"To Travel and Write" A Literary Pilgrimage and a Collection of Short Stories

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“To Travel and Write”
A Literary Pilgrimage and a Collection of Short Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary
by
Peter Collins Thomas

Accepted for __________________________________ _
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 25th, 2011
Explanation and Table of Contents

This project is a collection of short stories interspersed within a travel journal. The journal chronicles my visits to various locations central to Ernest Hemingway’s life and works. In between sections of this journal, you will find six original short stories, each inspired by my personal travel experiences throughout the United States and by my study of Hemingway’s own short stories, novels, and several secondary biographical sources.

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Introduction, Key West and Seattle

“I want to travel and write.” Scrawled in the pages of a high school junior’s notebook, these words would set the parameters of one of the most widely studied and celebrated lives within the canon of American literature. For Ernest Hemingway, travelling and writing would also come to include sailing, fighting, drinking, flying, hunting, fishing, bull-running, and practically every other phallocentric adventure that one man could fit within a lifetime cut short by depression and a favorite shotgun. Hemingway and the media that embraced him both consciously and unconsciously built the model for the American boy to leap out into the world with the values, fashions, and airs of an intellectual man’s man. Of course, I would be lying if I said I didn’t come out of high school hoping to make the same big leap into macho-manhood.

So in classic college-age male fashion, I set out to follow the man who helped invent the stereotype of the American male adventure. I completed my junior year of college hoping to spend the summer following bullfights like an aficionado in Pamplona, or drinking coffee during the day and absinthe at night in Paris. Unfortunately, my European ambitions for the summer did not pan out as I moved closer to seven weeks of teaching canoeing and archery at a summer camp in North Carolina. While at camp, I learned that my truly destined Hemingway journey would be a strictly American one, but that it would encompass the best parts of what I loved about Hemingway and his works: the Nick Adams struggles in the American wilderness, the boozing and U-boat scouting of Key West’s “Papa,” and the general preoccupations of how to be a man in an America whose God is dead and whose women are trouble.
This realization was facilitated by the fact that I had already begun this journey during my spring break trip to Key West. Amidst fruity-drink hangovers and the testosterone levels of my William and Mary friends surrounded by UGA sorority girls, I managed to sneak off to the Hemingway house with all of its tourist trappings.

I had to pull a few teeth to get my friends to step outside the walk between our hotel rooms and the beach during the day, but thank god for my friend Phil, a member of the riding club and the perpetual sassy gay friend of a number of the tri-delt girls who had come with us from Williamsburg. He rounded up a few of the girls and his roommate Schulte, who came along just to get in with the girls and enjoy the mojitos we had all promised ourselves for later. The twelve dollar admission ticket came very close to dissuading my co-travelers, who could easily justify spending their money on more drinks or Cuban food, but I think I managed to guilt-trip most of them by saying, “I have to go for my project, so I’m doing it anyway,” and striding assertively up to the ticket counter.

Once everyone followed suit, we patted through the dirty fur of our first six-toed cat in front of the house and then split off into two groups, or rather, I split away from the group that had absolutely zero interest in going on the tour. My tour guide talked like a kids’ show host and wore a ridiculous khaki outfit that was probably better suited for crocodile hunting than reciting literary history. There was a fairly substantial amount of actual historical value in the bottom floor rooms, with a model of his boat, *The Pilar*, pictures of Hemingway and a biographical display of the old man upon whom *The Old Man and the Sea* was apparently based. Despite this one very thorough section of the exhibit, I got the feeling that the house had drifted far beyond its literary merit in the
direction of tourist trappery. One needn’t visit the house to discern its website’s priorities: (click one) “The Legend,” “Our Cats,” “The House,” “Directions,” “Tour Rates,” “Our Hours,” and “LIVE Cams.” Unless there was some allusion to ghost activity on the tour that I missed while admiring the furniture, the “LIVE Cams” must cater strictly to those who find sick pleasure in watching inbred calicos traipse around and mark their territory throughout a famous author’s beautiful house and garden.

Aside from giving you the sense that Hemingway was just a Nobel Prize above your average crazy cat lady, some of the traditional Hemingway themes and values do seem to trickle through the anecdotes and jokes on the tour. For example, the cats are explained by the sailor’s superstition of six-toed cats as luck-bringers, and I wouldn’t put this past the author’s sensibility for maritime traditions. Nevertheless, it’s hard to imagine Hemingway writing up in his loft while brushing away the twenty-plus cats (and a rooster) which currently reside there, each with cutesy names like “Hairy Truman” or “Nikki Adams.”

Regardless, it is a beautiful house which you can imagine would be the perfect refuge from war-reporting and the rapidly industrializing world, at least before Jimmy Buffett got there. The backyard paths wind through a verdant garden of palm trees and ferns, leading you past what was, and apparently still is, the largest private pool on the island. The pool allowed my tour guide to tell one of his favorite stories, in which Hemingway’s children apparently convinced Pauline that he wanted the pool. Upon his return from reporting in Spain, he learned that the project cost him $20,000, which was $12,000 more than the value of the house itself. From this, we get the story of Hemingway furiously turning to Pauline with a penny from his pocket, saying, “Well,
you might as well take my last cent.” The penny is currently framed under glass in the concrete beside the pool. Whether this anecdote was an example of Hemingway’s frustrations with his wife or merely a cavalier joke at the excess he now afforded is unclear, yet we can at least assume that the poolside boxing ring was his idea. Scholar Russ Pottle argues that the Key West house and the swimming pool legend are symbolic of Hemingway’s own unease while balancing financial security with artistic achievement, as he had certainly established himself as a successful author yet could still rely on a safety net of Pauline Pfeiffer’s family wealth if his writing did not continue to be productive:

…it presents a plausible cause for resentment over money, whether Hemingway threw coins or not. No longer young, Hemingway was nonetheless starting over, leaving the Hadley Richardson years and their Parisian economics behind, beginning anew in Catholicism and career with the help of the Pfeiffers…And here is Hemingway, legendarily transposing the Pfeiffer wealth into the product of his own spiritual potency, represented by the famous search for truth in the right words.

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In other words, Key West was a new beginning for Hemingway, both financially and in terms of his writing, and it was here that he would redefine and mold his own “legendary” image as an established artist and public figure.

Another stop along the tour of the garden was the deceptively Grecian-looking urinal-fountain, an ornate combination of a Spanish olive jar and a urinal from the Sloppy Joe’s bar. Apparently intentionally built for his cats, the fountain is a testament to Hemingway’s appreciation of some of the finer diversions of Key West’s now absurdly popular Duval Street. The Spring Break ’10 version of Sloppy Joe’s which I was fortunate enough to witness was a shit-show of big-school sorority girls and popped collar bro-daddies in what appeared to be a very old warehouse with a conveniently
placed bar in the middle and a stage in the back. Behind the stage, where the same band played Sister Hazel and Tom Petty covers the four nights we were there, was a huge black and white face of “Papa” himself, overlooking the spectacle of my hammered friends making out with girls they would never remember. I bought a pint glass at the gift shop next door with the same logo.

To return to the house itself, of which I’m certain my perception was tainted at the time by a Sloppy Joe’s induced headache, Hemingway’s writing studio was the chief highlight. Up a metal staircase over a small patio and separate from the house and hidden from the pool, it is the dream office of any writer-adventurer. In a refurbished hayloft, you are greeted by a stuffed gazelle head staring out from the far wall above gorgeous built-in bookcases full of books which surprisingly did not at least appear to have been borrowed from the gift shop. Hemingway had a small desk off to the right for his typewriter. Long windows on the back and side walls lit up the room perfectly. You could easily imagine him sitting there with all of the windows open during the day, letting the breeze come in from the ocean. Maybe he would occasionally get up to view the lighthouse, make a drink, and then get back to work at writing his “Letters” for Esquire or fine-tuning To Have and Have Not (Reynolds, 33). It was the perfect office: large, open, and offset from the house itself, beautiful but separate from the distractions of his wife and children, raised off the ground like a young boy’s dream tree-house where he can always escape into the fantasies of safari hunts and European escapades. Here was the essential dwelling of the greatest author of the twentieth century with everything he could ever need between his typewriter and the ocean. It was the idyllic nest of his literary genius, carved out of the ascetic and rustic habitation of a backyard hayloft,
around which the swimming pool and lavish gardens and boxing ring had sprung—the trappings of celebrity which cloaked the private artist. Of course, the tour guide didn’t take us up into the writing studio, but it was suggested that we check it out on our way to the gift shop.

While Key West was the first location of my Hemingway tour of America, it certainly wasn’t the start of anything that had been adequately planned as a continuous literary journey at that point. Finishing up exams and going into a summer of teaching canoeing in North Carolina, I had no idea how I was going to fit my trip into my schedule or budget. Then, halfway through the summer, I learned that my older brother Sam was planning to drive across the country to visit his roommate from college and stop at as many breweries and baseball games as possible. He had finished up work as a paralegal for a firm that had sent him to Hyderabad for months at a time to sort through documents in hot and dusty Indian basements. He would be moving into an apartment with his girlfriend just before starting law school in DC, so this trip would have to be a nice last hurrah before hitting the books and spending money instead of making it for the next three years. To give a sense of my brother’s attitude toward my project, he told me, “Short stories are like just casually hooking up with a girl. Way easier, but way awesomer.”

The ensuing plan was that I would meet him on the butt end of his trip, flying to Seattle to give him company and force my own literary tourist’s agenda into the itinerary for the trip back to the east coast. So I drove the six hours back from the camp where I worked to my house in Richmond, did some laundry with Mom’s help, tested out my new camping tent in our dining room, and repacked the same bags I had been living out of in a
cabin all summer. I left early in the morning on a Monday, caught up on TV on the plane, and landed in a sea of fog in Seattle, where my brother met me in our recently deceased grandmother’s green Volvo wearing a foam helmet that looked like the head of an angry panda. The helmet was a souvenir honoring San Francisco Giants infielder and switch-hitter Pablo Sandoval (or “Pandoval”), the first evidence of Sam’s spree of stadium visits.

Upon arrival, I got the sense that Seattle is like a version of Maine where people actually want to live. This comparison probably stems from the fact that my brother and I were strictly east coast kids, having grown up in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Virginia. The climate, as expected, was damp and foggy, but the prevalence of dark green pines and rocky grey mountains could only be compared to the drives up to the White Mountains of New Hampshire or to Maine’s Casco Bay which characterized most of our childhood.

Since I had woken up at five in Richmond and it was currently about ten o’clock in Seattle, and I had not slept on the plane, the obvious next step would be the unavoidable visit to one of Seattle’s most famous businesses: Starbucks coffee. Sam drove us (having fortunately removed the panda helmet for safety reasons) to the famous Pike’s Market, where I got my first look at Puget Sound and the Pacific Ocean, and half-dazedly walked through the market full of produce, mounds of seafood, and glass-blown and ceramic artwork in celebration of salmon. Flannel shirts and denim jackets were out in full force, especially considering it was only the beginning of August, but it all made sense from the cool temperature and the inevitable fashion sense of those who can be considered nearly Canadian.
Like I said, my first priority was to get my caffeine fix, so we headed to the original Pike Place Starbucks location, which wasn’t nearly as crowded or touristy as I anticipated. Rather than the usual layout which involves plenty of space for overly-skinny moms and publicly aspiring novelists to plop down at private tables with their respective strollers and laptops, the Pike Place Starbucks is extremely narrow and totally seatless, offering only enough room between a wall of memorabilia and the register counter itself to stand in line and give your order. The store is much more rustic than “global” compared to other branches, with antiquish wooden counters and shelves. It also has more of a classic coffee-shop feel with bags of coffee beans lying around and an older looking, dark brown version of the mermaid logo seen everywhere else.

We did our due diligence in picking up a couple Pike Place Roasts, a mug, and a bag of coffee beans for the parents. We continued wandering around the market for a while, stopping on the sidewalk for some really good gyros with lots of hot sauce. We then made our way to Pike’s Brewery, which would set the tone for the rest of the trip in terms of mutual enjoyment for the two of us. Sam has always been a much bigger baseball fan than I am, and he definitely wasn’t going to be as interested in my Hemingway sites, but beer was something we both had in common. Sam began a never-ending microbrew phase once he got out of college and got an income as a paralegal. At that point, I was just beginning college, so I’ve always been that guy in the room with an imperial stout you’ve never heard of while everyone else is funneling Natty Light.

So the two of us, pretentious snobs that we are, walked into the Pike’s brewpub straight to the bar in the back and grabbed a sampler of beers with names like Naughty Nelly, Monk’s Uncle, Kilt Lifter, Tandem Double Ale, and the XXXXX Pike Stout. My
personal favorites were the stout and the Kilt Lifter, the latter of which was a Scotch style Ruby Ale with a nice, smoky flavor. Sam and I left slightly buzzed with two t-shirts—I got a Kilt Lifter shirt for obvious reasons, and Sam got one for the Tandem. We went back to the hotel we had reserved, a Travelodge, to drop off some things and take a break, and then we headed to the somewhat trendy area of Fremont after Sam had smart-phoned a good Sushi place.

The place was called Chiso, and it took us a while to find it, but we were able to sit down right at the bar when we got there. Before we even ordered our food, the chef on the other side of the bar reached a couple small bowls over the sneeze-shield which each held a soup-like dish with a curved piece of flaky white meat within. He explained to us that it was salmon cheek, and I was concerned but then pleasantly surprised to have my first taste of fresh West Coast Salmon come from the inside of one’s mouth. It was actually delicious, and I would have it again any day of the week. Sam ordered sake, which I tried to warn him about, and I ordered a forgettable Japanese beer. Sam hated the sake, as I predicted.

