Memoir in Transient Moments

The author was born during a severe weather warning. Dense clouds with gray wings spread wide across the Midwestern sky. Like most infants, he couldn't sleep at first, partly due to the humidity and gale-force winds. But beneath the author, the prairie writhed in moss and peat. Nearby, the Mississippi River flowed in its mighty, muddy glory. Tethered itself to the author's spirit like an anchor to a ship. At night, he would float through a cognitive haze. Early in life, he had no dreams, no goals, only a thin slice of daylight huddling near the horizon. Only a curtain of fog that misdirected his internal compass. As the author matured, he would learn to stack sins like firewood as ghosts gathered around the bonfire of his soul. The author would rest, but only amid storm fronts when he would somehow snore through the commotion that kept everyone else awake. Would carry his fears like cargo in the darkness. Would hush each of them to sleep, each night.

As a child, the author etched his name in the playground dirt and had needless fistfights with older kids during recess. His mother would tuck him into bed nightly with a Post-it-note prayer that she claimed would help him to *get right*. When interrogated about his questionable behavior in school, the author silently pulled out those handwritten paper-thin prayers and set them one next to another in the principal's office, crumpled from his backpack. Sometimes, nothing but threadbare scraps that he would unintentionally tear with his clumsy hands. All during another growth spurt that again set his legs aching and hormones churning. It was impossible to resist conjuring trouble whenever his audacity would swell with excitement, but the author remained resolute. By adolescence, the Post-it-note prayers had sat dormant far too long to ever be answered. He tossed them one by one into the recycle bin like coins in a wishing well.

The author looked like his father, but only when he was angry. And only after the author finished nearly drowning in rage would he ever come up to the surface to breathe. Like his forbearers, he never lingered on the ground after getting knocked down, but instead stood up time and time again. Would risk it all and dive headfirst into the undertow of trouble if given a chance to hit paydirt. Would curse the system that held him down long after learning how to game it. The author started noting these things with a pencil in a notebook, but by then his dad took to breaking everything he touched. Took to breaking every journal's spine and throwing them in the trash, never realizing the value of his progeny's writing. The author would later talk to himself and write essays about those words that he lost, their void, their verity.

One day, the author found a dirty magazine abandoned in the woods. Dog-eared and wrinkled, but tweenaged boys cannot afford to be snobbish with free secondhand porn. The author squinted but could not see the models' spirits, there among the flesh and fur of their naked bodies. The angles of their limbs seemed impossibly obtuse and obscene. The author arranged the torn-out pages, ragged and freed of their binding, in his bedroom with the door shut. Tried to chart the course of his future yearnings atop his bedspread. The author closed his eyes and imagined tangles of hair and skin and open mouths. Licentious phantoms moving back-and-forth in a frenzy, haunting him stiff, blank-faced on the page.

For better or worse, the author grew up in the Midwest. Festered beneath the July sunlight like a blister. Ran full-court games all summer long on asphalt playgrounds until he couldn't dribble or sweat anymore. Couldn't keep curse words out of his mouth nor insults out of his dialogue. The author built a panic room out of literature and music and hunkered down inside it for years. In college, he wrestled with imposter syndrome and the grief of his father's passing, and still, the holes inside him stretched and grew larger until he contained so much. Sports statistics and vinyl records, doubt and bottles of prescription pills. The author would crack open ever so often and out would fly a manufactured aura of effortless cool that would hide his desire to hide his desire. The author would fall apart with all that wanting, would fold and fray in the wind like a tattered flag.

The author wrote a book that inventoried all his filthiest secrets. Then he left a fistful of wildflowers to be pressed into dryness between its pages. After that, he wandered for days, sleep-deprived and emotionally drunk on synthetic pride and baseless optimism. The author wanted to love the book but would tremble with guilt whenever he touched it. Every time he entered the room, the book tumbled off the nightstand. The author knelt on the hardwood floor and tried to coax the book out from under the bed. Tried to love the things that made it an exquisite mess. Its creative license to assassinate his character. Its inherent inconsistencies and white lies. How he'd be willing to share the spotlight with the book, but the book needed its own shine, its own flickering candle. Its own small glow shimmering inside its unassuming cover.

