us forever dispel with the misconception that the forest is a quiet place, free from cluttered background noises. No, this cabin is louder than a Manhattan

subway car. There must be at least thousands of birds on this plot of land alone, plus squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, deer, ants, spiders, centipedes, ticks, moths, and bats. And that's to say nothing of the sporadic howling coming from just beyond the hill. There's an ancient Chinese psychological torture method – water is slowly dripped onto the victim's forehead until they reach insanity. This howling is like that, only auditory. Intermittent enough to never fall into a pattern of white noise, but unceasing enough to deny me even a moment of peace.

The howl is too thin and high to be a wolf. The sonic pattern bears closer resemblance to that of a coyote. The irony! As you surely remember, “Coyote,” a meditation on predators and prey, was one of the poems that first placed me in the public eye. At the time, I considered the recognition a blessing from a kindred spirit, but now I realize the coyote has cursed me. For literary fame was never the luxury I imagined, it was the architecture for my public desecration. The coyote led me to the top of the mountain, pushed me over the cliff, and now it laughs as I plummet downward.

For the second time this morning, I trudge out into the snow. I scale the small hill behind the cabin, looking for the coyote. At the edge of the glade, I see its thin tail and lean haunches. As I approach, it lets out another howl, then disappears into the trees, stirring up a cloud of ice and dirt in its wake. I cross back across the house and return to my car with a strengthened resolve. What I need is a gun – along with a mattress, a chair, and a desk for writing – and once I have one, I'll lay waste to my tormentor and bury him in the Vermont snow, or maybe hang his head on the cabin wall, as sparse decoration and a concession to my id.

The gun shop is closer to the cabin than the nearest supermarket, which seems to me a perfect encapsulation of Vermont's northeast kingdom. The hand-painted sign dangling precariously over the store's front porch awning reads “Regal Pete's Hunting & Fishing Supply

Shop,” but it’s unclear what exactly makes Pete or his supply shop regal. Someone’s tied a tire swing to the rickety wooden post beside the shop’s main entrance, lending the premises a *To Kill a Mockingbird* ambiance. I climb the porch steps and enter through the dilapidated front door, where I nearly trip over a policeman camped out in the entryway. He’s sitting in a foldable camping chair and eating an overstuffed breakfast sandwich smeared with mayonnaise and sausage grease.

“Howdy there, son.” He eyes me up and down and I realize how conspicuous I must appear to the residents of this small town. My tweed jacket and suede loafers stand in stark contrast to Regal Pete’s second amendment aesthetic, and my smudged and foggy spectacles immediately reveal my scholarly background. This town meanwhile, has little patience for formalities. Even the cop wears a beer-stained flannel pulled over his uniform and a Patriots Super Bowl XLII hat.

"Son, would you mind if I asked you a few questions? Strictly procedural. We're in the middle of a case." It's been decades since anyone called me son, and it sounds strange from the tinny voice of a Vermont cop who looks at least five years my junior.

“Son, where were you the night of the eighth?” and for a moment I panic, because that’s the date of the incident, and if even this Podunk town sheriff has caught wind of my public embarrassment, then everybody in the country must have heard the story by now. I contemplate relocating myself to Romania and starting afresh, perhaps in a secluded mountaintop villa with a limited English-speaking population.

“I was in New York City. Midtown Manhattan.” My voice feels thin and high, like the forlorn wail of the coyote. “My publisher and my wife can confirm my location. May I ask what this is about?”

“We’re investigating a murder,” he tells me. “Some bastard blew a little old lady’s brains in a few miles over from here. Robbed her house bare and then torched the place. Can you believe that?”

“We live in a dark and twisted world,” I say.

“We sure do.” He nods, and I see him jot the remark into a small notebook. “You’re sure you’re not the bastard who killed a little old lady then burned her house down?”

“I’ve told you, I was in Manhattan, my publisher and my wife-”

He waves a hand at me. “Right, figured not. You don’t really match the profile of the guy we’re looking for anyway. But never hurts to double check.”

I continue into the shop. A second cop is talking to the short, fat man behind the counter. I pass by them, cut through the live bait aisle, and head to the featured display rack of firearms. One of the cops has fashioned a conspiracy theory-style diagram, with thumb tacks and fishing line, on the floor beside the ammunition shelf. The floor is littered with newspaper clippings and grainy photographs of an old woman, circled and starred with red pen.

There’s a man next to me with a beer gut and a single tuft of white hair on his head, perusing the rifles. As he turns to look at me, I notice he wears a homemade-looking eyepatch, a ragged piece of cloth crudely fastened over his left eye. He gives me a strange look as I stand in the aisle, puzzling over the gun selection. I have no idea what I’m looking for (truthfully, readers, I’ve never held a gun before in my life) and the eyepatch man seems to realize it.

“You’re not from around here.” His harsh voice sounds like the tearing of a page.

“I live in a cabin ten minutes to the north,” I tell him.

“No you don’t,” he says.

“Well, my primary residence is New York. Manhattan, specifically,” I tell the man. “But I intend to relocate to Vermont full-time. Unfortunately, I’ve encountered a small coyote problem up at the cabin, which I hope to deal with as soon as possible, before it proves a further inconvenience.”

“Coyote, huh,” he says. “Mean sons of bitches. You better shoot straight, Manhattan.”

“Would you mind giving me some advice?” I ask him. “On gun selection? You likely possess a more extensive knowledge than I do.”

“I’ll say. Well, this one’s a .204 Ruger.” He gestures at a solid black rifle slung over the side of the rack. “Reliable choice. Then you’ve got your Remingtons.” He points to a line of camouflaged rifles. “That’s the Ranchland compact. Small, but shoots like a motherfucker. But I like this bad boy.” He points at an enormous sniper rifle on the opposite side of the aisle. It resembles the weapons of war films. “The Del-Ton. That’ll kill the hell out of your coyote. Blast it to pieces. It’ll be like that motherfucker never existed.”

“Are you sure that such a large gun wouldn’t be overkill?” I ask.

“Of course it’s overkill, Manhattan,” he says. “But you don’t want that coyote underkilled, do you?”

“I suppose not,” I respond.

“Then get the job done right. Buy the Del-Ton.” He pulls the gun off the rack and hands it over to me. I sag under its weight and nearly drop it on the dust-clad carpet.

“Buy the gun, Manhattan.” He pushes me towards check-out. I walk up to the counter and place the gun in front of the short, fat cashier. He lets out a quick, throaty laugh.

“What do you need this thing for?” he asks me.

“That man, whom I was just conversing with, recommended it.” I point back at the eyepatched man, but I’ve lost sight of him amongst the rows of ammunition and fishing rods.

“Maybe, if you’re trying to shoot up a school or something,” says the cop loitering by the checkout. “You trying to shoot up a school?”

“I need to kill a coyote,” I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows. “Sure you don’t want a smaller gun?”

“I would like this gun, thank you,” I say.

“Okay, suit yourself.” The man behind the counter rings up the Del-Ton. It costs much more than I expected. I pay him with a crumpled-up wad of cash (I’d withdrawn as much money as possible from my bank account, to avoid having any credit card statements reveal my location) and it occurs to me that I must look like an extremely overdressed drug dealer. The man behind the counter bubble wraps the gun and places it into a large tote bag.

On the way back to the cabin I make a detour and swing by a mattress store to buy a king-sized tempurpedic. The other customers in the mattress store stare at me with alarm as I browse the aisles of bedding, and I realize that I’ve carried the tote bag with my new rifle into the store. The tip of the gun sticks out above the lip of the bag and gleams off the aisles of plastic-encased bedding.

“It’s for hunting coyote,” I tell a young mother, carrying a newborn baby through the crib aisle. She darts away from me.

When I make it back to the cabin, I unwrap the gun and sling it over the windowsill. I throw the mattress on the floor, not bothering to tear off the wrapping, and lie down with my notebook and pen, finally ready to resume my memoirs. I’ll buy a chair and a desk another day.