Our sushi was brought out in beautiful wooden models of fishing boats, and it was all incredible. It was easily the best sushi I had ever had. My usual favorite dragon-rolls, made with eel and avocado, were hands-down better than any I had had in Richmond.

We finished off the night at a place listed as “Naked City Brewery,” which wasn’t much more than a bar with a few fancy beers like the San Franciscan 21st Amendment and the place’s own Naked City Fleur d’Elise, which was the only available beer to earn the “brewery” description. It was a little underwhelming after we had expected another
large-scale brewpub. We finished up the night well-fed and ready to sleep at our Travelodge up the road.
Aficionados

It’s Whiskey Wednesday at the Back Room, which means five dollar whiskey drinks of any kind. Ben and Big Al each get it on the rocks, while everyone else gets it with ginger ale or Coke. They get to give their male friends shit for that. The girls go for whiskey and Coke if they don’t circumvent the deal altogether and settle for Stella.

Wednesday is also open-mic night, which means everyone has turned out to hear Ben play guitar after a few hours of poorly executed James Taylor and Bob Dylan renditions by locals with shaggy beards and lips full of Skoal.

The Back Room is the only real bar in town and the only one with live music, so Wednesday night is really the highlight of our week.

Big Al gets his drink. The bartender remembers his ID because he has the same birthday as her sister. She had yelled at him and his friends for drinking beers in the parking lot before they went in. They agree that the bartender is pretty cute, but even Danny hasn’t hit on her yet.

Big Al and DJ head to the back of the bar to play shuffleboards, which is Big Al’s favorite game involving sand, after volleyball. He can’t imagine how someone ever came up with the idea for shuffleboards, but DJ explains it. Apparently, British people around the time of Shakespeare would slide large coins across the table or down a bar, probably on less interesting nights than Whiskey Wednesday. The game somehow made it through the colonial era and into American bar culture through the avenues of gambling and drinking games, and then developed its own tournaments and player associations among populations of blue-collar workers, college students, and retirees. What DJ doesn’t explain is at what point some drunk must have fallen behind in points and decided, “This
table’s too slippery! Let’s put some fucking dirt on it!” and started the revolution making it necessary for the Back Room to keep an on-hand supply of shuffleboard sand at all times.

Big Al doesn’t have any idea how DJ knows so much about shuffleboards. He wonders if it was just something his parents didn’t clue him in on while driving him to soccer practice as a child. They never said, “Remember, after this, you’ve got your billiards lessons at three and bocce at five, so drink lots of water!” DJ then shows him the online history of shuffleboard he had pulled up with a few thumb-flicks mid-conversation. Big Al and one of the girls play a round against DJ and his girlfriend and get slaughtered, but Big Al calls him a pussy for not even putting a dent in his full cup of whiskey-ginger. DJ gulps it down, and he and Big Al head back to the bar.

DJ picks out a Dale’s Pale Ale, cheaper than most decent beers but still fairly high gravity. Big Al asks for a Two Hearted Ale, but they’re out, so he gets a Sweetwater. Big Al and DJ talk beer for a while. He explains to DJ how India Pale Ales represent the fastest growing genre within the beer industry, with more and more people choosing it out of the already nitpicky population of microbrew drinkers, and how breweries are making hoppi er and hoppi er beverages to push this trend as far as it can go. He tells him, “In forty years, our kids will be pre-gaming with something so bitter that our eyeballs will burst out of our heads if we steal a swig from them.” One of the girls sits down with them and they try to impress her by explaining why IPAs are called IPAs.

“So that’s why they taste so bad,” she says.

“Hazel” gets up on stage and provides everyone with a front row view of her armpit hair as she sings a number of too-slow acoustic covers of The Cure. Then, a big
biker-looking guy gets up and mangles “Country Road,” but it’s alright because everyone in the bar can sing along with the chorus well enough that he can draw away from the mic during the more demanding parts of the song. The biker guy’s name is Paul, and the owner and MC of Open-Mic Night gets up and says “Alright, everybody give it up for Powerful Paul!” as he shuffles off the stage. Big Al and all his friends explode with laughter, except for DJ, who doesn’t understand.

“How’s he Powerful Paul?” he asks Big Al.

“Fuck if I know, but that’s hilarious.”

“What’s hilarious?”

“You know, Powerful Paul? I haven’t told you about Powerful Paul? Hell, the bartender knows about Powerful Paul.”

DJ is clearly out of the loop, so Big Al tells him the story. Big Al used to be pre-vet, focusing primarily on raising and breeding horses. Before you start thinking that Al is some huge, burly rancher who can muscle stallions to the ground, it is important to know that he’s a fairly trim, amiable-looking and unintimidating guy. He and DJ would constantly do push-ups and sit-ups together to fight their beer-bellies and keep their arms looking good in their overalls, but neither of them could be referred to, unironically or ironically, as “big.” No, Big Al got his name from being the runt among his friends at an early age, but was now prone to jokingly explaining himself as merely “Average-Sized Al.”

Anyway, Big Al used to be pre-vet, and this meant knowing a shit ton about horses, even though he now won’t have anything to do with them. He wouldn’t even help his friends ride them when they all snuck onto another friend’s ranch after splitting a
couple jars of apple-cinnamon moonshine. But Big Al used to work with horses as part of his internship with a real vet who managed rich people’s stables and bred their horses for them. So, one day, one of Big Al’s co-interns, Mike, informs him, “Powerful Paul is coming in,” and Al clueless about what this could possibly mean.

Mike returns from another room with a baseball helmet, expressionless as he puts it on. “He’s huge,” he says, “And sometimes he kicks.”

“You can’t be serious,” Big Al says.

“You’ll see.”

Their next task is to roll out a giant artificial horse structure made out of heavy-duty plastic and metal. This is the mount, which is supposed to support Powerful Paul’s weight during the time of the collection.

Someone has paid eighteen hundred dollars for Powerful Paul’s seed, looking to get one of their mares pregnant from quite possibly the most valuable genetic specimen in all of horsedom. Powerful Paul is exactly what his website (yes, he has a website) describes him as, a “magnificent English Shire Stallion,” 2,300 pounds of “architecturally perfect” musculature. Big Al says it is the biggest horse he has ever seen and will ever see for the rest of his life. Powerful Paul’s not just enormous, he’s also just downright beautiful. With a gleaming black-brown hide and a mane which wraps halfway down to his legs, Powerful Paul stands like a dark and massive tower, like someone piled on slabs of black marble in the shape of a horse and then chiseled it down to the equestrian equivalent of Michelangelo’s David.

The horse’s mane isn’t even really a mane. It has lost all semblance of the grace and majestic tidiness of the horses you find painted in old people’s houses and little girls’
bedrooms. Instead, it’s just a long but luxurious mullet of hair, hanging down like Fabio’s as a measure of excessive beauty, clearly not styled for speed or comfort. His tail is approximately the same volume and length. Paul’s butt-muscles must be constantly straining to move this mass of hair when swishing flies away.

According to the website, “Paul is what every stallion should look like. He covers his mares efficiently and reproduces himself with a perfection that not many stallions can claim… His offspring are picture perfect.” In reality, Paul is so huge that they can’t even bring out the actual mare they plan to inseminate. Any horse that Paul would actually physically mate with would be crushed under his weight.

Once Powerful Paul is led out of the trailer, Big Al immediately realizes the necessity of the baseball helmet and prepares himself for the seven foot tall thrashing monstrosity that has stepped out before him. It becomes Big Al’s job to help Mike lead Paul to the fake horse mount, which has been sprayed with pheromones and dolled up to look as much like a mare’s rear end as possible. Paul’s finicky at first, but once he gets a whiff of the other mares in the stable, he’s fired up and ready to go.

Big Al and Mike stuff the four foot collection bag, essentially an enormous, plastic condom, into the frame of the mount before leading Paul up to it. Big Al and Mike have the inglorious duty of holding onto the edges of the opening in the mare-mount so that it doesn’t get forced out of place. Big Al wishes he had his own helmet.

With everything in place, the real vet goes to work stimulating Paul’s prostate with a long-sleeved glove that stretches up to his shoulder. Mike and Big Al are ready to throw up. Powerful Paul finds his place behind the mount, placing his front legs up onto the structure as it trembles and rocks from side to side under his weight.
“Hold!” Mike yells, and they stretch the ends of the collection bag as Paul goes to town, smashing his excessively large manhood, or rather, horsehood, into the opening, simulating the process of an NFL football team hitting the sleds over and over again in rapid succession. Big Al manages to lean as far away from the action as possible, averting his eyes and counting on Mike to monitor the welfare of the bag and Paul’s precarious stance on the mount.

“Shit,” says Mike, and he signals for the vet to stop. The bag has ripped, so they need to reset everything and put in a new one. They get everything all put back together, squirt the mount with more pheromones, and Paul’s still ready to go.

This time, Paul seems to really get into his groove, not shuffling around so much on the mount, finding the right rhythm and keeping steady with his stance. Big Al pays more attention this time. He doesn’t want it to be his fault if the bag rips again. The two of them grip the bag firmly, but careful not to stretch it too far. Nevertheless, the bag rips again, and they have to start all over again.

The third time they get Paul all mounted up, Big Al, Mike, and Paul himself are drenched in sweat, and the whole place stinks of filth and friction. Paul hasn’t lost any momentum, but rather speeds up gradually until Big Al thinks he can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel.

The mount shakes viciously, and Big Al and Mike have to split their grips, one hand each on the bag and on the side of the mount itself to keep it from falling over. Muscles straining and teeth gritting, they watch as the edges of the mount around the opening are beginning to crack with each thrust. The huff-huff-huff-huff of the horse gets louder and louder until finally Paul lunges forward, knocking the mount off its base. Big
Al loses his grip and falls back as the bag explodes in the other direction, spraying across the front of Mike’s shirt and up into his face.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Mike screams, and stomps out of the stable, spiking his baseball helmet in the straw and manure.

Mike douses himself with the hose in the yard before stripping all of his clothes outside and heading to a real shower inside the facility.

They would have to bring in a whole new mount, since it’s been cracked and the vet can’t collect a pure sample out of the torn remnants of the bag. The vet lets them call it a day.

Big Al wasn’t on duty the next day, so he never found out how they finally accomplished their goal, but they made the eighteen hundred either way. Big Al hasn’t been able to look at a horse the same way since then, even though he can still tell you anything you would ever want to know about them.

Ben takes the stage in his corduroy overalls, a plaid thrift-store shirt, and a bowtie. He settles the microphone into its stand, pulling it down to reach him on his stool, and gives the crowd the look that lets them know he’s all fired up and ready to go. No nerves, no stutters, all smiles, Ben jokes with the owner on the switchboard before going into a cover of a bluegrass band that everyone’s always talking about. Ben’s fingers scamper all over the frets like swarms of spiders, and you can just tell that his brain was made differently from normal human beings. Ben is thinking things about music that no one in the bar will ever understand, and all while crooning the words in an oaky, older-than-himself voice that may make him famous very soon.
Big Al laments that he will probably never learn to play guitar, and that he will never be able to hold a conversation with Ben where Ben won’t have to constantly monitor himself for condescension while talking about music. They can talk about books, Jim Carrey movies, and HBO, but Ben will always have an amazing talent and body of knowledge that Al can only tap into vicariously.

Ben finishes his set with one of his own songs after a folk rendition of R. Kelly’s “Remix to Ignition.” His friends had to beg him to play one of his own, since he’s always humble and secretly nervous, imagining that somebody out there, maybe not one of his friends in the bar, but somebody else can listen to what he’s put together and say, “I see what you did there. Way to fool the rest of them.”

Al heads to the bar and hails the cute girl behind it.

“Can I get a Victory Storm King Imperial Stout?”

“Whoa!” she says. “You sure?”

He’s got a stomach full of whiskey and a head full of hops. They’re all leaving soon, so he knows he’ll have to drink it fast.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

He passes it to DJ for a sip. He says it’s disgusting.

The girl behind the bar gives him a quick smile as he takes his beer back, and she tells him to have a good night.
Seattle and Safeco

The next morning, we packed up our stuff and spent the morning looking for a hotel that would be closer to Safeco Field, where we would be watching the Mariners play the Texas Rangers later that night. During this search, we had to stop at one point in Chinatown so that Sam could pee in a Starbucks cup in the car and then throw it out in a trash can on the sidewalk. After driving around for a while, we found the “Sixth Avenue Inn” for a decent price, where the receptionist was a young woman from Maryland and a pernicious flirt. We dropped our stuff off there, and then checked out Hale’s Ales Brewery and Pub, which was a little ways out of the main city section of Seattle. Hale’s bore the more classic brewery look of a warehouse with a small restaurant attached. The brewery itself was openly visible when we walked in, with the giant mash tuns and bottling lines directly to the right. We ate in the pub area, which was modest and comfortable. I had a really great reuben with the beer sampler that Sam and I split. The most interesting ones were the Mongoose IPA and the Supergoose IPA, both for their taste and their interesting choice in trademark animal. The Supergoose label bore the photographed image of a mongoose (although, we may have determined it was actually a meerkat) standing at attention with a red cape flowing behind it.

After some good beers and good food, we headed to the Space Needle. It was foggy again, so the $18 admission fee to go up into the tower was not easily justified. Instead, we walked around the park there, admiring the artistically designed music arena and the Experience Music Project/Science Fiction Museum building designed by Frank O. Gehry. Within this giant curvy, shiny, metal structure, Sam and I explored exhibits on
Hendrix and Kurt Cobain, and learned a good deal about why Seattle is considered one of the birthplaces of rock and roll.