The author picked a word out of a hat and reluctantly swallowed it like cold medicine. Magically plucked and plagiarized a likable persona from TV, and still the author could not fully unearth popularity or inner peace. But he loved it when the wrong women placed their hands on his body and coaxed him into abandoning common sense. Spun his better judgment around until it became dizzy underneath disco balls and strobe lights. Ate out his heart with a knife and a fork, but returned him, intact, to his apartment door the next morning. The author tried to put a country mile between each mattress that he temporarily conquered. Tried to make counterfeit euphoria real, down to each *Oh God* and every errant proclamation of love moaned during lustful instants. He locked them in the attic to stop their nagging, but they whined all night beneath the crescent moon. How soon after they pursued with pens and paper cuts, scribbling their musings in the margins of his existence.

He's got writer's block, again, so the author goes outside searching for a new idea at night like it's a runaway house pet. Or chasing after it as if it's the backside of some stripper-turned-lounge singer who looks hot but can't quite hit the right notes. Toting empty beer bottles and a smartphone underneath a feral moon. Creativity loved the author once, but now it barely returns calls or answers texts. And when it does, it becomes nearly incoherent with gin-soaked ramblings or a vomit stream of LOLs and emojis. Fraught with remorse and bitter with cynicism. You would be

hard-pressed to uncover proof it even existed, let alone that they were once tight. Check the wall safes and crawlspaces. Watch it fold itself into the cracks of buildings. Become a brick through a window, or a knife through a cake. Black under the eyes and sweet talking its way into afterparties and other people's motel rooms. Creativity would cut the author's throat to save itself. Would watch as he bleeds out, knowing everything goes to plan until it doesn't.

The author loves self-loathing like a newborn. Gives it plenty of attention. Feeds, swaddles, and provides it with a caring home so it grows. The author's nights are full of snowfall and shot glasses, so he attracts nothing but questionable choices. But he still has his mother's smile as a backup plan, a deus ex machina that he keeps tucked in a pocket and carries everywhere like a wallet. Sometimes, he uses that smile to pay debts, gloss over details, flirt with strangers, and passively manipulate bad karma into favorable outcomes. No harm in flexing charm. Left foot, then right foot, but rarely ever tripping. Using a secondhand smile with nefarious intentions was yet another problematic choice. The author spends too much time jaywalking and sweet-talking and not enough time adjusting for optical illusions like toxic friendships and glass ceilings. Everyone's vision becomes blurred, even with their eyes wide like scared deer. Everyone's smile looks like his mother's, especially when they gossip or wave goodbye.

The author's inheritance was a litany of makeshift promises and nervous flutters. An affinity for sex and sweets. A need for absolute silence in the room when he writes and enough free time to doomscroll through the world's endless disasters. The author barged his way out of the river town he was born in and fought tooth and nail for fragments of success. Ingested every snake oil potion in the cabinet, but still fell short of seizing superhero status. On the screen, caped avengers yet again rescue all the women and children from impending danger. They emerge unscathed from fierce battles with witty one-liners and comforting promises. Knowing smirks and honey in their voices, the way they hold onto virtue like their morning coffee until it goes cold. All this to say that the author might very well be more villain than superman, more shitheel than do-gooder. The author's inheritance was a patch of weeds in an urban garden surrounded by smokestacks and

rusted-out cars. The author's inheritance was anxiety, which slipped into his bed each night like a cat beneath the covers.

Like all authors, the author longs for daffodils stretching along empty roads. A cabin in the forest which seems more like a forest inside a cabin, all wood rot and wilderness. A racket of wayward crows. The author tries to write things other than poems. Disjointed narratives and ad copy, dirty jokes and clickbait articles, but poetry sticks in his wheels and grinds his gears to nothing. All the wanting, the words, the musicality, some faint glimmer on the horizon, approachable but always out of reach. For how soon the palace of poetry becomes its own kind of prison, the octaves pitching with enjambment loitering at the end of each line. Becomes a tiny apocalypse where the dead mumble through hauntings because they no longer have tongues to form words. Where ghosts bang the kitchen pots all night but still hunger for more in the morning. The author collects these transient moments and tucks them into bed each night, but where do they go when the back door is left unlocked? What use for alarm systems and handcuffs when they wanted to remain imprisoned all along?