Since my arrival in Vermont, something indescribable but nonetheless significant has shifted within my psyche, like a trapdoor opening. I feel myself standing above the portal, looking down into the darkened underbelly of everything that ever has happened to me, and everything that will. A ladder stretches down into those shadowed depths, and with each paragraph and phrase, I climb deeper.

Poem for a Mattress Store

White shrouded shelves
stand watch above me, like prison walls
that cradle honeymooners
and their spoiled infants. My gun and I
we pass through these hallowed, consumer halls,
removed from the static
surrounding us, a tiny hurricane eye
in the midst of half-whispered
wedding vows.

-NV

III

While I appreciate the time-sensitive nature of this memoir, and know that I must write like my reputation depends on it – since it quite literally does – I still find it increasingly difficult to focus. In the days since my trip to the gun shop, I have purchased a chair, a desk, a desk lamp, a battery-operated coffee pot, a pristine new moleskin notebook, and several dozen pens in

various colors, and yet these additional amenities have only given me more anxieties. I pull out my phone and find myself compulsively refreshing Erin's website, waiting for a new slander piece, which will doubtlessly reduce me to the permanent butt of a joke. I try each of her social media accounts, and our publisher's site next. Still nothing. On the other side of the cabin, a family of daddy long legs spiders has moved into the space between a half-rotten floorboard. I can hear their needle legs ping across the hardwood.

I refresh our publisher's page, and there's still nothing, so I try googling my name, an endeavor which quickly sends me down a rabbit hole of paranoia and self-doubt. Readers, the internet is nothing but a cesspool teeming with humanity's most grotesque vices – a collection of bottom-feeders and back-seat-drivers without empathy or shame, united through digital herd mentality. I have written on this subject before, on many occasions, and yet to see the articles (if one can even call them that) and reviews and think pieces which have surfaced in the days following the incident; to see my own God-given name (I am not a religious man, nor have I ever been. I use this terminology simply to underscore my message) branded into the most vicious of headlines; to bear witness to my own public thrashing is too much for me to bear, and I find myself huddled on a corner of my still-saran-wrapped mattress, knees clutched to my chest, shaking as I stare at my phone wide-eyed, unable to look away.

Then, when I think I've seen the worst of the bad publicity the worldwide web has to offer, I stumble upon a New York Magazine interview with Kate Perrone, a former acquaintance of mine. She's barely even an acquaintance – she was a friend of Dale's, and we existed in adjacent circles, but we hardly ever interacted beyond a few brief exchanges at social functions. As to why she, of all people, has decided to contribute to my demise – that is a mystery to me. Anything for a little time in the spotlight, I suppose.

The following is a transcription of Kate Perrone's interview with New York Magazine. I have kept the text unaltered, for the sake of authenticity. But I must warn you, the article you see before you is nothing but slander, filled with inaccuracies and hyperboles. I urge you to believe not a word of this nonsense. I only include it alongside these memoirs to show you, dear readers, the type of accusations I now face:

*Kate Perrone: The Actress Dishes on her New Show, Nigel Vernay, and why she's Obsessed with
Balloons*

[Author name redacted]

Kate Perrone sits across from me in a small, Parisian-style coffee shop. She wears a wide brimmed hat that casts shadows across her pale, angular face. She points at her cup of coffee, and laughs sheepishly. "Would you judge me if I spiked this?" she asks me in a warm, musical voice.

I've taken the liberty of omitting the next few paragraphs of the article, as none of it pertains to me in any way. If for some reason you wish to learn more about Kate Perrone's new show, or why she is obsessed with balloons, I trust that you can find the full interview yourself. I assure you that none of this information is relevant to my memoirs, and that I have not withheld any incriminating details. Again, if you do not believe me, I encourage you to seek out the full interview yourself. It is meaningless garbage in its entirety.

When I ask her if she can tell us about the time she met Nigel Vernay, she giggles. “He’s a weird guy,” she says, as she fidgets with the coffee stirrer. “We were at a party. He started talking to me about Ezra Pound, and kept going for like, an hour. I had no idea what he was talking about.”

Here, the article includes an unflattering candid photo of Kate and myself at a small literary reception a few years ago. I’m standing a few yards away from her, in the process of trying to eat a mini-bruschetta toast.

When I ask her if she’s heard about his recent arrest, she looks uncomfortable. “Yeah. It’s all so weird, I don’t know,” she says, her voice trailing off. “I think he just wants attention, probably. Dale Casborough and I are good friends actually, and Nigel’s put that poor guy through so much. He’s such a sweet, timid man, and all of this has just been so embarrassing for him.” She trails off again. “Can we talk about something else?”

By the time I finish the article, I’m shaking in my seat with rage; at the interviewer, for grabbing at the lowest hanging fruit, and dragging my name through the mud in the process, all for a pulpy headline; at Kate, for her ridiculous claim that I just want attention – let me ask you this: would I have fled to the furthest reaches of Northern Vermont if I sought attention? – not to mention her petty insults and her name-calling; and at Dale for somehow coming out a victim in all this mess. With the right words, even the most ruthless, remorseless individuals can be painted in sympathy, after all, that is the power of the written word, but to describe a blackmailer as “sweet” and “timid” is a level of dishonesty that would put the Watergate scandal to shame.

Again, I think upon the slew of voicemails Dale has left me, piling up and cluttering my inbox. But I will not listen to them, not now, not ever. I will not give Dale yet another foolish ear to pepper with his sweet talk and sob stories.

I put my phone down and try to convert this rage into prose, but I'm left with a series of nonsensical scribbles that barely form whole words, let alone coherent sentences. I imagine new articles coming out with every second I waste, each one worse than the last. There is no solution to any of this, other than to turn back time, and I feel the portal sucking me downward, into the future's gaping maw, a darkened abyss with no bottom in sight.

From outside the cabin, I hear the coyote howl once again, and I can't stand wasting any more thought on Dale or Kate or that buzzard of a reporter, so I seize the distraction and venture back into the forest, this time with my Del-Ton in tow. Heavy snow forms piles around me. I follow the call and walk deeper into the forest. Electricity courses through my body, and my fury shifts to grim determination. My feet sink into the uneven ground, and snow slides into my boots with each step, and as I reach the ninth or tenth snow-studded hill, I realize that I have lost track of the coyote. I turn back around and retrace my steps, which works for a while, but soon my old footprints have filled with fresh snow and I find myself stranded, Hansel and Gretel-style, in the Vermont forest.

I try my best to rely on instinct, but I'm disoriented by the snow, and every tree looks the same. The Del-Ton bounces in my grip, heavy and useless and coated in ice. I pull my phone from my jacket pocket, searching desperately for a signal, to no avail. I walk for an implausibly long time. Wind tears at my too-thin coat, and snow pelts my face.

The sun has begun to set, and I'm ready to curl up like a fetus in the snowbank and hand my body over to the winter winds, when I see a stretch of pavement several yards ahead, a forest

road of some kind. I curse myself for failing to study any maps of the region before making my impromptu move to the northeast kingdom. The road winds and bends through the trees, and I follow it helplessly, trudging up and down hills, snaking deeper into the mountains, until eventually the forest road connects to a larger road – the Vermont version of a highway.

I walk along the highway shoulder, holding my thumb above my head, in the hopes that somebody else is out in this blizzard and is open to assisting a frozen hitchhiker. I hold the Del-Ton behind my back, to make myself less threatening to any passing cars. It feels heavier with each moment, and repeatedly threatens to slip from my grasp.

Headlights approach me. I reach my thumb out higher and walk towards the car, which I can now see is a minivan. The car slows to a crawl, and for a moment I can see the face of the driver, an older woman with saltwater taffy wrinkles and frizzled gray hair. Then I see her eyes widen with concern as she notices my gun, and she's gone. Defeated, I sit on the side of the road, nursing my frozen hands and wait for what feels like hours. Two more cars pass. Neither stop.

By the time a third car approaches, I've resolved to die. A roadside burial would be a fitting end for me. My body wouldn't be uncovered until spring, and by then my features would be so eaten away by ice and frost that I'd be barely recognizable. A perfect finale to my fall from grace.