We walked around downtown, stumbling upon a museum about the gold rush explaining why Seattle had become such a center for trade and industry as a supply port for entrepreneurs on the way to the Klondike. Further downtown and closer to the stadium, we grabbed a small dinner at Elysian Fields Brewing Company. They had pretty good beer, with their Bifrost Winter Ale winning the title of Sam’s “new favorite.” The highlight, however, was the Taco Tuesday special which provided cheap but delicious tacos for our pre-stadium meal. My tacos came packed with chorizo, chicken, and tongue.

Elysian Fields was a little too upscale for our tastes as far as breweries go. Despite the awesome tacos and pretty good beer, the place came across as more of a froofy wine bar, taking itself too seriously as a restaurant and not enough as a brewery, in my opinion. This atmosphere was immediately contrasted with our next stop on the way to the game: the Pyramid Alehouse, directly across the street from the stadium. Upon entering the alehouse lot, we were first greeted by the enormous crowds of people deciding between the outdoor beergarden and the indoor restaurant. In the beergarden, which is open before every Mariners and Seahawks game, they surprisingly blasted Daft Punk as they served their Haywire Hefeweizen and Apricot Ale. Sam wasn’t excited about getting beers here, having already been to another Pyramid brewing location earlier in his trip, and I soon learned why. Pyramid kinda really sucks. The Apricot Ale is a lesser version of Magic Hat #9, with hints of Play-Doh.

Nevertheless, this place did a great job of providing easy pre-game fun before heading over to the game, and they looked like they were making a killing. The game
itself was a lot of fun. We ate pretzels and hotdogs as we watched the Mariners beat Texas 3-2. It was colder than we expected, and neither of us had brought jackets. I had never been as high up in a stadium, having split my baseball-watching experience between the smaller and lower Fenway Park and at the new and terrifically exciting Richmond Flying Squirrels games at home. It was a great game, but we were both exhausted and had to hurry through the cold back to the Sixth Avenue Inn, almost losing ourselves in what I have named in my notes, “Bum Village.” We must have taken a wrong turn at some point on our way back, because we very closely avoided tripping right into what was apparently a shanty-town of dozens of homeless people, a few of whom seemed to be fighting or at least screaming at each other. We booked it the hell out of there and made it to bed back uptown.
In Cádiz

The flamenco dancer wore a yellow and black dress, a color combination which the American typically loathed, bringing to mind the ugly jerseys of the Pittsburgh Steelers, but also the two markers he had learned never to mix as a child because the black ink would inevitably stain the tip of the yellow marker, leaving him with muddled strokes of tar when he was hoping for something bright and distinct. Back when Batman still wore a yellow bat-symbol on his chest, it was always an impossible task to draw his favorite superhero without this murky stain of disappointment.

But here, the colors did not blend, did not stain, did not hinder the work of art which stormed in circles around the stage. She was a jangling, rushing, huffing flurry of ruffled cloth enshrouding a campesino-brown body. When she lifted her skirt, her calf muscles clenched over tiny feet which looked as if they had been wedged into black wooden platform clogs with the aid of a set of pliers and possibly a hammer. The dress itself was black with large yellow polka dots and what looked to be at least twenty-five pounds of layered yellow material beneath the external skirt. The skirt expanded and contracted accordion-style every time she pulled on it in firm handfuls. She wore bracelets, a necklace, and earrings which all leapt up and down on her body throughout the dance, providing another layer of percussion for the mustachioed band of guitaristas, castanuelas, and a lone screaming cantante belting the operatically distorted Spanish narrative of a father mourning the death of his daughter.

The real percussion, of course, was in her shoes, which had to be made from about four or five inches of hard wood to withstand the force being exerted on them with every step. The steps were louder than anything in the dancehall, drowning out the
smoke-filled coughs of cigarillo-faced patrons and the clinking carafes and flute glasses
of sangria. Each step was given both force and grace, strangling ankle bones within the
rigid straps of her shoes. He had at this point forgotten the initial beauty of her face,
rounded and dark but with Cleopatran cat-eyes and perfect maroon lips, since it would
now remain tightly contorted until the end of the song. Her hair was tied up in a tight
knot but was loosening with every shake of her head as her shining earrings, shaped like
Indian dream-catchers, whipped at her cheeks until one finally spun out on a fierce turn.
The earring skimmed across the stage, sliding off the edge fast enough to land in the
American’s plastic cup of tinto de verano two seats down the table.

The Spanish strangers seated around the long table where the American had been
discourteously placed by the hostess all erupted in laughter and isolated applause. He felt
deeply self-conscious at first, with the inhabitants of the other nearby tables briefly
shifting their attention from the dancer to the American while the music continued. He
considered the mess of dipping his fingers into his nearly full cup of tinto, but instead
lifted the cup to his mouth and channeled his college-age self as he drank the entirety of
the beverage, catching the earring between his lips and his nose like the implements of a
game of quarters. He lowered the cup, removed his bejeweled mustache, and placed it by
his bread-plate. He looked up to see the heavy-set man across the table staring at him, to
which he awkwardly smiled and raised his empty cup, but the man just looked back to the
stage.

The American wondered what he was supposed to do. He could throw it back up
onto the stage, but that might distract the dancer and ruin the performance. He couldn’t
just throw something on the stage. That would be intrusive. This was something
dignified, something culturally sacred and artisanal. This kind of woman didn’t deserve to have American men throwing things at her.

He resolved to wait until the dance was over, and then he would make his way backstage to hand it to the dancer herself. Somehow, he thought, he could parlay this situation into a cordial and flirtatious encounter, managing through broken Spanish to convey his interest in her craft, and then maybe they could arrange an interview at an outdoor café over boquerones and croquetas and a bottle of wine, and then he would sketch out notes for what would eventually become his debut novel about “la gaditana hermosa,” which he would of course dedicate to her.

The performance was reaching its climax. He could tell, because the stomps were getting louder, the cantante began holding his notes much longer, and the dancer’s face tightened and strained until tiny yelps popped from the dancer’s mouth as she flicked her head back, shaking her hair out of its knot as she spun and stomped, letting the long, loose tail of it fall at her shoulder as she planted her foot firmly on the stage, arms raised to signify her finale. Once she stopped moving, the sweat released from her brow as if each pore had been stopped up until this moment. It flowed down her forehead before she gracefully wiped it away from her eye makeup, smiling and wincing to the crowd. In his mind, the American stood behind her, watching that same wincing face turning back as he pressed her against a stone wall, a flushed expression of pleasure and physical toughness as he held the heavy ruffles of her black and yellow dress above his waist, pushing and tearing through the downy layers of her exterior to slide his hands up onto her dark back and around her hips and across her stomach.
As the applause ended, she clomped off the stage with the band in tow. It was now time for the judges to score the performances. She had been the last of three dancers, each with her own band and her own song. The American had walked in late, towards the end of the second performance by a more svelte but dispassionate dancer. While the judges, whoever they were, deliberated from an unseen location, half the dance hall turned to pouring each other refills of sangria at their tables while the other half got up to head to the bathrooms and the bar. The American certainly wasn’t going to stick around to attempt to eavesdrop and interpret the exclusive Spanish debate now occurring at his table which for all he knew could have been about the flamenco dancers or the Cuban Missile Crisis, so he headed to the bar to drop another four Euros on a new cup of the tinto.

He waited a solid ten minutes in line with some fifty customers gathered before four different bartenders. Almost everyone wanted the same two or three drinks, he figured—straight red wine, tinto de verano, or sangria. Despite the wait, everyone seemed to be laughing and enjoying themselves around him, patting one another on the shoulder and smiling at the bartenders. The American was nervous, feeling urgent, craving the assembly line efficiency of American concerts with fully-staffed tents distributing Bud Light. The other patrons weren’t in a rush to get back to their tables. They probably had a much better sense of the schedule of these things than he did. It was a good night, so far, but he wanted to see the dancer again. Maybe she would win, and he would have the honor of returning an earring to one of the best dancers in all of Cádiz.

“Señor!” A firm hand had landed on the American’s shoulder. He was swiftly rotated by his collar to face the cantante who had just performed staring up at him. He
was a broad-shouldered man, but was at least six inches shorter than the American. A thicker, narrower version of Dalí’s moustache curled up his cheeks, and his white sleeves puffed around the openings of a vest which was too small and hence too high on his shoulders.

“¿Sí?” The American shuddered backward, yet remained within the cantante’s grip. The cantante awkwardly folded the tambourine he was holding into his left armpit, keeping a hold on the American with his right arm, and turned over his left palm.

“¿Tienes el arete?”

“¿Qué?”

“¿Qué?”

“El arete, por favor.” His eyebrows appeared to grow bushier as his forehead tightened.

The American understood, and began checking his pockets. The two of them were standing in line, motionless as it crept away in front of them. As he checked and rechecked his pockets, those behind him in line hesitated, yet hinted at going around him.

“Shit,” he said, and nervously pulled out his pockets in front of the cantante, miming his apparent dispossession before a thickening crowd of impatient Spaniards.

“¡El arete, señor!” The man’s grip was now tighter, and he was visibly shaking the American by his shoulders.

“Earring!” said a fat woman behind him, now involving herself as she shuffled up close to them in line.

“I know!” said the American. “No lo tengo. Lo perdió.” Under duress, he felt like he was pushing the limits of his Spanish. It would have been rolling off his tongue ten years ago in his high school Advanced Placement classes.
Then he remembered. “Sobre la mesa!” He turned out of the cantante’s loosened grip and cut out of his own line through the three parallel lines. He now realized he had said “over the table” instead of “on the table,” but the message must have gotten across. Either the cantante trusted him to return or was still squeezing through the tightening lines as the announcer called “cinco minutos” over the loudspeaker.

He made it back to his table, which had been cleared of empty drinks and plates. He knew he had left it here. He remembered putting it by his plate. All of his tablemates had returned and were now picking at a half dozen plates of various tapas that they had brought back from the bar. His own spot at the table was completely empty; not even his rumpled napkin remained to signify that someone had even sat there. The earring was nowhere to be found. One of the women at the table glanced sideways at him as she pulled apart an octopus meatball, clearly disappointed that he had returned. The heavy-set man across from his seat was now looking him straight in the eyes.

“¿Dónde está el arete?” the American asked him.

The man shrugged, giving the kind of clownish frown one gives when he wishes to immediately remove himself from a straightforward question. He looked around the table, and re-articulated his question: “¿Alguien ha visto el arete?” and “¿Nadie tiene el arete?” He hoped one of these phrases would stick. Instead, he watched each person around the table mimic the same ridiculous shrug and frown.

He suspected they were playing some sort of trick on him, but it was just as likely that one of the table-clearers had picked it up along with the dishes. Regardless, he worried that the cantante would come out of the crowd at any moment, ready to shake him down in front of the entire dance hall. He dipped.
The American cursed the people at the table under his breath as he found a convenient exit toward the back of the dance hall, rushing through the current of stragglers returning to their seats as the contestants lined up on stage. He briefly glanced back at the dancer in the yellow and black gown, but he was already too far away to see if she was wearing both of her earrings, or any at all. Her respective cantante brushed through the curtains on the side of the stage behind her, coming in late to stand by her side. He did not think the cantante could see him, but he wasn’t going to take any chances.

He left through the door and emerged into Cádiz. A wash of ocean air pushed the clinging traces of cigar smoke and fried food out of his nose. If the moon had been out, or at least some stars, he would have seen a shimmering stretch of the Atlantic as it flirted with the idea of washing into the Mediterranean. Instead, he saw only its fingertips as it splashed against the concrete cubes which had been piled up against the wall decades ago to keep the city from slipping into the ocean as it leaned toward Africa. During the day, dozens of black cats could be found basking between the crevices of the concrete blocks, bringing the brinish stink of urine and dirt to the cubist wasteland of a Picasso painting.

He walked on the runner’s path alongside the wall and overlooking these blocks, but he was on his guard for muggers and cats. A few years ago, when he was a student here, a friend of his had been decked while trying to get a wireless connection on his laptop, exploiting a nearby plaza’s free wifi as a means to connect back to America. A girl who studied with them had been knocked out on her way back from a club in New Cádiz, only to wake up in the hallway of an apartment building with no shirt and no money. They had even pulled out her belly-button piercing. These stories hadn’t kept the
American from returning; he simply learned to stay around Old Cádiz, where the buildings were more beautiful and the streets were cleaner.

He did not see many people on the walk back to his apartment, but the cats were all around him. They would look at him from around corners, sometimes three in one spot, or would cast shadows from behind him as they scampered between the ocean’s wall and the buildings. He passed the empty paved courts where young men played soccer during the day, and the cats were there, squeezing through the holes in the fences which regularly saved the Gaditanos from chasing the ball into the ocean. At times, there were so many cats around him, above him, and in places where he could only hear them, that he thought, this is it. They’re planning something. I might not make it back.

The cats watched him the whole way, but he kept his eyes toward the silhouetted dome of the cathedral. For him, it was the capitol building of Old Cádiz, and he could always find his way home as long as he could see its unmistakable golden dome. He crossed the cobblestone street, avoiding two maricones on a scooter, both sporting the apparently popular “angango” hairstyle which most Americans would call a mullet. He made it to the Plaza de la Catedral. The entrance to his apartment building was in a nearby alley. This alleyway remained a point of concern for him, since every morning it served as a meeting place for a gaggle of women, ranging from about sixteen to thirty, all looking severely over-worn in short-skirted dresses and too-high heels.