Through barely open eyes, I see the third car pull over. It's a battered pickup truck. A door opens and a hand waves me over. Still clutching my sniper rifle, I pull open the passenger seat of the truck.

"Jesus, Manhattan, what's happened to you?" the driver asks, his voice rough and ashy. It's the man from the gun shop, with the eyepatch. "Get in before you freeze to death."

I don't need to be told twice. I climb into the passenger seat, and we drive into the blizzard.

Poem for a Buzzard:

A creature with no shame,
a heart of aluminum and an appetite
for rats, she circles with graphite wings
that thrash the sun-faded pages
of ten cent tabloids. A boy with rosy cheeks
and a lollipop between his teeth
pulls the buzzard's skull from the magazine rack
and flips through, idly. He discards her
in favor of a titty mag, and she disintegrates
on the pharmacy floor, matted feathers
and shards of beak scattered across the linoleum.

-NV

IV

“What the hell were you doing out there, Manhattan?” the gun shop man asks me. Plastic cutlery and empty ketchup packets line the floor of his pickup truck. It reminds me of a photo I saw once in National Geographic of an archaeological dig site, fragments of ancient salt-ravaged ceramics scattered around the soft clay. Some alt-country ditty plays on the radio, the lazy twang of mandolins just barely audible over the sound of static.

The eyepatch man bobs his head along to the music. “No one should be out in this snow, let alone some scrawny, sweater-wearing motherfucker from the city.” His voice sounds rough and congested, like he’s swallowed a small ball of fur and is attempting to speak through it.

“I was trying to hunt the coyote,” I tell him. “But I seem to have become lost.”

“I’ll say,” he says. “Another dozen miles and you’d have been in Canada. You’re not a Canuck, are you, Manhattan?”

I shake my head. The snow in my boots has begun to melt and leak out from the stitching around the toes, forming small, icy streams which run across the pickup truck floor and mix with the fossilized remnants of ketchup, leaving pale red pools scattered around my feet.

The gun shop man clears his throat and lets out a long, hacking cough. “Where are my manners? I’m Grant.” He gives me his hand, and I shake it.

“Nigel.”

“I don’t care what the fuck your name is. You’re Manhattan to me, Manhattan.” Grant pulls a pack of yellow American Spirits a pocket of his flannel jacket. “You smoke?” He dangles the pack in front of me, and I notice that his fingers are surprisingly delicate, like a child’s.

I shake my head again.

“Come on, live a little,” he says. “You nearly died out there today. Have a smoke.”

Reluctantly, I pull a cigarette from the pack. He lights it for me and I pull the smoke in. The act of smoking has always struck me as a vulgar activity, a practice reserved for burnouts and bums, but I also recognize the importance – no, not just the importance, the necessity – of appearing authentic to my new surroundings, of casting off my identity as a placeless pariah, so I decide that if the locals of the northeast kingdom smoke cigarettes, then so will I.

“That’s more like it,” Grant says. “So what do you do Manhattan?”

“I’m a poet,” I tell him, as I cough through clouds of smoke.

He raises an eyebrow. “You don’t write any of that faggot crap, right?”

Unsure how to respond to this line of questioning and the presumably deep-rooted prejudice that lies at its foundation, I say “No, my poems are imagery-based mostly. Scenes from nature, snapshots of the mundane, that type of thing. My style is a blend of sorts between naturalism and postmodernism.”

“I don’t know what the hell any of that means,” Grant says. “But I like you, Manhattan.”

“And I am grateful to you for pulling me out of this blizzard,” I tell him. Outside, the snow is starting to subside, fading into an icy mist. Against the glare of Grant’s headlights, the fog is a hectic yellow. “I want to write you a poem,” I tell him.

He shoots me a look. “I thought you said you didn’t do any of that faggot crap.”

“Not like that,” I assure him. “It wouldn’t be a long one. Merely a few lines, to express my gratitude.”

Grant seems skeptical. Staring out the window, he strokes his eyepatch, pressing and smoothing over the folds of the fabric, massaging the space below. It’s a grotesque motion, and I find myself recoiling, shrinking away to the far side of the truck; he seems to notice this involuntary reaction, and sneers at me, as if issuing a challenge. “You have fans, Manhattan? People read your poems?”

This question has always troubled me, as I imagine it troubles most artists. For if the conception of beauty and meaning can be quantified by a crude popularity contest, then what of the Van Goghs and Beethovens, the unappreciated geniuses slaving away on dusty canvases in the solitude of darkened rooms? “Well, poetry is a dying form,” I explain. “The new generations lack the attention span for its subtlety. Poetry doesn’t contain enough explosions for them.”

“That’s not what I asked,” says Grant. “Do people read your poems?”

I wonder whether he wants to interrogate me, or provoke me into a rhetorical battle as a test of sorts, so I tell him, “Yes. Plenty of people do.”

“So what the fuck are you doing up here?” His words are quick and relentless, as if he has previously rehearsed them.

“I’d prefer not to share any details,” I tell him. “But let’s just say that I got drunk and did some things I regret, and leave it at that. And that I must remain here until it all blows over.”

“You remind me of a younger version of myself, Manhattan. Let me give you some advice.” Grant ashes his cigarette and tosses it up onto the dashboard and turns towards me. I can feel his breath against my face. “Never regret anything. Live in the moment.”

“I understand the appeals of that lifestyle,” I tell him. “But even still I find myself unable to embrace it. Everything that’s happened to me these past few years keeps resurfacing, no matter what I do to push it out.”

“Then you’re not trying hard enough,” says Grant. “You bought that Del-Ton for a reason, didn’t you?”

“I told you, I’m hunting a coyote,” I tell him.

“Yeah, and you’ve got a big fucking coyote to kill, Manhattan,” he says.

For a while, the two of us are silent, lost in the dimming light of the highway. Then Grant sharply pulls onto a smaller, barely-paved one-way road. “Hang on,” he says. “Just something quick I need to do.”

We stop along the edge of the road, beside a serpentine driveway that curves through the trees. At the end of the driveway stands a large, well-lit house, somewhere in the gray area

between a mansion and upper-middle-class. “Wait here,” says Grant. He adjusts his eyepatch, then strides up the driveway, his steps surprisingly nimble for a man his age.

I slouch in my seat, head leaning against the decaying upholstery that lines the truck. Allowing my eyes to wander, I survey the truck’s interior, counting the number of discarded utensils to pass the time. I quickly lose track of my tally amongst the piles of debris, but then notice, poking out from underneath a pile of barbeque-sauce-smearred camping equipment, the barrel of a rifle. This new discovery wins my attention, so I gently shift the tarps and sleeping bags to the side to reveal four freshly polished guns – two sniper rifles and two sub-machine guns, each larger than my trusty Del-Ton. Beside them rests several cases of ammunition, stacked into organized columns. I lean over the back of my chair to further investigate Grant’s unofficial weapons stash, and find a small collection of Russian nesting dolls, plus an antique jack in the box tucked amongst the holsters and cases. I run my fingers along the chipped wood of the nesting dolls, and raise one up towards me for a closer look, when I hear a sound like a marching band drumroll reverberate from the house at the end of the driveway. A light flashes from within the house and then Grant emerges, traveling at a light jog, beer gut jostling up and down as he runs. I hastily return the doll to its original resting place. Grant climbs into the truck and we abruptly pull out onto the one-way road, traveling in the wrong direction.

“Was everything okay back there?” I ask him.

“Right as rain, Manhattan,” he says. He has fundamentally failed to answer my question, or to at least address the question’s intent, and I find myself involuntarily running through each possibility in my head, each scenario of what could have possibly taken place within the glowing windows of that distant house. For that is the curse of the writer – or one of the many curses, at least – a mercilessly active imagination which gleefully plummets headfirst into mental pits,

pursuing an increasingly demented progression of thoughts without reason or restraint. The first scenario that flashes into my misguided mind is the obvious possibility: Grant has murdered somebody (or better yet, several people) in the house. Over what? A narcotics transaction gone haywire? A financial dispute? Might Grant have acquired a blackmailer of his own? Or perhaps he has no reason, and sheds blood simply for the thrill of it. In general, I always attempt to give everybody I encounter the benefit of the doubt, yet it occurs to me that I have only interacted with Grant on two occasions, and that for all I know he may very well possess psychopathic tendencies. But, surely this scenario is impossible. After all, Grant's truck contains a full arsenal of firearms, none of which he brought into the house. Perhaps he stabbed the homeowner with a pocket knife, or choked them with his bare hands. But then what could be the explanation for that perplexing flash of light? Did he pause to have his photograph taken?

This line of thought has clearly taken me nowhere, so I force myself to temporarily cast it aside. It's surely a mere product of my authorial sensibilities, to impose darkness and doubt on what likely adds up to nothing more than a run-of-the-mill errand. Grant might make a trip like that every week – perhaps that's why he runs down the driveway, to minimize a tedious, meaningless routine. It's nothing, it's most certainly nothing. By this point, we have reached a stretch of road I recognize, so I direct Grant the rest of the way through the blizzard. He drops me off at the cabin door.

“You need anything, give me a call.” He hands me a coffee stained business card that appears to have spent most of its life crammed into a pocket. There's no affiliated business on the card, just Grant's first name and a phone number, printed in a small, blocky typeface.

“Anything.” He starts up the car and drives off into the snow. I hoist the Del-Ton over my shoulders and retreat into the cabin. Across the room, the daddy long legs spiders race across

the hardwood, mirroring the steady clicking of typewriter keys. Outside, as if issuing a taunting reminder of my failings, the coyote howls.

Poem for Grant:

He haunts the snow-laden interstates,
a frozen wanderer in a rusted pickup. How long
has he scoured these highways? How far
has he traveled, headlights peeking
through the hectic blue torrent?
And when he pulls the keys
from the ignition, does he retreat
to a desolate cabin, or an antique bachelor pad,
or a fluorescent-drenched home
filled with greetings and laughter? Or does he remain
outside in the icy whirlwind, consigned to wander
forgotten median strips and forlorn forests?

-NV

V

Readers, sometimes it takes a near-death experience, a staring contest with the hollow-eyed grim reaper, to snap a life into focus. Time is swift and merciless, and were it not for Grant and his decrepit pickup truck, this memoir, which I have slaved over for weeks now, might have ended up as nothing more than a stack of posthumous editorial notes.

All of this is to say, I have spent the past few days, in the wake of my brush with mortality, pondering the past, and I have come to the conclusion that all things considered, life has been cruel and unfair to me. I do not mean to say that I am a blameless bystander in the mess that has consumed my life, only that I am an honest human being who has made a handful of mistakes, and do not deserve the wave of misfortune that has cascaded over me.

It has also become increasingly clear that I have wasted an exceptional amount of time, torn away from the chronicling of my life's story by trivial distractions and unimportant tangents, time which I may not have much more of. And so rather than continuing to prolong the inevitable, I shall embark on the task I should have begun a week ago – I am finally ready to bare all and shine some light on the specifics of the trauma and embarrassment that befell me that fateful night in the Bronx. You may believe you have heard about these events in their entirety, but I promise that any slander you may have seen in so-called news sources conveys nothing of the truth.

My Side of the Story:

To accurately set the stage for my Shakespearean demise, and provide the unadulterated context, I first need to rewind to a fight between Erin and I, a few days prior to the incident. Now, this wasn't the domestic disputes of soap operas and reality television, not a screaming match, nor a physical altercation – this was the domestic equivalent of the Cold War. An icy silence had settled across our household, and when we did speak to each other, it was in terse, one-line exchanges. Erin had signed some production deal a month earlier, for a segment on Conan, one of those two-minute guest slot gigs. Why she agreed to this job is beyond me – she

has openly admitted to loathing interviews, and public speaking in general for that matter, so her willingness to lower herself into the teeming fray of late night television baffles me.

But she had no interest in my input on the subject. *This isn't an interview, Nigel*, she told me, pacing around the kitchen as if I was wasting her time. *I'll be doing standup. I'm trying out a new bit.*

I must reiterate that I support my wife in all her endeavors, and that any assertions to the contrary fail to capture the nuances of this complex situation. But I will say this – Erin has allowed her career to drift. That may be the most seismic difference between the two of us. Whereas I have remained staunchly committed to my original vision for myself – a poet and scholar within the naturalistic and minimalistic postmodern disciplines – a vision I have held on to since grade school, Erin sees no problem in reinventing herself, adopting a new persona, a new philosophy, a new life path at a moment's notice, untroubled with hastily casting aside her purported dreams in favor of some new, short-lived pursuit. When we first met, nearly five years ago, she fancied herself a contemporary E.B. White, “a personal essayist,” she told me over French pressed coffee and New York bagels on our first date. Yet today she happily casts her pen and paper aside, in favor of a handful of cheap laughs.

You're so dramatic, she told me. *Nobody reads my essays anyway. And this is the same thing. Just talking instead of writing.*

That comment stung, readers. But it also revealed a deep lack of self-awareness from Erin, a trait which I find most repugnant. For she might see her departure into comedy as a harmless shift of mediums, but it is apparent to those who know her – and who knows Erin better than I do? – that it marks the start of something far more insidious, the process that some may colloquially refer to as “selling out.” Do not twist my words readers (you especially *New York*

Magazine, after your sloppy hack interview with Kate Perrone, I can't even begin to imagine how you might butcher these observations into some flashy clickbait headline), I am not calling Erin a sellout. I'm merely pointing out the beginnings of a dangerous slippery slope that could lead to any number of humiliating career choices. A role in the next Adam Sandler movie? Why rule it out? A guest appearance on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*? At the rate Erin moves, it could happen in the next year. Again, I don't intend to judge or ridicule, I only hoped I could provide counsel, to gently nudge her back towards the career trajectory that won my esteem in the first place. But Erin has never been one to accept the hard truths.

When Dale heard about the deal, he decided a grand a month wasn't enough anymore, and doubled his rates. *Erin's going to notice*, I told him. *And then I'll have no choice but to tell her*. But Dale, blinded by greed and determined to strip me of my savings and my dignity, ignored me.

Of course, when Erin saw a two-thousand-dollar withdrawal on the bank statement a month later, she flew into a panic. She spent the better part of a day pacing around the kitchen, muttering to herself, wildly opening drawers and sifting through piles of old receipts and coupons to solve the mystery of the disappearing two grand as if she was a strung-out Nancy Drew. What was I supposed to tell her, readers? That I had become ensnared by a rapacious blackmailer? Faced with an impossible situation, I chose to play the fool, and when Erin turned to me for questioning, I acted as baffled as she was, all wide-eyed and stammering. This deceit pained me, my disposition being naturally honest after all, but I knew a confession would be preposterous, and above all, stupid. So I watched idly as Erin tore our house apart.

Maybe someone got our credit card info? she asked me. She had started nervously biting her cuticles, and they were now torn and bloody. *I'll call the bank and put a hold on our account.*

If only that had been the truth. Identity theft, a situation completely beyond my control. It would have been a luxury.

Well, when Erin called the bank to report suspicious activity on our card, the banker on the other end, who apparently has no respect for the privacy of his clients, helpfully outed me to my own wife, with a long-winded description of my last visit to the bank, confirming that I had indeed filled out a withdrawal form so there would be no need for any account cancellation. In moments like this, I cannot help but feel that the universe has conspired against me, and that every person I encounter seeks to increase the conflict within my already haphazard life, even bored bank employees performing menial customer service jobs.

Erin hung up the phone and shot me one of her serious looks, demanding an explanation. *I don't remember making the withdrawal*, I told her. *It was probably for the rent.*

No, rent is this one here. She pointed at the listing a line down.

Oh, the electrical bill then. It sounds absurd in retrospect. But it proves the point I've been trying to make since the beginnings of this memoir – I don't have a dishonest bone in my body, and even this one small lie was so agonizing and unfamiliar to me that I couldn't help but make a mess of it.

A twenty-thousand-dollar electrical bill?