One had caught his eye the first morning he had stepped out to get coffee, not because she was the most attractive of the bunch, but because when he first laid eyes on her she was leaning against the stone frame of the entrance of the building. He had to step
over her bent legs as he squeezed between the women on his way out. He took care to close the heavy wooden door closely behind him, subconsciously worried that the contagion of these women would somehow creep into well-kept home he had rented. He looked back at her after having stepped over from the doorstep with a hushed “Lo siento,” to be answered with a smile completely devoid of an upper row of front teeth. She looked to be about his age, or a few years younger, and might have been beautiful.

The next morning, he awoke to the sound of crying. A baby crying, women crying, women screaming at each other. He had attempted to wait it out, hoping he would not have to start his day off wading though such misery, but the shrieks of the gaggle did not stop. He finally descended the marble stairs into the small, open-air courtyard of the apartment building and put his ear to the door as he gripped the handle. As far as he could tell, it was safe to open the door. He walked out into the ruckus, where every woman was standing and gesturing wildly, pulling at hair and screaming in Spanish at one another. High heels had been removed and kicked against the edges of the alleyway. The woman from his doorstep was in the middle of the group, clutching an infant wrapped in a beach towel. The woman’s face was red from sobbing, and her lips pulled back to reveal her childlike, barren gums. He hurried out of the alleyway, but when he made his way into the Plaza de la Catedral, where he usually got his coffee from one of its two or three cafés, he decided to keep heading away from the apartment, searching for someplace out of earshot. The next morning, there was no such screaming and crying. The infant was gone, but all the same women were there, speaking to one another more quietly than usual. The woman from the doorstep was asleep, nothing in her arms, leaning against the building on the other side of the alleyway.
On his way back from the competition, the American was ready for anything as he turned from the plaza into his alley, keeping in mind that the women, if they were working, would still be scurrying around New Cádiz at this time of night. Only one of the women was there, standing skeleton-thin in the light of the streetlamps, clicking back and forth between the cobblestones as she smoked a cigarette. She was at the opposite end of the alleyway, which was only about twenty feet or so from the door to the apartment building. Even in the dimness of the alleyway, he recognized her as the young woman from the doorstep, the one who had, at one time, held a child. He made it to his door without taking his eyes off her until she turned to look at him. She was pursing her lips tightly to keep the cigarette in her mouth. He turned his gaze away from her to concentrate on wedging his key into the door, but couldn’t help looking back down the alley, where she stood. Her eyes narrowed into darkness, and she turned her back to him as she removed the cigarette from her mouth, clicking two steps away in the other direction.

He pushed his way inside and then stumbled through the darkness up the stairs to his apartment, unsuccessfully feeling along the wall for the switch which should light the stairway. He eventually made it to his door, let himself into his room, and successfully located the switch which illuminated the path to his kitchen. He went into his fridge, pulling out an open eighty-eurocent bottle of red wine which he had lost the cork to, as well as the label. He set the bottle on his table, and then pulled out another, this one full of orange soda. He emptied as much of the soda as he could into the wine bottle, creating the poor man’s tinto de verano that was sure to give him a sugar-induced hangover in the
morning. He took a long swig out of the bottle, the carbonation of the soda and the bite of the wine simmering behind his eyeballs. He closed his eyes as he sat back in his chair. The woman in the alleyway bloomed in his mind, pressed up against the building, a yellow and black dress falling off her emaciated shoulders as she winced, mouth open, gums bare, high heels planted in the grit between cobblestones, stomping out beats which only the American could hear.

He grabbed a tall glass from the cabinet and filled it with the tinto, keeping what was left in the bottle as he made his way back down the stairs. He did not find the woman in the alleyway, beneath the streetlight, but he heard the clicking of heels from where the alley opened into the plaza at the opposite end. He followed her out in front of the cathedral, where light poured in around the building from the street behind it. The cafés were all dark, but there were a few lampposts lighting the tables out front, where all the umbrellas had been taken down for the night. They were the only two people there in the plaza, he and the young woman; though the American believed he could hear thousands around him: buzzing mopeds with straddling maricon riders, growling drunks tailing tourist girls from the bars, the shushing street-zambonis washing and sweeping the piss and trash out of the gutters.

She caught him with a turn and a flick of her finished cigarette as she stood in front of the steps to the cathedral. He stopped, frozen in the middle of the plaza, unsure of what to do or say. He held the bottle and the glass in each hand, making an awkward gesture, somewhere between divine offering and “who’s ready to party?” She looked at him and gave a wide but closed-lipped smile, slowly lowering herself from the heights of her heels down onto the cathedral steps. He gathered himself and met her there, giving
her the choice between the bottle and the glass before taking a seat next to her. She grasped the bottle by the neck and closed her eyes as she filled her mouth, holding it there until she opened her eyes again and swallowed. The American watched her as she looked at the bottle with its scraped-off label. She then held it against her breast, pressing the cold glass against her skin as the American felt the wine warm within his chest and in his face, and they sat on the steps of the cathedral, drinking as they watched the cats, each one hurrying between swathes of light in the plaza.
Yakima Valley to Ketchum

The next day was an inevitable “driving day.” I had to convince Sam in the morning that it was really essential for us to get to Ketchum, Idaho as part of my project, which made a pretty severe shift in the direction of the trip, leaning up against Sam’s growing desire to get the rest of his trip over with. He had already been on the road for two weeks. He had left his girlfriend alone in their new apartment, and he was ready to be back into a normal routine of sleeping, eating, showering, exercising, and primetime HBO. He was also antsy to start law school. Getting back to his girlfriend was his chief concern, but he had pulled me into this trip in need of someone to split the driving (and designated driving) and to keep him from going crazy. I was, of course, happy to join him, and I just hoped that he would be on board for as many literary excursions as possible.

So we got up early, got a fast food breakfast, and made our way out of Seattle. It was a beautiful drive through the Cascades, and I left Seattle thinking this would be an amazing place to live—great seafood, great museums, great beer, and an overall fun and exciting urban environment, all within a few minutes of beautiful mountains where you could hike or camp whenever you wanted. I wished we could have stayed for a few days longer.

At some point during our ride through the mountains, the glass part of our passenger side mirror must have fallen off, because we didn’t notice it until we had switched drivers at a gas stop. It was more or less an “oh well” moment, since there was no point in taking the time to get it fixed while we were on the completely opposite end of the country from our usual Volvo dealership.
Our minds were set on covering some ground between Seattle and Ketchum, but we were hoping for another beer-related highlight on the way there: The Yakima Valley. Yakima, Washington produces 75% of the hops grown in the United States, a fact which would seemingly make it a necessary and unavoidable Mecca for beer aficionados like us. The whole way down, once the mountains opened up into larger skies and more green and brown farmland, Sam and I were searching the internet on his phone to find all of the beer-related landmarks we were sure to find in Yakima. Our search yielded “Yakima Craft Brewing Company” with an address. We spent about fifteen minutes driving around trying to find the road it was supposed to be on, and then ended up driving back and forth on a dusty road by various factories but nothing that looked anything like a welcoming capitol of Beertopia. Finally, I spotted a short, green sign on the side of the road that said “Yakima Craft Brewing Co,” sticking up meekly just before a small parking lot in front of a warehouse surrounded by empty containers and some construction equipment. We walked all the way around the warehouse, looking for some kind of entrance to the brewery that was supposed to be there. Finally, we found a half-open pull-down metal door into the warehouse, which revealed a narrow view of what was clearly brewing equipment inside, but it didn’t look like they would be giving tours any time soon.

Another place, “Grant’s Ales,” was supposed to be something like a brewery, but by the time we got to where we thought it would be, we found out it had already closed. Before leaving Yakima totally confused, we drove through what you might call the “developed” part of Yakima, which was proving itself to be a barren dustbowl full of closed businesses in the nexus of the recession. As a small glimmer of hope, we found a
small wine bar on the side of the road. We went inside and asked the owner, a chubby, friendly, mustached man in a Hawaiian shirt, if he sold beer in his store.

“Not anymore,” he said. There just wasn’t a demand for it. We asked him if there were any breweries in Yakima, and isn’t this supposed to be the hops capital of the world or something?

“Welcome to Hell!” he laughed, and pointed us to a store that might sell beer, but certainly not any that was made in Yakima.

So the hops capital of the world, the chief source of what makes American beer great, does not have a single legitimate brewery to speak of. If that isn’t a sign of the apocalypse, I don’t know what is. Having wasted a good hour and a half of our day, we hit the road angrily, listening to some of Sam’s sports podcasts from Bill Simmons about Lebron James and the Jersey Shore. We made it through a small bit of Oregon, which, like the equally strange New Jersey, doesn’t let you pump your own gas. We then drove through Idaho until we hit Boise in the early evening. Our first stop in Boise was the RAM Big Horn Brewery, a chain restaurant which we only knew about from Google. This sports bar-ish place boasted that it was “The Tallest Bar in Boise,” but it didn’t have a whole lot more to promote itself beyond its sullen employees and mediocre beer. Nevertheless, I couldn’t resist buying a shirt celebrating their Butface Amber Ale with a logo of two rams butting heads on the back. We called Mom and had her find us a better restaurant for dinner after we only had beers at Big Horn, and she found us one of the brightest gems of the whole trip. We used her directions to find the Sockeye Grill and Brewery. It was in a more suburban part of Boise, but had a very young crowd and a seemingly lively atmosphere for being in a town that I could only describe as in the
middle of fucking nowhere. The beer was fantastic- the Daggerfalls IPA and the
Powerhouse Porter were favorites. It will seem like I’m repeating myself, but the best
part was the tacos. Sam and I both ordered the “Coho Tacos,” thinking we better try the
famous sockeye salmon while we were there. The salmon was deep-fried (I had never
even thought of this as a possibility) and was a gorgeous bright reddish pink once you
broke into it. Sam and I both decided we had been eating the wrong kind of salmon our
entire lives.

Sam bought a Daggerfalls IPA shirt which I plan to steal from him soon.

We stayed in a Doubletree motel in Boise for cheap, and then headed straight to
Sun Valley and Ketchum the next morning. I was depending on my mom and my
brother’s phone for finding the right attractions once we got close, and I remember both
of them being testy about finding directions. Mom was testy because I was asking her to
do something on the computer, which inevitably gives her the impression that I’m an
impatient asshole, and Sam, of course, had no reason to be in Ketchum, fucking Idaho.

The one great difficulty with Ketchum and Sun Valley is that the actual
Hemingway home is not open to the public. The address of the house is not even really
public knowledge. Apparently, the Hemingway Foundation has resisted turning it into the
kind of tourist attraction that the Key West home has become, which is understandable
considering that this is where Hemingway ultimately took his own life.

As we drove around, looking for some possible point of access to the Hemingway
home, I saw banners on lampposts and street signs reading, “Welcome to Ketchum:
Small Town, Big Life,” which I found particularly amusing. What Ketchum did have to
offer were the Ski and Heritage Museum and the cemetery where Hemingway is buried.
The Ski and Heritage Museum, run by the Ketchum Sun Valley Historical Society, was fairly small and unassertive. It consisted of a couple of rustic, white buildings within a park next to a playground. There weren’t too many signs pointing to it as a major attraction, and there wasn’t anyone at the front desk to welcome you inside.

The museum detailed the area’s history both as a ski and outdoor vacation destination as well as a favorite refuge of Hemingway. In the museum, you learn about Hemingway’s friends while he was in town, like Lloyd and Tillie Arnold, whom he met at the Ram Restaurant near the Sun Valley Lodge, and how the hunting trips, not the skiing, were the main attractions for Hemingway. According to Hemingway’s grandson Seán Hemingway, “The remote and well-watered country around Sun Valley was excellent for shooting duck and pheasant, as well as Hungarian Partridge, Snipe, and ‘prairie chickens,’ the native sage grouse. Hemingway hunted all of these with his boys, as well as with celebrities, such as Gary Cooper and Jane Russell” (S. Hemingway, Introduction xxx). It definitely wasn’t roughing it in the Nick Adams Upper Michigan sense, since the Sun Valley resort has always catered to those of high status and notoriety, but it is easy to see how it would fit his appreciation of sport as something “for the times ‘in between’ writing, ‘when you can’t do it’” (Lyons, Introduction xxv).

The exhibit details how Hemingway completed For Whom the Bell Tolls in Suite 206 of the Sun Valley Lodge in 1939, and worked on the posthumously published Garden of Eden in the nearby McDonald’s cabins closer to the end of his life. Another note included that it was here that the immortal Hemingway beard was born, as his skin grew too tender to shave around the time that he was staying in Ketchum. The highlight of the Ski and Heritage Museum is its exhibit on Hemingway’s last letter written before
his death to the nine-year-old Fritz Saviers, the son of a family friend, who was in the hospital for heart disease at the time. The letter included that Hemingway was “feeling very cheerful about things in general.” Written seventeen days before his suicide, this letter elicits consideration of Hemingway’s state of mind before his death and during his final days of treatment at the Mayo Clinic. Was this an admission of contentment at the end of his life, and perhaps even a hint at his resoluteness in regard to what he might be planning to do, or was it simply a comforting note of solidarity between two ailing friends?