We left the lights on a lot. What could she have thought, I wonder? That I was addicted to cocaine? That I had purchased two thousand dollars-worth of lingerie for a secret mistress? As I've already stated, telling the truth was not an option, so I dodged Erin's never-ending barrage of questions for a while longer, and then retired to my study for a bottle of Shiraz and a book of Wordsworth. This unceasing game of chess between Erin and myself had become the de facto

state of affairs within our apartment, and I'll admit the tension was beginning to fry at my already scattered psyche.

When I first met Erin – I'm aware that my prose is yet again veering in a direction that some less patient readers might deem tangential, yet I promise this brief anecdote provides some necessary perspective on the complex situation – no conversations were off-limits between us. This was at least a year before either of us came into the public's gaze, and our banter contained a natural buoyancy that seemed unobstructed by any and all societal expectations. We had met at a reading for up-and-coming New York writers. I read a handful of poems, including "Dust Bunnies" and "Amber Moon" which can be found in my recently self-released compilation of early material, and she read an excerpt from a personal essay on her father's embarrassing lack of table manners. Afterwards, I approached her and complimented her blend of wistful nostalgia and razor-sharp satire, and she told me that she found my use of similes amusing. I offered to introduce her to the best bagel shop in the city, and she responded that although she'd hoped to get some writing done, she supposed she could multitask.

We spent the better part of the next day camped out at the bagel place, each churning away on our own respective projects and philosophizing on the state of contemporary literature. I was displeased to see that she wrote on a laptop, rather than in a notebook or journal, but what she lacked in authenticity, she made up for in spirit.

On the subject of our peers in attendance at the reading, Erin pulled no punches. *Everyone's trying to write the next great epic*, she said, her mouth full of cream cheese. *They all want to be Nabokov or T.S. Elliot or something, and they're so busy with references and framing devices and footnotes and perspective shifts that they've all forgotten to tell an actual fucking*

story. That's what I like about your poetry. It's straightforward. It's not trying to be anything, it just is, you know?

While straightforward may not be the word I would use to describe my poetry – I prefer the term “rustic” – I admired her keen insight into the strengths and weaknesses of our generation. She refused to mince words, and was unafraid to call out disingenuousness when she saw it. Alas, how people change. In the days following our bank statement dispute she could hardly look me in the eyes, and scarcely uttered a complete thought to me when we crossed paths. It may be a cliché, but readers, the silence was deafening. I found myself a stranger in my own home, more often than not confined to my study, with nothing but my books and wine for solace.

Understanding the precariousness of the situation, I confronted Dale about the effects of his price hike, and did my best to diplomatically emphasize the instability he had created for the both of us. Perhaps he could return us the money, I suggested, with a new check so that I could pass off the transaction as a simple business mistake, followed by a subsequent refund, an explanation which surely would have appeased Erin and put the matter to rest. But Dale refused to write a new check, and not only that – he had the audacity to request another two thousand dollars from me, a payment which would have been simply impossible for obvious reasons, given the circumstances. So, I'll admit it, I lost control of the situation.

I struggle to recount the details of what came next, and even the most casual, anecdotal reflections have already inflicted a deep cerebral pain upon me. My fingers shake and jitter, clutching my pen so tightly that I fear it may rupture in my hands, coating my palms in ink. Yet I press on, since what is right is seldom easy, and what is easy is seldom right. Above all, I know

that you, my faithful readers, deserve the truth, after this horrid week of humiliating uncertainty. So I press on, with the promise of leaving no stone unturned.

A few days following my fight with Erin, I took the 6 train across the Harlem River, over to Dale's. It was well into the middle of the night, and I'll admit that I had finished more than a few glasses of wine, so every couple minutes I found my eyes closing and my thoughts drifting, and I'd have to startle myself back awake. I barely remember exiting the subway, and I remember nothing of the walk through Dale's neighborhood. I do remember the faint grating sound of a homeless man yelling – likely aimed at me – and the glow of orange streetlights, but the rest of the walk has been reduced to a vague watercolor of sounds and shapes, lost somewhere within my consciousness.

I wish I could provide a satisfying explanation for my trip to the Bronx, a well-thought-out strategy or a specific statement of purpose, but the night still remains shrouded in confusion for me. Maybe I hoped to find some of my stolen money stashed away under the bed or in a dresser drawer of Dale's apartment for safekeeping, so I could anoint myself a Manhattan Robin Hood and reclaim my earnings. Or maybe I'd simply had enough of Dale's mind games and smug stubbornness. Yet can I be condemned for my failure to think straight, when I had been repeatedly pushed to the brink by a relentless blackmailer and a moody, silent wife? I may have behaved illogically, but was there any rational escape from this mess, beyond saying a silent prayer and firing a revolver between my eyes?

By the time I made it to Dale's house – a dingy, split family home lined with haphazard scaffolding and lopsided rain gutters – I had just begun to sober up. I stood in a small pile of gravel, scattered along the border of the house and the driveway, looking up into Dale's windows. No lights were on. I scooped a handful of the larger chunks of gravel into my palms

and stood there for a bit, disoriented, sifting through the rocks. I let the smaller pieces slide through my fingers, and then I upturned my hands and let them all fall through, save a large, salt-scarred rock. Spreading my feet apart, across Dale's driveway, I wound up like a baseball pitcher, leg extended in the air and everything – I saw someone on the Yankees do that once, I don't remember who – and hurled the rock into Dale's window. Glass shattered and sprayed out onto the street, and I had to duck into the bushes to avoid being hit by any stray shards. I am not proud of any of this, obviously. But if Dale wishes to explore the blackmailing business, he ought to have been prepared for the hazards of the job.

I approached the window to survey the damage. Parts of the glass around the edges of the sill were still intact, so I pushed them free, onto Dale's floor. Grabbing hold of the windowsill, I tried to hoist myself up into Dale's apartment, but I had several drinks in me, and my upper body strength has always been lacking, and as I tried to find a sturdy handhold, my ring finger sliced across one of the shards of glass. I was making a lot of noise by then, yelling and crying and nursing my injured finger, and it took me a few minutes to realize that, to add insult to injury, my wedding ring had slid off my hand, onto Dale's floor. Holding my bloody finger with my other hand, I tried to pull myself into Dale's house again, but I still failed to find a steady handhold.

Of course, the local law enforcement arrived upon the scene around this time, with tales of a noise complaint and public disturbance, and while I naturally cooperated and agreed to accompany them to the station, these sympathetic details appear to have become lost in translation, in favor of the heightened, glamorized farce you've doubtlessly seen upheld in newspaper headlines. Some of these accounts depict me, a sensitive academic, as waving a baseball bat in the air, hollering as I smash Dale's possessions into indistinguishable shards – framed photos, dishware, a vase of flowers all supposedly reduced to a pile of debris at my

hysterical hands. Nigel Vernay, arbiter of chaos. Can you imagine? In others, I proceed to fight the law enforcement officers arriving on scene. Nearly every phony account describes me as clad only in my underwear, a ridiculous claim that couldn't be further from the truth (I would never leave my house without a buttoned-up shirt and dress pants, at the very least). The lies these so-called journalists will tell, all for a few cheap clicks.

Following their arrival, the police escorted me to the downtown Bronx police station, where I waited amongst the riff raff in a cement holding area that smelled of cigarettes and urine. Then, once I finally posted bail, I suffered my worst humiliation yet – a representative from the talent agency that currently represents Erin came to the station to retrieve me. We rode back to the apartment in silence. My phone had begun rapidly buzzing, a mix of frantic, concerned messages from friends and family, and a barrage of live updates on my public desecration. I knew that the moment she saw me, Erin would become reduced to a series of disappointed gestures, headshakes and sighs, so when the agent dropped me off, I went straight to my study, packed the essentials, and began my exodus to Vermont.

So there it is, the truth in all its elusiveness. I promise, this scandal and embarrassment amounts to nothing more than a singular broken window, blown far out of proportion, a small price for Dale to pay, considering the disarray he brought upon my personal affairs. For some, the truth may prove disappointing. I have become a piece of entertainment, and to see my tale of debauchery and arson stripped of its shock value, in favor of a more nuanced outlook might infuriate the masses. But consider this – I am more than an eyebrow-raising headline, I am a person with feelings and dreams and achievements, and I deserve the chance to prove my innocence, for is that not the cornerstone of democracy? If Erin can pen essay after essay jam-packed with disillusioned condemnations of her friends and family, why should I not employ my

words as a metaphorical shield, to protect myself from all past, present, and future slander? Is that compulsion not innately human? And on that note of rhetorical questioning, I shall conclude this journalistic retelling of my quick and merciless fall from grace.

Scanning through my newly penned recounting of the incident, I cannot help but feel a twinge of dissatisfaction. These pages, which ought to serve as a definitive, rock-solid defense of my reputation, instead sound like the fractured ramblings of a madman. Take for instance, the following line: “yet can I be condemned for my failure to think straight, when I had been repeatedly pushed to the brink by a relentless blackmailer and a moody, silent wife?” Does this description, which I penned myself, not reduce me to a simple trope, an addled husband on the brink of a midlife crisis, a Jack Torrance for the modern age? Or consider another line: “but she had no interest in my input on the subject.” Do my words, which ought to elevate my plea, solidifying my true account, not fall flat, unable to hook even the most casual readers?

No matter how I attempt to string the words together, the memoir (traditionally Erin’s form of choice, not mine) has doomed me to incoherence. I return to the same sections again and again, but with each revision my prose only becomes more scattered and convoluted. The fundamental truth of the matter is that I’m simply not cut out for nonfiction, and no surface level edits can ever change that unfortunate reality.

From outside the cabin, I hear the coyote howl again. Perhaps its shrill wail is my Achilles’ heel, and without its incessant taunting, I might be able to break free from my storytelling shackles and produce a satisfactory defense. When I wrote in my quiet Manhattan study, I could finish a full-length poem in under an hour. Yet here, with this unrelenting coyote permanently situated directly outside my window, I can barely hold a consistent line of thought

for more than five minutes. Yes, this creature of the forest stands between me and redemption, of this I am sure.

My resolve strengthened, I scoop the Del-Ton into my arms and stalk into the snow. The howling is louder than ever, nearly deafening as it echoes amongst the birch trees and frozen bushes. I know that if I venture too far into the forest, I will likely become lost again, so I loiter on the outskirts of the glade, in the patch of frozen crabgrass immediately outside the cabin. And then a shadow flickers across the tree directly ahead of me. Here it is, the creature that has tormented me endlessly over the course of this past week, finally within my grasp, at my mercy.

I aim the gun in its direction and fire. Nothing. Several meters away I hear the soft thumps of plodding animal footsteps, a hasty gallop away from my assailing bullets. But while the coyote is quick and subtle, I am determined, determined to not allow this canine scourge to escape yet again. Holding still for several long moments, I freeze and listen, attempting to pinpoint the sound to a specific location amongst the frozen foliage. From a snow-covered bush several paces ahead of me, I hear a faint rustling. I raise the Del-Ton, this time towards the rustling bush, and squeeze the trigger. A wave of hot metal floods from the gun, and I see the coyote's shadow across the clearing, trying and failing to claw its way through the dense snow. Two of the bullets clip the coyote, and it topples into a snowbank with a yelp and a light, wet thud. I cross through the icicle-coated brambles to the clearing just in front of the tree, dragging my feet through blood spattered snow. And then I see something which stops me in my tracks.

At the base of the tree lies a medium-sized dog, some type of beagle mix I believe, with brown and white splotches scattered across its stomach. Two dark red contrails slowly percolate into the snowbank that surrounds its flank. Around its neck, which expands and contracts violently in a desperate search for air, clings a soft purple collar, with a silver tag the shape of a

bone. I sink to my knees, lying my gun in the snow at the base of its trembling body. I dig into my pockets and pull out my phone and the business card Grant gave me. Ice bites into the creases of my pants as I huddle against the ground.

“Hello, Grant? It’s Manhattan. I fucked up.”

Poem for a Dying Beagle:

Lying in the snow, your body
 small and damp
 in the New England morning.
 Man’s best friend, reduced
 to a bloodstained lump of fur.
 I’m sorry.

-NV

VI

Against the frigid evening wind, Grant stands at the crest of the hill, looking over at the dog spread before me. He holds two rusty shovels.

“Christ, Manhattan, it’s not even dead yet,” he says.

I see that he’s right, and that the beagle is still choking out small, ragged breaths. The pitiful creature knows that its time on Earth has abruptly reached its final chapter, yet its body tirelessly marches on, its heart refusing to cease its shallow beat.

Grant pulls my gun from the ground. “Haven’t you ever seen *Old Yeller*?” he asks me, and fires a single shot into the beagle’s skull. The insides of the dog’s head leak out into the

snow, ensanguine confetti streamers piled into thick clumps. I have to jerk my head away to avoid vomiting.

“Grant? Am I a good person?” I ask.

“Who fucking cares, Manhattan,” Grant replies.

“Everyone,” I tell him.

“Well I’ll tell you this much,” he says. “You’re hunting the wrong coyote.”

“I suppose so.” I sit in the snow in silence for a while, fidgeting with my hands, doing everything I can to avoid making eye contact with Grant.

“Get up, stop feeling sorry for yourself, and help me dig a hole.” Everything appears to have slowed down – the falling snow, the wind-rustled pine trees, it all progresses in slow motion. Even my train of thought, which normally races along chaotically, feels lethargic and bloated. With the energy of a bed-ridden Lyme patient, I incrementally pull myself to my feet.

Grant hands me a shovel. We hack at the frozen ground, making slight indents in the hard dirt, and though manual labor has always been a skill beyond my wheelhouse, I don’t utter a single word of complaint, since after all I am the one who has placed us in this unfortunate, morbid situation. I have never fancied myself a gravedigger, nor an executioner, yet these past few weeks have mercilessly stripped me of my identity and fashioned me a new one, with whatever half-thought details and contrivances fate could scavenge together. Can I blame this latest lapse of judgment on an uncovered primal instinct, a deeply rooted curse of nature indifferent to my attempts at self-improvement? It seems possible.

Once we break through the surface, the work becomes easier and I find myself falling into a routine, shovel up, shovel down, dirt in, dirt out, and soon we’ve dug a small, beagle-shaped hole. Grant picks the dog up by one leg and unceremoniously tosses it in, like a log upon

a fire, then smooths a mixture of snow and dirt over its body, packing it down with the flat end of his shovel.

I take a knee beside our beagle grave and say a few makeshift eulogies in my head. In my eulogy, the dog had lived a long and peaceful life with a gentle middle-aged couple on a large, forested plot of land. It had recently been diagnosed with cancer, a condition which quickly spread across its grizzled body with increasing severity – upon consultation, the veterinarian estimated that it only had two months to live, at best. If anything should happen to it in the meantime, the veterinarian advised the couple, it would be a mercy killing. I can live with this version of events.

Grant's voice interrupts my quiet funeral. "So your coyote – has he got a name?" he asks me, his tone lilting and conversational.

I think of Dale, sitting in his apartment, chair leaned back on two legs, as I fruitlessly attempted to impress the consequences of his blackmailing upon him. I think of Dale, looking past me, eyes glazed over, as if the patch of air directly behind me was the most interesting space in the universe and I was blocking his vision.

"Who's he to you?" Grant asks me. "Some faggot friend of yours?"

I think of Dale, sitting in his apartment, chair leaned back on two legs. I recall that he wore a partially buttoned-up nightshirt stained with what I discerned to be olive oil.

One thousand dollars? I asked him incredulously. He nodded with sparkling eyes, a direct successor to Anansi, the trickster god. I lay on the bed, a wretched, hyperventilating mess, as he beamed down at me with his siren's smile. *Surely I misunderstand you. A twisted practical joke, is that it? Have I done you a disservice somehow, or committed some arbitrary slight that*

enables you to justify this wickedness? Has nothing that has passed between us meant anything to you? But my words elicited nothing more than a laugh and a shrug from the callous trickster.