My tour guide at the home in Key West argued that Hemingway’s suicide was a result of the shutdown of Cuba’s borders for American visitors, and that Hemingway’s greatest loss at this point in his life were the manuscripts and the boat he left back at La Finca Vigia. A more accurate explanation would probably include more about his family’s history of depression, a number of concussions including dropping a skylight on his head and the double-dose of an African plane crash, or the shock treatments that disrupted his memory and made it impossible to write. As much as the Key West cultural memory might beg to differ, Ketchum and Sun Valley were not a stagnant alternative to the relaxing beaches and night life of Hemingway’s island getaways. Rather, this place was an American haven with rivers and valleys perfect for hunting. Even today, once you get away from the Sun Valley Lodge and its long halls of pictures of celebrities from Ted Kennedy to Arnold Schwarzenegger skiing and carousing at the resort, the place does look and behave like the traditional sportsman’s paradise.

Sam and I drove down to the Hemingway Memorial which backs up to the resort’s golf course. On the way we passed signs saying “No hunting in city limits,” and
could hear gunshots from behind the burnt over, scrubby hills which were said to have reminded Hemingway of Spain. The memorial itself consisted of a bust of Hemingway facing left above a man-made, granite-lined stream which flowed back into the trees. You could walk along a trail back into the resort, but Sam and I turned back for fear of getting hit by golf balls and his need to keep moving toward Yellowstone. I asked Sam how he thought Hemingway would feel about the location of his memorial, or the general tackiness of the resort that resembled a slightly nicer version of Busch Gardens’ alpine Germany attractions. My brother responded, “When you take your life, you don’t get much say.” Hemingway himself is said to have told writer A.E. Hotchman that “he spent a lot of time killing animals and fish so he wouldn’t kill himself” (Lyons, Introduction xxvi). If this is true, we have to wonder about those final days where hunting and fishing no longer sustained the great writer as his memory failed him and his depression worsened.

Back at the Ketchum Cemetery, I didn’t find any such memorial or statue, just the large stone slab covering his grave bearing the words “Ernest Miller Hemingway July 21, 1899 - July 2, 1961.” The grave was covered in pennies, perhaps from people offering their “last cent” as he did poolside in Key West. Someone had left an empty airplane bottle of Jack Daniels as well.
Involved in Mankinde

I was looking at my friend Laura's Facebook status a little while ago. We hadn't talked in a while. I still hadn't talked to her since the last time I saw her. She was really pretty and she taught riflery at the camp I work at. She was also a Clemson cheerleader. I think she's a flight attendant now. I don't know.

I saw her profile picture had changed. Something in a bathing suit that would have caught my eye. I clicked through to the next picture. It would be her last favorite picture of herself before picking the one of herself in a bathing suit. Whatever.

The next picture she had was from camp. It would have been her second to last summer there. In the picture, she's decked out in black athletic gear for capture the flag, with black stripes under her eyes like a football player. She's crouching and apparently screaming next to my friend Bruiser.

I can't remember why he was called Bruiser, but we all called him that for as long as we knew him. Bruiser's face in the picture is wide-eyed, wide-mouthed, looking right at the camera. He's dressed in navy blue, which would have only grazed the limits of what you could wear on the dark team in light versus dark capture the flag.

Bruiser lived somewhere in western North Carolina, someplace pretty rural. He once told me he had two lesbian neighbors who were usually clad in homemade jean shorts and Timberland boots. He did an impression of one of them yelling to him over the fence to his backyard in a filthy southern drawl: “Hey, Sean, want to see my cooter?” That was the first story Bruiser ever told me, and it’s how I learned the word cooter. Bruiser swears he said “No thanks,” but I’m still not sure how the situation really panned out.
Maybe Bruiser got his name from the way he looked. He grew up at camp, and must have been a pretty intimidating little kid from the way he was built: semi-stocky, semi-portly. By the time we knew each other, we were both wrestlers in high school and would talk about wrestling and try out all the different moves we knew until one of us hit his head on a bunk.

Once I let Bruiser borrow my knife in the cabin, and he wouldn’t give it back. I reached my hand down slowly to grab the handle as the blade was facing me, and he jerked it back, trying to pull it away from me too late, slicing my middle finger bad enough that I couldn’t swim for a few days.

This was the age when staying up late and cussing and talking about girls in terrible ways was the biggest form of rebellion we had to concern ourselves with. We played poker on a board held up by cinderblocks and listened to our counselors when they played banjo versions of Golden Slumbers and Wagon Wheel and “My baloney has a first name, it’s O-S-C-A-R.” When we’d go on camping trips, someone would inevitably bring a can of spray-deodorant. The can quickly became the property of the group, and while our counselors would stand back and watch, we would spray intricate designs on each other’s chests, from spirals to crosses to the iconic dick-and-balls shape. The trick was, someone would hold a lighter or a match up to the design while it was still wet. Another guy would stand by with a dirty t-shirt, ready to smack the ignited one as hard as he could in the chest. When the deodorant lit, we would all shout and laugh during the brief moment at which a flaming blue penis spread up the kid’s chest before the t-shirt stamped it out. Our cabins and campsites often smelled like singed nipple hair and stale deodorant.
Bruiser had an odd gag reflex where if something smelled bad enough he would throw up immediately. He espoused the horrifically revelatory fact that because tiny particles of whatever you smell actually enter into your nose, that meant he was actively ingesting whatever terrible thing he smelled. That’s what he believed, at least. I still don’t like to think about it. One time, the sewage got messed up in boy’s camp, and everyone had to smell their own shit for about a week. During this time, as I was whittling a slingshot with a contraband pocketknife, I watched Bruiser as he ambled up the stairs between the cabins, made a squinched-up face, and released his lunch onto the concrete steps. We had to hose it down ourselves during camp clean-up. Another time, my friend Zach cupped a fart in his hand and held it in Bruiser’s face just to piss him off. Bruiser hacked with bombastic fuck yous between the two youngest cabins until he puked on the spot.

We grew up a little more, became counselors-in-training with all of our former cabin-mates, and started using every day off we had to go to someone’s lake house and drink ourselves messy. This was the last summer I ever saw Bruiser, before senior year, when we were only concerned with our futures in terms of whichever college’s hat we were letting fade in the sun at the time. That last summer we had a stomach virus going around camp that had forced other nearby camps to close. As CITs, we had to do most of the grunt work of moving bunks into the infirmary and cleaning up the vomit. Bruiser, as it figures, was lucky enough to catch the bug. While we were all running around trying to hold camp together, Bruiser was quarantined to his cabin, where I brought him Gatorade and a bucket and put on Old Crow Medicine Show for him. He moaned and said he
thought he was dying. He was semi-delirious and puked into the bucket as I left to get back to work.

Three years later, Bruiser and I hadn’t really spoken in a while. Facebook certainly helped, but I was never a good enough friend to give him a call and start up a random conversation. I didn’t wrestle anymore, he had vowed never to return to camp at the end of that last summer, and we were both going to schools in different states which we probably had no interest in visiting. Every once in a while, one of us would comment on the other’s photos, but that never got anyone to pick up the phone. Nevertheless, these little comments gave the feeling that we were still connected in circles that were clearly demarcated by mutual friends and old pictures from summers that no longer existed.

And now, three years later, I was looking at a picture of him from his last summer at camp, and underneath was a comment from another former counselor, Steve. All Steve had left was the utterly unilluminative but devastatingly understated emoticon frown, or the oh-so-cute colon followed by an opening parenthesis. Why Steve would be intextually sad about the picture, I had no idea. I knew Bruiser and Laura were good friends, and I figured she had just put the picture up out of nostalgia. Steve’s comment was dated April 9th. It was the 26th.

Beneath Steve’s confusing emoticon was a reply comment from Laura, from the same day, reminiscing on how it was the first time she had ever helped get the flag over the line, and that Bruiser had helped her capture it. Again, I was hit with the same frown emoticon, followed by “he’s really gunna be missed.”

My chest clenched up as I stared at my laptop. I certainly hadn’t heard anything from Bruiser in a long time, but I knew someone would have told me if something
happened. We had lost another counselor friend to meningitis, and my friend Matt had called me immediately to let me know. Someone quickly created a facebook group in his memory, and friends and family posted about his funeral and the creation of a college scholarship in his name. This was when I felt connected, like facebook was providing a valuable service in keeping people connected through solidarity and extended friendship, and the memory of someone great. However, the somewhat necrophiliac activity of friends commenting on the “wall” of someone no longer with us had always made me uneasy. Maybe I just saw it as fake social interaction producing a fake kind of mourning—nothing truly serious or respectful could take place on facebook.

I quickly clicked over to Bruiser’s profile page, and got all of the same kinds of comments on his wall: “Miss you buddy. You would have loved last night” or, “I can’t believe you aren’t here anymore. You will always be in our hearts.” I paged all the way down, through hundreds of these comments. Nothing gave me any specific answers about what could have happened. I was looking for the beginning of these posts, and had to scroll until it was back to the typical posts about school, sports, parties, inside jokes. Once I had hit these “normal” posts, I scrolled back up to a wall post from Saturday, March 13th. “Tell me it isn’t true, buddy” was the first of them all.

Nothing from this post on up said anything about what could have happened to my friend. I had to turn to google. I typed in his real name and his college with the keyword “obituary” and clicked around for what looked like the most vivid results. I didn’t find a traditional obituary, but instead news reports about what had happened. The Charlotte Observer yielded “Man hit by train was UNCC student.” Bruiser had been walking home from a spring break camping trip on a Friday night when he was struck by
the train. I felt my stomach curl up. I tried to imagine how this scene could actually pan out, how this was even possible. It didn’t make sense.

No one had told me. His funeral had come and gone, his fraternity had held a special service, and everyone else on facebook had already had a month to cycle through their grief and shock and mourning. No one had called me, and I wasn’t even a good enough friend to check his damn facebook page to realize it had happened. I felt like a terrible friend, and I felt like my friends were terrible friends.

I called one of our old CIT buddies, Scott, who lived in Florida.

Scott was at work when I called, so he called me back an hour later after I had texted him, “Hey, do you know anything about something happening to Bruiser?”

It was an uncomfortable way to start a conversation. We probably should have had plenty of “checking in and seeing how you’re doing” and “what’s up” conversations before this, but we hadn’t.

“Yeah, I’m sorry man. I guess we figured you already knew. Since you’re closer to camp, I figured you guys all talked about it.” Closer to camp meant I was in Virginia, which happens to share a border with North Carolina, and is, of course, a much shorter drive from Jacksonville. It made sense, if maybe we were communicating by smoke signals or carrier pigeons. I wanted to breathe flames through the phone, or drive down to Jacksonville to start strangling Scott, but then we got to talking more about it. I didn’t get many more answers about what had actually happened. Neither one of us really wanted to ask the questions about alcohol or suicide. We told a couple stories about our last few memories of him, his jokes, and that time when he played the car in our “Grease Lightning” dance from the senior camper play. But then we got to checking up on how all
the Florida guys were doing, who was going back to camp, whatever. The conversation never escalated to an upbeat tone, but there was at least the commitment made at the end that we would keep in touch—better than we had been doing, anyway.

I still can’t decide whether to curse facebook or curse myself for the way I had to find out about Bruiser’s death. I hadn’t burnt any bridges, but I had certainly let some rot away. I have yet to be convinced that facebook keeps people connected who wouldn’t already be without it. We will invest in the relationships in which we decide to invest, but the internet isn’t providing any service that will make us better friends than picking up the phone or writing a letter will. Instead, it fosters lazy interaction, tells you to keep tabs on the people who post the most pictures or write the funniest status updates, but it doesn’t remind you that real relationships come from capture the flag and telling funny stories and helping each other out when we’re trying to puke into a recycle bin.

And sometimes that sidebar on the right tells you, “Hey, remember Eddie from high school? Write on his wall!” but you ignore that. Saying hello just to say hello seems stupid, you think. It’s the website’s way of making sure all of its users are continuously checking their own profiles for comments or messages. Eddie hasn’t looked at his “wall” in a while, give us something to email him about. Let him know that he’s still, as Donne would say, “a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine,” a valued member of this vast network of “friends.” This technology might not alienate us from each other, but it certainly doesn’t give us any more reason to remember whose bell is tolling.

This was all very painful to learn. From the way I found out, I truly was dependent on this awful website to keep in touch with people I cared about, but that doesn’t mean that it was helping me keep my bridges from exploding. I have learned that
any man will become an island if he can’t stretch beyond pokes and wall posts to reach back to the continent, and each distant death will diminish him all the more. Bruiser was twenty-two years old, and I should have known earlier.
Idaho Falls, Yellowstone, and South Dakota

We stopped briefly at the Sun Valley Brewing Company, which was a small and slightly seedy open air restaurant with a brewery in the back. The beer wasn’t anything to speak of, and the bartender was overeager to check our IDs and not very friendly in general. I was tempted to buy a retro-looking t-shirt with a skier and the name of the place on it, but I couldn’t do it. We booked it out of Sun Valley and headed out Route 20 toward Yellowstone so that we could eventually get back to I-90.

On the way, we began passing plains of black, jagged rocks which would variably jut up in huge, oddly shaped boulders. We quickly learned from a National Park sign that this was the Craters of the Moon National Park. This strange geological phenomenon is the result of vast lava flows yielding fields of black, spongy looking magma rocks which were actually very hard and sharp, and which created a dark and surreal landscape as storm clouds gathered around us. Sam found it essential to “pee on lava,” so we stopped briefly to do so, picked up a few rocks to take home, and grabbed some snacks out of the cooler in the back of the Volvo. We kept driving, moving fast to avoid getting stuck in the storm which gave us a light show on the horizon as we pushed toward sunset.