This line of reflection warrants a discussion of equity: consider the idiom *what goes around comes around* as a pint-sized microcosm of the ethical dilemma I pose before you. When concerning a relationship between two parties, when one breaks the trust of another, what is owed between the two? Are reparations in order, or the issuance of punishment in some form?

At this present moment, as I kneel in the frigid Vermont air, finger crusted with blood and sweat, Dale lives like a king off the spoils of my reputation, stuffing his face with unearned confidence as he delivers stirring monologues to every journalist in the city. He stands atop the podium of culture, an orator or else a demon, tainting everything he touches with his serpent's praises. Sitting in an intervention circle of my limited remaining friends and family, he tells tales you would not believe, he who I once trusted above all else, before I saw his lupine haunches beneath the sheep pelt with which he obscures his true nature. And for a moment I feel an indescribable sadness. It is an unfamiliar emotion, one which I can rarely handle without a great deal of discomfort. And then that short bout of sadness is gone, and what's left is a small, resigned nothing.

I breathe in sharply through my nostrils. "Dale Casborough," I say to Grant, before I can consider the implications of my answer. His face impossible to read, Grant casts looks at me and nods.

Coyote Pt. 2:

The time has come
to equate man with beast, for what

true distinguishing marks
can be made, between the savage coyote,
stalking a tender prey
through starless nights,
and a predator of finance,
drawing blood from the crisp edges
of checkbooks, in a sleepless city?

-NV

VII

The next day, I sit propped against the corner of the mattress, scrawling out the finishing touches of a working first draft for my ongoing memoirs. For the first time in this tedious, frustrating process, I feel as if I have finally reached a point of clarity, or at least something resembling it. I am contemplating the artistic benefits of canine slaughter – a moral transgression, of that there can be no doubt, yet how else to explain the immediacy with which my words now freely flow? – when my thoughts are interrupted by the whirring hum of my phone. A missed call from Erin, no voicemail. The notification piles atop a steadily lengthening list of red Xs, some Erin, most Dale, a handful of acquaintances who I can barely remember.

Barely a minute has passed since the missed call when my phone begins to vibrate again, again from Erin. Again, I do not respond – not out of fear, embarrassment, or spite (as previously indicated, the dawning of this new day has brought with it a shift in my perspective, and I now see that the world turns on, with or without my participation, so does my stubborn unresponsiveness bear any true effect?) as much as a desire for behavioral continuity: if I have

ignored every phone call for two weeks, one more missed message scarcely makes a difference, so then why should I interrupt my steady prose just yet? But then my phone rings for a third time, so I reluctantly answer, letting out a shaky “hello?” into the cellular airwaves.

“Nigel, it’s you?” Erin’s voice is thick with concern.

Under different circumstances, I might have offered up an indignant retort to Erin’s uncalled-for incredulity, but instead I simply reply, “yes, it’s me.”

“Jesus-fucking-Christ Nigel, I’ve been so worried,” she says. Her voice drifts in and out of static. “Where are you? Where have you been?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell her.

“What?”

“I just needed some time to myself.”

“Nigel,” she says. “Dale is dead.”

Now it’s my turn to ask, “what?”

“They found his body this morning. They’re saying his house caught fire.”

I’m not sure how Dale’s unexpected demise should make me feel. On one hand, is this not precisely what I hoped for? Is the motive not suitably in place? But despite the disparaging view of me some might hold, I am not a monster, nor am I emotionally vacant. Here is a life, a life which may have bore a destructive effect on the lives of others, yet a life all the same, ripped away without warning. A life that matters to some, to those who still heed the treachery of Dale’s saccharine voice. A life which at one point mattered to me, perhaps more than I care to admit, in fact. So yes, my response is complicated.

“My goodness,” I say. “A fire, just like that?”

“Nigel,” Erin says, “I’m not sure I’ll ever understand you.”

Taken aback, I ask her, “where is that comment coming from? What have I done to confuse your sensibilities?”

“Nigel, he’s dead,” she says.

“I know. I’m still attempting to process it, albeit in my unique way which may not be understandable to everyone, but-”

“Nigel, where are you?”

“Nowhere, for just a bit longer.”

“Please come home.” Her voice is small and tinny.

“I’m sure you’ll craft a spectacular essay from all this,” I tell her. “A triumph of creative nonfiction that will stop the pulse of the literary world.”

“What?” she asks. “Nigel, I’m not writing about any of this. I don’t think I ever could.”

This statement strikes me as hollow and false. For I know Erin better than she knows herself; I know the twitch she develops at the tips of her fingers when a new chord of inspiration strikes; I know her inability to resist the divine temptation of such a delectable subject matter; I can practically see her manuscript, nearly finished, stacked before me.

“You may be able to lie to yourself, Erin,” I tell her. “But you can never lie to me.”

“Nigel, what-”

I abruptly end the conversation and bury my face in my own journal’s pages. In just one more hour or two, I estimate, I should be able to finally send these memoirs to a publisher, to await their editorial fate. Though my writing has not been expedient, there is still a chance that I can publish my side of the story before Erin can publish hers.

Meanwhile, Dale is dead. Unless that too is a lie from Erin, a lie she tells me in order to break my focus and win the publishing race. Perhaps Dale is alive and well, clad in a tuxedo

somewhere, sipping from a glass of champagne, as he smooth-talks some other poor young fool. Or perhaps not. Does this new information warrant a direct public action from me? Should I send a bouquet of carnations to Dale's mother, to Kate Perrone, to his daughter, Lila? Or perhaps I should release a eulogy, a nuanced piece which paints an honest portrait of Dale at both his best and worst moments. I table that idea for now, and continue writing my memoirs.

A few hours later, just as I have begun to compose a brief author's note, I hear a knock at the cabin door. Deeming this distraction nothing more than a wind rustling the cabin's frame, or else sleep-deprived hallucination on my part, I ignore the sound and resume my writing. The knock comes again, and then a third time, so I slowly pull myself to my feet and open the door. Waiting before me are the two policemen I encountered at the gun shop, at the start of my time in Vermont.

The officer who wore the flannel and the Patriots hat stands in front (though on this occasion he has forsaken the hat and flannel in favor of more professional attire). "Good evening, son," he says. "Would you mind answering a few questions for us, regarding your whereabouts last night?"

Though I don't wish to leave my nearly completed memoirs stagnant – for what if inspiration leaves me as quickly as it arrived? – I recognize that a police officer is hardly a figure who can be ignored, so I welcome them in.

"My apologies for the lack of furniture," I say. "But this mattress is quite soft, if either of you would like to sit?"

"We're fine standing."

"Suit yourself." I sit down, legs crossed on the mattress.

“I’ll give you some background on our current investigation,” says the lead officer. “This morning, we received communications from the Bronx division of the NYPD. They were investigating the death of a man named Dale Casborough. I believe you’re familiar with him?”

I can feel my palms beginning to drip with sweat. What are the odds that these two cops from a Podunk Vermont town are aware, in any capacity, of Dale Casborough? “Yes,” I respond. “Dale’s an acquaintance.”

“Was an acquaintance,” corrects the second officer. “Since he’s dead, you know? That’s kind of the whole reason we’re here.”

“Our condolences,” says the first officer. I feel like laughing, at the brash cartoonish-ness of these supposed officers of the law, but I stop myself. “But yes,” he continues. “That is why we’re here, son. Specifically because Dale’s death shares a striking number of similarities with a case we’ve been examining.”

“Somebody shot a little old lady, then burned her house down,” says the second officer.

“Absolutely disgusting, if you ask me,” says the first.

“Did you hear about that?” the second policeman asks me.

“Yes,” I respond, trying my best to remain calm and levelheaded. “I heard about it from you two, actually,” I tell them. “Remember, we met at Regal Pete’s Hunting & Fishing Supply Shop last week?”

“We meet with a lot of people, son. I can’t say I remember you, if I’m being honest.”

“You must remember me,” I say to the second officer. “I purchased a Del-Ton Sport, for hunting coyote? You made a remark about a school shooting?”

“Yeah, I don’t remember you either,” says the second officer.

“A sniper rifle for hunting coyote?” says the first officer. “Why in Heaven would you need that, son?”

This line of questioning has begun oscillating between an invasion of privacy and a cheap prank, and I think, as I sit Indian-style on my plastic-wrapped mattress, that these policemen ought to be reprimanded for their lack of professionalism and basic etiquette. The other thought that passes unwanted through my consciousness is *and still, Dale Casborough is dead.*

“Would you mind if we looked at this gun of yours, son?”

Smiling and nodding, I stand up and pull the Del-Ton from its perch on my desk. The second officer runs his fingers along its framework and lets out a loud whistle. “Beautiful gun,” he says. “Definitely not a hunting gun though. Not at all.”

The first officer scribbles something into a small notepad. “Anyways son, Dale Casborough is dead. Shot twice, and then his house was torched.”

“Looks like the bullets didn’t kill him,” says the second. “They didn’t hit any vitals, so we think he, you know-”

“He what?” I’m not sure if I even want an answer.

“We think he probably burned alive,” says the second.

“Our condolences,” says the first.

Their words fade into the background. Again, I see Dale sitting in his apartment, chair leaned back on two legs. It feels like just yesterday. I remember thinking *if only I could wipe that smug expression from his face, if only he* but now, here I am with some demented variation off the basic idea of what I wanted, and all that I can think about is the smell of burning skin and the need to take a long, cold shower (I suppose, as the old adage goes, *be careful what you wish for*, but this strikes me as a ludicrously extreme example of that principle).

“He’s crying,” says the second cop. I want to argue with him, tell him he is seeing things, but when I reach my fingers up to my tear ducts, I find to my surprise that he’s correct.

“We’ll give you a moment,” says the first cop.

“I don’t buy it,” says the second.

How must it feel to burn alive? Is it a state a living, breathing creature can even begin to process? Every cell, every particle, every last atom corrupted by the shrieking of flames, the body rebels against itself, descending into a state of utter helpless chaos. How can such a scenario even be imagined, much less play out in real time?

“We just need to know where you were last night, son,” says the first cop.

“I was here,” I tell him. “I’ve scarcely left this cabin at all in the past two weeks, not even for groceries.”

“Okay,” says the second officer. “But did anybody see you here?”

“No, I tend to keep a reclusive existence,” I say. “As a writer, too much outside influence or human distraction hinders the creation of my art.” From two hundred miles away I here Erin whisper *I’m not sure I’ll ever understand you. And still, Dale Casborough is dead.*

“So nobody can confirm that you were in Vermont last night?”

I remember Grant, steadily shoveling frozen dirt. “I think I may know the man you’re looking for,” I say. “His name is Grant. Trust me when I say that you’d know him if you saw him. And he resides in this town, I believe, so it’s likely that you have seen him, at one point or another. His hair is long and white, his stomach protrudes into a beer gut, and he wears an eyepatch over his left eye.”

“An eyepatch?” asks the second cop, incredulously. “Like a pirate? I’ve never seen anyone in this town with an eyepatch.”

“Son, does this Grant have a last name? We need you to work with us here.”

I do not know Grant’s last name, nor if he possesses a last name at all, but it seems to me that these officers of the law who stand before me should be able to uncover this variety of information for themselves, rather than arbitrarily deputizing locals to perform their jobs for them. I dig into my pants pocket for Grant’s business card but seem to have misplaced it. I quickly scour the cabin, but fail to catch a glimpse of it.

“And what leads you to believe that this Grant fellow, this mysterious eyepatch-wearing man, is the suspect we’re looking for?”

I cannot provide an answer that would satisfy their endless questions without partially incriminating myself in the process, so I say, “I just believe that it’s a lead you ought to examine.”

The first officer pulls his colleague aside for a second, and they engage in a whispered conversation several paces away from me, just out of my earshot. I imagine the cruel and defamatory remarks that they’re likely spewing, and find myself overcome with the overwhelming urge to continue writing. If I can just continue writing, I can write myself out of this dilemma, I am sure of it.

After a moment, the two cops step forward again. “Thank you, son. You’ve given us plenty to think about. You’ll hear from us in a day or two, in the likely event of any follow-ups.”

“Am I a suspect?” I ask them, desperate for an answer, but equally terrified of the words I might hear in reply.

“I’m afraid that we aren’t a liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation.”

“When we met two weeks ago, you told me I don’t match the profile of the individual you’re looking for,” I say. “Has that changed?”

“Again, I can’t say I remember you, son,” says the first officer. “But let me tell you, people are full of surprises.”

And with this final, cryptic remark, the two policemen depart, their cruiser trailing down my driveway in reverse, red and blue lights flashing. I lie down on the plastic-wrapped mattress and reflect upon the conversation. It seems to me, now more than ever, that the entirety of the universe has conspired against me, for reasons beyond my comprehension. And then, unable to stop myself, I think of Dale again, a charred carcass draped carelessly across a pile of smoldering rubble. I think of Dale and when I think of Dale again I think of Dale *I’m not sure I’ll ever understand you* so I return again to my trusty, loyal journal and attempt fruitlessly to distill these incessant emotions into a coherent, sensible prose, but what I’m left with amounts to little more than an assortment of scribbles punctuated with the occasional correctional X. And if I am unable to catalog these moments, then how can I even consider myself a writer, if I have failed at the one critical element of my supposed life’s purpose. *And still, Dale Casborough is dead.* I hoist the Del-Ton over my shoulders and exit the cabin.

I walk in a straight line for upwards of ten minutes, deep into the Vermont woods. When I find a small, dimly lit clearing I pause, crouch down, and begin to dig at the snow and dirt with my bare, gloveless hands. Though the task is exponentially more difficult without the aid of Grant and his shovels (and where is Grant now? For he must be the culprit responsible for Dale’s untimely descent into inferno – which by extension leaves me at least partially responsible, though really, blame is a tricky thing to throw around – so has he fled town, departed into the hills, commandeered his decrepit pickup truck into new, uncharted lands?) I eventually have a small hole before me. I drop the Del-Ton in, and smooth the dirt over (I am suddenly self-conscious of how much I have buried in these past few days, both figuratively and literally).

I know the portrait painted in the police officer's notebook is not a flattering one. Worse still, it seems to point in the direction of a jail cell, or worse, the electric chair (no, New York doesn't have the death penalty *what are you talking about, Nigel?*) especially if these incompetent, Podunk cops, hopelessly grasping at straws manage to improbably pin this arbitrary local murder on me (what motivation could I possibly have for engineering the demise of a sweet old, house-ridden woman? Why does this world consistently fail to understand that I am, above all else, a writer, not an outlaw nor a homewrecker nor a hopeless public embarrassment, and certainly not a murderer). And so, regretfully, I must disappear for some time, that much is clear. Where to? Well, I could hardly print that detail in this manuscript, no (do not think for a moment that I have forsaken my publishing ambitions)? It is likely that this may be the last you hear from me (or, if by some grace of fair fortune we do meet again, it will not be until the long distant future).

I return to the cabin to gather my belongings and ensure that my affairs are suitably in order. Most importantly, I arrange the mostly finalized pages of my manuscript (choosing to leave the author's note undone) and place them into a large manilla envelope. And then I glance at my phone and see the thirty-seven unread voice messages that Dale has left me. Striving for a moment of closure, or rather clarification, or perhaps something else entirely, I press play.

As I sit, listening to Dale's candy-coated voice crackle through the phone speakers, I am conscious of approaching footsteps from outside. Footsteps light, but frantic. I stand up and gaze out the cabin window.

Outside, at least three hundred coyotes have assembled themselves around the cabin. Some howl, some let out timid yelps, others snarl under their breath. Some are large and fleshy with glistening pelts and insatiable eyes, while others are ragged, scrawny. Some bare their teeth.

All have lean haunches and thin, long tails, just as I described them six years ago. And all of it symbolizes something, of that I'm sure, but for once the meaning eludes me.

Poem for Dale:

Listening to your voicemails, a vestige
from a time forgotten, a time
to which we never can return, I am
conscious of your presence
just behind me, several paces removed
on a plane I can sense but never see,
and I know that against all odds
you're with me still. Or so I hope.

-NV