We made it through a small amount of bad weather to Idaho Falls, one of the many armpits of America. I convinced Sam that he couldn’t drive through Yellowstone at night, firstly because it would be foolish not to be able to see the most famous national park in America, and secondly because I wasn’t sure we would even be allowed to. Hence, we decided to stay in a hotel in Idaho Falls, where the only feature of significance was the namesake itself, a fairly impressive set of man-made rapids. We ate at the Brownstone Brewery directly across from the falls. Brownstone’s beer tasted like it was
made with bad tap water and the service and food were all mediocre. It poured rain while we ate, and by the time we left the restaurant, the passenger side of the Volvo was underwater on the side of the curb. We spent the next twenty minutes sponging out the floor of the car, after which I made sure to urinate into the falls and tell the whole state of Idaho to fuck off before we drove in our wet, smelly car to the nearest Motel 6.

We got up early the next morning to get Starbucks and download music and podcasts for all of the ground we hoped to cover quickly over the next two days. While we were at Starbucks, an enormous bearded man walked in with the biggest dog I have ever seen. I was almost certain it was actually a wolf. We got the hell out of Idaho Falls with its terrible weather, shitty beer, and giant-wolf-dogs, and made it through the Targhee and Harriman national forests. At some point, Sam drove through a flock of birds which flew across the road, probably killing at least one. Sam picked up a six-pack of the Montana-made Moose Drool Brown Ale at a gas station, which ended up being my favorite beer of the whole trip.

We made it to Yellowstone National Park, where Hemingway happened to teach his sons Patrick and Greg how “to bait-fish for trout with grasshoppers.” Patrick Hemingway writes, “It was always cold enough in the early morning to get a bunch of them before they warmed up along the grassy bank” (Foreword xiv). Sam and I unfortunately did not have the time or means to camp out and enjoy the fishing or grasshopper catching, but we still paid $25 to enter the west side of the park and stopped at the “Fountain Paint Pot Hot Springs,” which consisted of a multicolored sulfuric miniature desert which was at times both geologically beautiful and prehistorically frightening with its deep blue pools of boiling water and its bubbling oatmeal pits of
geyserite. We then made it to the unavoidable Old Faithful and waited for thirty minutes surrounded by idiotic parents who were constantly yelling at their children. I had already been here before as part of a trip I took before my senior year in high school, but I had to make sure that Sam saw the geyser explode at least once. He seemed to enjoy watching the eruption, although I’m sure he was happy to get away from the crowds once he had seen enough.

We hurried back to our car and drove as fast as we could, breaking out of the traffic around Old Faithful but still getting stuck behind minivans who couldn’t handle turning around the mountains. We saw a couple elk and maybe a moose from a distance, and I almost ran over a marmot at one point as we cruised around cliffs between vast expanses of forests still recovering from the fires of 1988. The drive was slow and stormy as we made our way out of the park, but it cleared up eventually and we moved past dozens of fly fishers enjoying themselves on the Shoshone River. We stopped at an Arby’s in Cody, Wyoming, and then drove through Bighorn National Forest. I sat in the passenger seat as Sam drove through numerous switchbacks over which huge cliffs stared down on us. The highway was paved red through here, and there were labels telling us that the roadside cliffs were of the Precambrian and Ordovician eras. I introduced Sam to my Daft Punk “Alive” album, which he said made his heart race as he drove. We saw hundreds of cows and horses as we made our way out of the mountains, and a few antelope once we got back to I-90.

We stopped in a Taco Bell in Spearfish, South Dakota, which redefined the term “seedy” with its nightlife of fat, drunken bikers stumbling in and out of bars and where we realized that we were about to be in the midst of the annual Sturgis Harley Davidson
motorcycle rally. This would not bode well for traffic, since hundreds of thousands of motorcyclists would be filling up the road the whole way through the state. At first, riding a Harley Davidson across the country might sound like the macho-American dream. However, once you’ve seen hundreds of thousands of these identical meatballs rumbling around with their wives struggling to wrap their arms around their husband’s guts, you stop thinking of it as a great adventure and start worrying about someone tumbling backwards onto the hood of your car. After wasting far too much time looking for an affordable hotel in Spearfish, we got back on the road. According to my notes, I “powerdrove” to Rapid City, fully enjoying the wonders of cruise control at night, but frustrated by how unfruitful our time had been in the miserable pit that was Spearfish. We stayed at an AmericInn in Rapid City for a fairly good price.
Spearfish

Nick Adams was tired. He had driven a long way. The road through Yellowstone had been slow. He had been stuck behind a nervously driven RV since Old Faithful, and it had rained the entire way. Instead of surveying the burnt-over hills for possible wildlife, Nick sat for hours letting the image of the RV’s brake lights burn itself onto his retinas. The long, downhill, cliff-side drive kept him leaning forward onto his steering wheel with his weight on the brake until the terrain finally leveled out.

The road had returned to the riverside. Rocks that had rolled down off the mountains, blasted by road construction, carried by wind and erosion and the river itself, now lined the bends where fishermen stood. Fishermen? Lawyers, doctors, corporate accountants and executives doing the tomahawk chop on the riverside with long rods that cost as much as Nick’s truck. Nick tried to pick out which one of them was the guide, if there was one. It could be a retired, expert fisherman, maybe an old park ranger, or just a college kid whose dad gave him good lessons. Whichever it was, he wasn’t doing a very good job by taking them here. The road ran right by the bend, and the waves of cars released by geyser schedules would mean constant ruckus for any fish that would have otherwise stuck around. The open air and the sunlit time of day meant there were not many shady spots to hunker down and watch for flies.

Maybe a big grizzly would come by and chase them from the bend, providing the lawyers and doctors with an excuse to stop fishing such a terrible spot, as well as a story they could tell at every country club lunch or cocktail party for the rest of their lives. Nick always hoped for bears. He had driven through Yellowstone a number of times and seen elk, deer, marmots, and a fox, but never a bear. He often felt that at least one bear
sighting was what he deserved for the price of admission to the park, and that this was probably why there were a number of “Bear World” or “Grizzly Village” locations advertised around the park exits where people could pay to watch “rescued” bears push around balls with their noses and gnaw on dog toys.

Nick drove fast across the rest of Wyoming. He kept the car in cruise control until he could feel himself fading. He turned on the radio to keep his mind alert.

Nick saw signs coming off the interstate for a number of motels and fast food restaurants. He took the exit into Spearfish, South Dakota. It was about ten o’clock. He hadn’t put anything in his stomach since breakfast except a thermos-full of coffee and half of a Cliff Bar, chocolate chip peanut butter. Spearfish appeared to be a small town, huddling around a row of bars and restaurants and maybe a few shops, and then sprawling into nothing. Motorcycles leaned against one another in a phalanx of improvised parking down the line of the curb, and the spinning red and blue of police lights repainted the buildings as bearded and bandana-crested lumps of leather cleared out of the bars and onto the street.

Nick wished he had found a place to camp before making it this far out of the national parks. He could have found a motel if it weren’t for the bikers, but every place he stopped was either completely full or too expensive. If he got back on the interstate, the next couple of exits with possible places to stay were at least an hour away, and they would probably have all the same brands with the same rates, or worse. He could either pay for an expensive room in Spearfish or spend the night sleeping in his car.

Regardless, Nick was hungry. He would make his decision while he ate. He tucked a magazine from his passenger seat into his coat pocket and got out of the car. He
locked the car. It held all of his clothing and supplies, and he had not yet developed his trust for the kind of people Spearfish had to offer.

The Taco Bell, like many fast food restaurants, had a seemingly unnecessary double set of doors, with a space between the exterior door and the interior door. For Nick, this space seemed to serve as a depressurization zone like he had seen in science fiction movies of space stations or underwater facilities, either protecting the inhabitants of the main compartment of the U.S.S. Taco Bell from the infiltration of fresh Spearfish oxygen or retaining the vital gases produced by the simmering heaps of ground beef on which they survived. Once within the second door, the smell was inescapable. Nick Adams, having never been in a Taco Bell before, was not accustomed to such an immediately unappetizing stench, but hunger overcame disgust. In California, he had picked up trailer food catering to migrant construction workers, landscapers, and vineyard farmers who ate cow head, tongue, and stomach without hesitation, smothering it with pico de gallo and hot pepper sauce, freshly assembled by the human hands of those who were themselves travelers. However, he had been living on tin cans of baked beans and onion sandwiches for the past few days, by the fire in campsites or on the tailgate of his truck at rest stops. He was craving something “prepared.”

Nick was overwhelmed by the large number of choices on the menu board. Everything he saw was an option, with no distinctions for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The various combos with their giant numbers pressed upon him. Tacos: hard shelled and soft shelled. Quesadillas: steak, chicken, or beef. Burritos, enchiladas, chalupas, todos. Despite the numerous choices, the only person in line ahead of Nick was having a difficult time getting what she wanted.
“What do you mean you can’t get Nacho Supreme as a side? I always get Nacho Supreme as a side!”

“It’s not side anymore,” said the elderly Asian woman behind the counter. “We have Nacho with Cheese.”

“I don’t want it with just cheese,” the woman asserted.

“You want Nacho Supreme combo?”

“No, I already told you I want the Beefy Crunch Burrito and the Seven-Layer Burrito!”

Nick was examining each of the mentioned items as the negotiations continued. With the Beefy Crunch Burrito, the woman was already ordering something with Frito chips layered within the burrito itself, begging the question, how many chips do you really need in one meal? Theoretically, she could just get the nachos with cheese side with her burrito combo, and dump all seven layers of her Seven-Layer Burrito onto the chips.

Eventually the woman compromised whatever principles she was upholding by ordering the full-sized Nacho Supreme meal in addition to her two burritos. Nick stepped up to the counter, ordered the Chalupa meal, filled his cup with Mountain Dew Baja Blast, received his order from the counter, and sat down at a table for two. As he sat down, two teenagers walked through the door, the first wearing a puffy gray jacket and a thin beard which only lined the edge of his jaw. The second wore a blue wool-knit hooded jacket with pictures of llamas patterned across the front. Nick thought this kind of sweater jacket looked interesting. It was something he might have bought as a younger
man, but he would look foolish in something like that now; bearded with shades of gray creeping through the sides of his head.

The llamas and the patterns made him think of Peru. He was planning on driving down through Texas, possibly heading toward South America as far as his money would take him. He doubted the teenager had gotten his jacket there, but he didn’t want to ask, either. It probably wasn’t very warm anyway, he thought. It couldn’t be water repellent. Probably wasn’t very well-insulated either. It was something that would be good for just about the current temperature in Spearfish, but not much warmer or cooler. Nick was better off with the LL Bean field coat he had bought several years ago. It was still holding up very well, aside from a few coffee stains.

When the teenagers walked in, through the door-chamber, they brought with them the distinct smell of something earthy and bitter. Nick thought of pizza boxes and haze-filled apartments. The teenagers made it to the counter, but didn’t order. Instead, they let the cashier stand waiting as the two of them examined the transparent box of coins on the counter. The box was a foot and a half high, with a small opening at the top. Within the box was a tower with multiple ledges sticking out of it in different directions. The object was to get your coin to land on one of these ledges in order to win some sort of prize. The two of them leaned over the box, then peered around each of its four sides, apparently unfazed each time the cashier asked if she could help them.

“Dude, I can totally do it,” said the one in the gray jacket.

“No fuckin’ way, man. It’s totally rigged.”

“Can I help you? Young men?”
The two were entranced. The first one, with the thin beard, pushed the one with the Peruvian sweater away. He slid a penny through the opening. Nick heard the tap-tap-tap of the coin bouncing off each tiny platform until it clinked onto the pile of other failed attempts at the bottom of the case.

“Shit,” he said.

“Young man, can I help you?” The small woman was now speaking with as much volume as her tiny body could manage.

“Yeah, I’ll have ten soft tacos. With fire sauce.”

Nick looked up from his meal, which had now become a mess of different folds of tortilla soggy with sour cream and the grease of ground beef. Thinbeard’s request was a relative game-changer. He had ordered outside the combo chart, but would still get an enormous and cheap meal. Nick wondered if the woman from before was listening as she ate her Frito-filled burrito. He looked down at his own meal, which had fallen apart in his hands and into a pile of the same ingredients practically every item in the restaurant contained. If he had chips, he could easily call it Nacho Supreme.

Thinbeard had pulled a zip-lock bag of coins out of his pocket, and was slowly emptying all of it into the box.

“At least one has to stick!”

Nick decided he did not need a Peruvian jacket. These kids could not have been to Peru.

Nick pushed his tray away. He licked sauce off of his fingers, and then pulled out the magazine he had brought along, an Orvis catalog from a few months ago. He wasn’t ready to get on the road again. The catalog’s pages were tearing at the edges, and the
cover had almost fallen off. Almost every page had pictures of white men and golden retrievers. As he flipped through pages he had already flipped through dozens of times, he wondered which would do him more good: a new fly rod or a dog? Every day, he became more convinced that he needed both, but also some waders and a good hat for fishing, one that would look like he had it for years.

The teenagers had emptied all of their coins into the box. It must have been at least twenty dollars worth. None of them had stuck.

“Man, this is bullshit.” Thinbeard slapped the side of the box.

“Nine-forty” said the Asian woman behind the counter.

Apparently, Thinbeard hadn’t come in with a wallet. “I just gave all my cash to your stupid contest!”

“It is still nine-forty, sir.”

“You can take it out of the damn box.”

Nick stood and pushed the dampened paper wrappers of his meal off his tray and into the garbage. The young man had now turned away from the counter as the woman tried to explain why she couldn’t take the money from the game. Nick caught Thinbeard by the shoulder and held him there for a moment, within the heat and stench, in front of the cashier, in front of his friend, and beside the soda machine. As he looked at the young idiot’s face, soft and pimpled but with a proud attempt at facial hair, he wondered how he himself must look right now, old man, middle of nowhere, stinking of car-sweat and weariness, accosting a child in the middle of a restaurant. He shoved the teenager out of his way. Thinbeard said nothing, just moved. Nick dropped a ten dollar bill on the counter and left through the two sets of doors.
Nick wondered if there was a Starbucks in town. His own coffee supply was running low, and he didn’t feel like boiling his own water, anyway. He hadn’t seen one on the way in. There would have been a sign for it when he got off at the exit. He couldn’t remember. He needed to wash his hands, but he didn’t dare use the Taco Bell restroom. Now that he thought of it, he needed to wash his face, as well. He didn’t need his beard to smell like beef.

He found a dry bar of soap among his supplies when he got back to his car, and gave his hands a quick once-over with it and some ice from his cooler, then scrubbed through the rough hair on his face. He used his shirt to dry everything off. He looked in his back seat. It was a mess of tools, tent-poles, some old beer boxes and a dirty pair of jeans. Nothing he wanted to curl up in. He got in the front, started his car, and pulled out of the Taco Bell, out of Spearfish, hoping to find someplace safe where he could stop and sleep.
Minneapolis, Green Bay, and Seney

The next day, we got up early for a disappointing continental breakfast. I pulled the floormat and Sam’s soaked running shoes out of the still soggy car to let them dry off in the sun. As we left the parking lot of the hotel, I realized that I had left them on the roof, and quickly jumped out of the car once Sam stopped it to pull them down and throw them into the back seat. The problem was, we had left a six-pack of Scuttlebutt Gale Force IPA leaning against the car door to the back seat, so I sent the bottles spurting and rolling into the intersection when I opened the back. It was a bad way to start the morning.

We made it to Mt. Rushmore, which I had also already seen, but which served as a great display of motorcyclist fashion and lifestyle choices. Sam’s main interest at the monument was to determine whether or not he could find a single biker woman that he found even remotely attractive, since he believed that the concept of a “biker babe” was either entirely mythical or at least recently extinct. His search yielded no conclusive results.

We completed the marathon drive through the rest of South Dakota, of which there was nothing to speak besides stormy weather and the necessity of a good radio station. We made it all the way to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where we got dinner at Town Hall Brewery. The brewery had very good beer, of which the Masala Mama IPA was the most remarkable. We both tried the “famous” Walleye Hoagie, which was a fried filet sandwich involving Minnesota’s most popular fish, and I bought a t-shirt with the pun “I support the draft” beneath a beer tap on the back. While we ate our dinner, a “Pedal Pub” pulled up to the sidewalk, out of which a dozen shirtless, yelling young men stumbled
into the brewery. The vehicle itself was a bar on wheels, around which a set of stools connected to bicycle pedals were placed in order to propel it around the city. The ride involved chanting and drinking as the bartender and conductor led its passengers through the city fueled by their own zeal for drinking. I really liked Minneapolis.

We stopped at another bar called Grumpy’s, but quickly decided to get on our way out of the city to find a reasonably priced hotel. Thus began the worst night of the entire trip, since we could not find a single hotel anywhere, and ended up catching a few weak hours of sleep at a rest stop in a place called “Menomenie” as it poured rain. By about three in the morning, we decided to keep moving. I had slept a little in the passenger seat while Sam had a terrible time trying to get comfortable on top of all of our camping supplies, clothing, and souvenirs. I grabbed a Mountain Dew out of the rest stop’s vending machine and drove through the rest of the night, cutting straight across the state of Wisconsin. I was semi-delirious from my lack of sleep. At one point on the highway, a large cat scampered only a few feet ahead of the car, and I almost couldn’t believe it was real. In my mind, it must have been some sort of ocelot or lynx, since no domestic animal would be so large or so insane to be out in this nowhere world of highways and farmland. I only slightly woke up my brother with my shout of surprise, and then continued through the night, drawing upon years of late-night paper-writing fueled by Redbull and Gatorade. The sun rose and I was still driving through Wisconsin farmland, past cows, grain silos, and headquarters of agricultural cooperatives. I wasn’t thinking complete thoughts anymore. My mind was only governed by the dotted line in the middle of the road and I couldn’t put the radio on for fear of waking Sam. Nothing
was changing in the scenery, and I started suspecting that I was dreaming and driving at the same time.

An overly long stay on the rumble strip signaled that it was time for Sam to take the wheel. I woke up at the parking lot for Lambeau Field in Green Bay. Sam had gotten us there safely, but there was essentially nowhere. The Packers stadium is literally the only attraction of Green Bay, Wisconsin. We had to go to another town to find a place to get coffee and breakfast, and ended up spending about two hours at Panera Bread recuperating from our night, refilling our coffee multiple times and charging every electronic device we had. We then rallied for the trip out of Wisconsin, driving through the rest of the state and picking up some native beer, summer sausage, and cheese in addition to a couple postcards before we crossed the border into Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

The drive into the Upper Peninsula was long and hellish after the night we had just experienced, but the scenery eventually became worthwhile. The environment was reminiscent of our camping trips to Truro, Massachusetts and the rest of Cape Cod, and all of the plants looked like fairly new growth with short white pines and scrub pines all along the road. We entered the Seney National Wildlife Refuge, soon to reach our destination: the Fox River, the basis for one of Hemingway’s most famous short stories, “Big Two-Hearted River.” While the title comes from a river in a completely different part of Michigan, and was chosen for strictly aesthetic purposes, the Fox River has been cited as the most likely river to be the actual site on which Hemingway based the story, and where Hemingway is said to have fished in September of 1919 with his friends after
returning from his tour as a Red Cross ambulance driver during World War I (Lyons, *Introduction* xx).

We arrived in Seney, the former lumber town which has been burnt over at the beginning of Hemingway’s story. The small museum in the town clarifies that the town never actually suffered such a fire, which leads me to believe that the low level of growth has either to do with the climate or the lumber industry. Nevertheless, there isn’t a whole lot around Seney to keep it from fitting into Nick Adams’s experience of it as a wasted land. There’s the museum, a couple general stores, and a few houses, but not much else. Hemingway must have included the “fire” detail both to explain the actual desolation of the town as well as to mirror his character’s own interior destruction; “The burned-out town of Seney suggests burned-out emotions,” as Nick Lyons puts it (xxi). Sam and I certainly felt “burned-out” after our long drive from Green Bay, so I’ll happily agree that this invented history is appropriate both to the story and the location.

Once we had driven down a long dirt road to get to our national park campsite, we picked out a spot, parked, and stepped out into the most terrible cloud of mosquitoes I have ever experienced. Immediately, at least half a dozen of them huddled around one spot on my ankle. I swatted at them all and killed a few, but the ones I missed didn’t even move. More and more of them started attacking all over my legs, and I was already finding bumps where each of them had bitten. I had experienced the worst of New England and Virginian insects, but these were some weird Upper Peninsula super-mutants, more vicious and with itchier bites which blew up across your skin like boiling soup. As this was happening, I watched my brother use the last of his bug spray on his legs. I wanted to scream when he told me he didn’t have any more. I got in the car and
drove ten minutes to a convenience store down the road. As I was leaving, Sam told me, “An onion would be nice,” so I grabbed what was luckily the one item of produce in the entire store along with my industrial strength outdoorsman bug spray. I didn’t even wait to get back to the site, but instead doused myself with the spray outside the store before getting back into the car.

I got back to the campsite, where I finally felt like I could breathe freely and know that my legs wouldn’t be eviscerated within seconds. Sam was unpacking our supplies, but we both decided we needed to bathe since we hadn’t enjoyed a shower the night before.

We went down to the river in our bathing suits with a bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo Sam had taken from one of our hotels. The river was fairly swift and narrow, but with many trees and bushes on each side and lots of spots for shade and shelter that were probably great hiding spots for fish at one point. The river had apparently been fished out for years. We did not see anything in the water. The water was cold, but it felt good to get clean and cool my skin off, especially after the panic with the mosquitoes. I had a new pair of Chaco sandals which let me walk around on the slimy, mossy bed of the river, going up around the bend until it got too deep to walk. I wanted to swim further up the river if I could, trying to see as much of the river as possible, telling myself that Hemingway had definitely looked at this particular rock or maybe gotten his line caught in one of these same trees, but the current moved quickly and the vegetation grew thicker. Sam had left the river and gone back to camp, so I went back around the bend and lay down in the water, lifting my feet to let the Fox carry me back to where we had just bathed.
For dinner, we grilled onions over the fire for onion sandwiches, just like Nick in the story, and then added bratwursts, baked beans, and beers to our terrible breath. I set up my new tent. It wouldn’t stand on its own without having stakes in the ground to hold it up, collapsing inward if you didn’t keep tension on every corner of it. I was sure that this would withdraw from its usefulness in the future if I ever wanted to sleep on anything firmer than loose soil. We went into our tents fairly early, but I enjoyed swimming in my own sentimentality by reading “Big Two-Hearted River” just before falling asleep.
The End of Nothing

He wasn’t surprised when she started crying. He just wished it hadn’t been out on the water when the fog started drifting over them like a big inevitable blanket. He had seen the fog from a ways out, and had yelled to her to keep paddling as the waves pushed her back toward the bridge to Cousins Island.

“I am,” she would say, and then he would watch her slouch through a few week strokes of the kayak paddle and then huff and sigh as she faded back with the waves. “I’m try-ing,” she whined.

The kind of girl he could have stuck with would have loved this. She would have listened and paid attention as he pointed out the osprey nest, or how the cormorants spread their wings like eagles on quarters to let the wind blow through their feathers as they stood all together near the hulking power plant. He couldn’t understand why she wasn’t having a good time.

The power plant was an enormous eyesore. If you looked out from the house you could see it behind where the ferry to Chebeague loaded up every day with people carrying their groceries and their shopping bags from the Freeport outlets or Downtown Portland. There was a bus whose piercing beeps echoed across the water when it backed away from the dock. There was currently construction on the road to the ferry dock to make it wider for the bus to turn around. This only made it worse for the time being, since the bus now had to avoid all of the equipment and the walls of orange netting lining the site. The two great movers, the ferry and the bus, were periodically connected by a two-way stream of Mainers and half-Mainers and just new money Mainers and old retired New Yorkers hustling to get home to put a new bag of chowder crackers into their
cupboards. But if you looked past the beeping ferry dock, or merely up above it, you would see the colossal gray smoke-stack standing sentry over the Casco Bay.

The young man hated the smoke-stack, but it insisted on its own necessity every time he stepped out of the air-conditioning to have an Allagash White on the back porch. When he was younger it used to make him nervous to look at it. He worried that it was poisoning the water or that it would explode and there would be no more lobster on his family vacations because the radiation would kill all of them. He later learned that it was only a natural-gas plant, but that didn’t negate the possibility of an environmental apocalypse in his mind. Its red eye would wink at him all day from the top of the stack, and he didn’t like that. Having now kayaked around Cousins a few times before, he learned that the plant was far more than just the stack that loomed behind the ferry point. Even worse, it was a long stretch of churning and bubbling water which erupted in rapids from anonymous jets below the surface. There were pools of mechanically stirred waste held in large vats and a half-dozen fifty foot cylindrical concrete stumps with some purpose he would never know.

The cormorants collected on the rocks around the plant, maybe because it shielded them from the wind in just the right way or because they confused the salty, sulfuric smell of the plant with that of an abundance of fish. Maybe there was, in fact, an abundance of fish, since the plant probably fueled algae growth and brought plankton which brought fish that ate plankton which brought birds that ate fish that ate plankton. He could never figure it out, but he didn’t want the plant to be good for the cormorants.

He couldn’t imagine it working out between them. He didn’t think he could live with her, even with money and a nice place up here and a lot of fun young-people-things
to do. But he had invited her up to stay with his family at the end of the summer before they headed back for one last year of college. Back at school, she had bought him an expensive watch after he had insisted that he never wanted one. She told him it was something he could wear to her sorority formals, and for when he needed to look nice. He had wondered why he would ever need a nice watch to go out drinking and dancing. Even for job interviews, he never hoped to work somewhere where people paid so much attention to his wrists. His father never wore a nice watch. He would never wear a nice watch.

She made him wear the watch to her formal, or else he wasn’t going.

He threw up on the dance-floor and was asked to leave.

They had worked and lived seven hours apart for the whole summer. She had an internship in a doctor’s office and he had supplied ranger stations in the mountains. There, he had met a lot of girls who would love this kind of trip, a couple hours of kayaking around some pretty beautiful islands, but he had been good while they were apart. He hiked up and down a mountain every day, showing a friendly face to all Appalachian Mountain Club members and carrying heavy packs of first aid and food supplies. He was in very good shape, probably the best shape he had been in since high school. He had helped drag injured hikers on sleds over rocks and fallen trees. He had gotten used to sleeping in hard wooden bunks or damp nylon hammocks. He had shampooed his hair during rainstorms.

While he was away, he could easily imagine her at home, getting bored with her job, fighting with her sisters, and thinking of all of the things her boyfriend was doing with those “crunchy” types out in the woods. Every time she picked up the phone, she
would have her sob trigger set for about five minutes into the conversation. Every phone call seemed to require the tragic episodes of whether or not they were still okay. Nothing new could be expressed or learned. She could only bring doubts, fears, and loneliness out of the wasteland of overpriced movie theatres, shopping malls, and ten-year-old suburbs where she lived. They were well past the “I just like hearing your voice” stage, and he could only feign so much interest in what she bought at J Crew while he was checking himself for poison sumac.

By the time the fog rolled over them, they were just rounding the end of the power plant where he could look up the smoke stack and only see the red blinking light suspended in mist. He looked back at her, just on the edge of his fog-horizon, as he was on hers.

Her face reddened. “Can you please just stop for a second?”

He wasn’t nervous about the fog. He knew the layout of the shoreline well enough that even with zero visibility they could hug the rocks on this side and eventually get to the short bridge between Cousin’s and Little John, right where they had originally set off.

“We need to keep going if you want to get back soon. Don’t worry. I know where we are.”

She huffed and dropped her paddle in the water, crossing her arms.

“Pick up your paddle!” he shouted as he sweep-stroked his boat around completely. She kept still, unaware that she was floating away from him, backwards into the mist.

“Don’t yell at me!” she cried through salt-dried hands which now covered her eyes and mouth.
“Pick up your paddle!”

It was still floating by her starboard side, easily within her reach. He got back to her within seconds, lining up his boat parallel to hers but facing the other direction. He lifted the paddle out of the water between them and tucked it back beneath the elastic cords on top of his stern. He then placed both hands around the edges of her cockpit. He wanted her to feel him holding her boat steady in the water as waves pushed against them. She still had her eyes covered.

“Come on, we’re almost done. You just have to keep paddling. I’ll stay back with you, but you have to keep paddling.” He rubbed his hand up and down her shoulder until she finally brought her arms down from her face.

“I don’t want you to compare me to those girls,” she said, looking at him with dryer eyes than he expected.

“What girls?”

“I’m sorry I’m not as strong as them. You can’t expect me to be.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t want a stronger girl, I just want you to keep paddling.” He was trying to imagine these “strong” girls she suspected him of comparing her to, but he also knew that she had caught him. He was tired of her, and wanted someone else. No one in particular, but someone else.

“I just want you to still think you can have fun with me.” She wiped her eyes

“I’m having a great time! Stop worrying about it. Everything’s fine. We just need to get going.” He wanted very badly to get out of the water, but there were only going to be more dangerous conversations once they got back on land.
He gave her back her paddle and then tied the handle on her bow to the handle on
his stern. He told her he would help pull her so they could stay together, but she would
have to paddle as well. He told her they were almost there, and everything was going to
be fine. He would wait until they got to shore to tell her the truth, or when they got back
to school, more likely. The fog grew thicker as they hugged the shore.
We woke up early. Sam made coffee while I whittled off pieces of summer sausage with my buck knife. Sam was in a hurry to get on the road. I was honestly considering camping another night, since this was the one real “outdoor” experience of the trip, and since Nick himself would never have spent just one night by the river. Sleeping in motels or in the car had made me feel guilty or unfaithful to the spirit of this American adventure I had hoped for, but Sam was ready to go. He had already camped a few times on his way out to California, and he wasn’t going to get much out of spending a whole day in Seney. For me, this was supposed to be the Mecca of my pilgrimage, the source of my favorite story and the definition of the Hemingway myth. Swimming in the Fox, looking for fish and not finding them, cooking food on a fire and passing out at the end of a long trip, all of it brought an amazing feeling of culmination and escape. Sadly, I knew I wouldn’t be wandering the woods for hours or searching for trails that Hemingway might have followed. Sam had us on a schedule, and we would have to follow it if there was to be any hope of our children ever meeting each other.

I did manage to make Sam wait in the car for about twenty minutes while I stepped inside the Seney History Museum, which was actually an old railroad stop, complete with a jail cell and old relics of the lumber industry. I was fairly certain I was walking on some of the same floorboards from when it was built, since it was impossible to step anywhere without alerting the curator of my presence. I was the only visitor to the museum, and the man who ran it made sure I saw everything, including the large room full of stuffed wildlife from the area. He assured me that there was not as much fishing anymore on the Fox River, and that there certainly wouldn’t have been any fish where we
camped. There was actually a surprisingly good Hemingway exhibit in a section of the museum, with some photographs I had seen before and some excerpts from “Big Two-Hearted River.” I was glad I had stopped in, and since the curator was extremely helpful, I made sure to buy one of the books he was selling about the lumber industry in the Upper Peninsula.

Sam was friendly when I got back in the car, probably because he knew I had enough Hemingway nerd-guilt in me to make sure we made it to the second-most important Mecca of our trip: Kalamazoo, Michigan, the home of Bell’s Brewery. The one beer which Sam and I could probably agree on as the absolute best beer, the one that each of us would choose if we had to be stranded with it on a desert island or in the woods of the Upper Peninsula, and the one that I will inevitably pay too much for on a given weekend at a bar, would undeniably have to be Bell’s “Two Hearted Ale.” As cheesy as it sounds that our favorite beer happened to be named after the river in Hemingway’s story, we could only take it as destiny that these two experiences would be so closely merged. We made our way through the long stretch of the rest of the U.P. and then straight down through Michigan.

According to Sam’s Blackberry, the brewery itself was not accessible for tourism, so we would have to settle for the “Eccentric Café” brewpub, which we found after negotiating the perplexing system of one-way roads in Kalamazoo. The café was open and full of thirty and forty-somethings, some with kids. One of these thirty somethings, a father in a group of two couples and all of their kids, had a menacing-looking eye-patch which Sam and I couldn’t get over. The eye-patch wearer could never pass for a pirate, since he was very skinny and nerdy-looking in his tight shirt and was currently
overseeing the equitable distribution of pretzel sticks at the kid’s table. This was an incongruity which simply could not be tolerated. Things only grew more “eccentric” when an Asian man walked in wearing full Buddhist garb and looking like a younger version of the Dalai Lama himself. Sam and I wondered if we were about to witness an epic battle between Eye-Patch Man and Buddhist Monk, or if they were going to reenact a bar joke we had never heard. Sadly, we were disappointed on both ends, and set upon obtaining a sampler of Bell’s brews as presented on a board the shape of the Upper Peninsula. The beers were, of course, all fantastic. We tried almost everything they had, including a “Kalamazoo Stout,” the “Consecrator Dopplebock,” and, of course, “Two Hearted Ale,” fresh from the source. It was great drinking, but not the best drinking experience, since the bartenders were very unfriendly and the eye-patch guy was creeping everybody out. Regardless, we bought matching t-shirts and left fairly buzzed. We headed out of Kalamazoo and drove until we got right outside Chicago, staying in a somewhat frightening Motel-6 where a guy tried to sell us weed on our way to our room.

The next day was a scramble. Sam and I were both tired, but we got up early to drive into Chicago. The city was busy and hard to get around, since Sam and I hadn’t done much research for what we wanted to do there. We parked at a Starbucks and stopped inside for breakfast and to use the internet for a few hours. The Cubs weren’t playing, so we bought White Sox tickets online. Sam made sure that we would go see Wrigley field anyway, so we drove over to the appropriate side of the city and walked around until we found “Goose Island Beer Company,” a large brewery close to the stadium that must really fill up whenever there is a game. They had Cubs memorabilia and television screens all over the place, and plenty of space upstairs and downstairs to be
filled with pre-game revelers. It was still very early when we got there, but Sam and I grabbed a sampler anyway.

The beers were all pretty good, a few IPAs and wheat beers, but the one stand-out was a “Bourbon County Stout” which they were promoting. It was a whopping thirteen percent alcohol content, and fully took on the flavor of everything in its name. When I asked to order it, our waitress asked me if I was sure. She said it was the one beer she had people turn back most often, and that I had better really like the taste of bourbon and stouts or else I was going to hate it. I decided I had to try it. The beer came in a fancy-looking stem glass full of pure black liquid with deep brown foam. I drank it very slowly, because I would probably have thrown up if I tried to drink it as fast as any other beer. It was dark, heavy, and extremely bitter. I could taste the straight alcohol in the beer as it kicked me in the face, and the next thing I knew we were walking around Wrigley Field, taking pictures in front of the giant noodle statue, and scarfing down enormous pastrami sandwiches with our heads full of stout. We got back to the car. Sam would be driving, while I tried to map out directions to Oak Park between his blackberry and the directions we had looked up at Starbucks that morning.

Oak Park, Illinois is actually outside of Chicago, which made it thoroughly difficult to find our way through the city in the right direction of the nearly suburban outskirts where Hemingway was raised. I have an entire page of notes made up of different sets of directions. We drove for maybe two hours going back and forth through seedy, third-world neighborhoods in Chicago, weaving under long train track bridges and switching through neighborhoods that were still clearly racially segregated. Finally, after Sam had given me a large earful about how I should know how to find the Hemingway
birthplace since this was my project, and after calling our mother at home-base with her computer at hand, we found the Hemingway Home and Museum just before four-o’clock. We bought tickets for both the house where Hemingway was born and the nearby museum, but the woman selling the tickets said I would only have time to tour the house before they closed at five. The house and the museum were about a block apart, so we rushed down the street to make sure we got the last tour of the day.

The house itself was fairly small and Victorian looking. Our tour guide informed us that it was built by Hemingway’s grandfather Ernest Hall in 1890. Grandfather Hall apparently didn’t trust electricity, so he ran gas and electric through the same pipes throughout the house, allowing for various double-pronged light fixtures which were pointed out during the tour. The house itself had been turned into apartments and modernized by a later owner, so the Hemingway Foundation had to spend nearly a million dollars to restore it, even recreating its wooden sidewalk.

The same grandfather, who was Hemingway’s mother Grace’s father, used to lead prayers in their dining room and tell stories to all of the children after breakfast, encouraging them to tell their own stories and probably instilling the kind of passion which would spur Hemingway’s career. Grace Hall herself was likely the most notable character in the house according to our tour guide, since she had been a promising opera star whose own mother had taught her never to go into the kitchen because she was destined for greatness. Unfortunately, her singing career was ruined by scarlet fever, which kept her from ever standing beneath a spotlight. By teaching music lessons, she ended up making ten times as much money as her physician husband, Dr. Clarence
Hemingway, who was actually required to learn an instrument when he moved into the house as part of the family’s musical tradition.

Grace continued to lead an eccentric life after her children were born. Though Marcelline, Ernest’s sister, was older than him by well over a year, Grace supposedly raised the two of them as twins, dressing them and cutting their hair in similar fashions and enrolling them in kindergarten and high school at the same time. Ernest was allegedly kept in an androgynous-looking dressing gown longer than most other children. Grace also is rumored to have spent money saved for Ernest’s college education on her own private house at Walloon Lake, separate from the one the family already owned.

Our tour guide characterized Dr. Hemingway much more positively, describing his career as a compassionate OB/GYN physician and his love for taxidermy and photography. He actually served as the attending physician when Ernest was born (he had originally refused, but the other guy had a heart attack), and taught young Ernest to shoot at the age of two and a half. However, the only thing Hemingway took after his father’s suicide was the Civil War pistol he had used to kill himself.

When speaking of Ernest Hemingway’s own life, our tour-guide provided an anecdote about the young writer making up the “Boy’s Rifle Club” just to be able to write about it in the school newspaper. After his experiences in Italy as a Red Cross volunteer during World War I, Hemingway apparently hung around the house for a while, drinking with his war buddies until his mother informed him that he had overdrawn on her “bank account of love” and would have to get out and find a job.

The tour was excellent, full of little details about each of the small bedrooms in the upstairs and Dr. Hemingway’s impressive library downstairs. By the time it was over,
we quickly thanked our tour guide and hurried back to the museum. It was just a few minutes before five, and I could tell that Sam was going to have an aneurism if we had to come back tomorrow to get into the museum. As I ran up to the door, one of the museum employees was already getting into her car across the street. She frantically motioned for me to knock on the door to the museum, which was already locked. I saw the shape of a short, elderly woman still inside the building, closing it up. She opened the door, looking perplexed, and assured me that the museum was closed. I told her my situation: that I was working on a research project and that this was our last day in Chicago and that I absolutely could not make it back tomorrow. I think the other employee across the street must have given her a secret thumbs up or something, because the poor woman was nice enough to let me inside. She showed me around the whole museum, and even directed me to a couple films that I could sit and watch, but I told her I would be fine just looking around.

The museum offered a broad overview of Hemingway’s life, from his youth in Oak Park and Michigan to his time spent in Spain, Italy, and France. What was most interesting was the section on Hemingway’s education, explaining how his high school principal John Calvin Hanna emphasized English as “the core of the curriculum” and how the young Ernest trained himself by reading Jack London stories. The exhibit also included the “I want to travel and write” note written in his junior year notebook, and another more humorous one: “When on this blooming page you look remember the beggar that scribbled youre book,” written in his sister Marcelline’s autograph book. As I moved through the museum, I felt like I was rushing myself from panel to panel, scribbling as much as I could that stood out, mostly quotes, newspaper headlines, and
magazine articles. Most of it was organized geographically, with sections on the two World Wars as well as the Spanish Civil War paired with the history of bullfighting in Pamplona. There were plenty of clippings from *Esquire*, *Life*, and Ernest’s own school newspaper *The Trapeze*. A *Vanity Fair* cartoon depicted Hemingway as a “rugged Tarzan,” loincloth and all, while an exhibit explained how *Green Hills of Africa* had cast him as the “he-man of American letters.” Somehow, I spent an entire hour going through the museum after it had already closed, ignoring my brother’s “what the fuck?” texts while he waited in the car. Finally, I stopped by the gift shop to let my elderly savior know that I was leaving, but I made sure to buy several postcards and a poster. She actually asked me to help her reorganize the bookshelves in the store, which I of course did, finding myself in her debt. I left the museum and found Sam with a cup of coffee waiting in the car. I had to apologize profusely, but I think he finally cheered up since we were going to a White Sox game that night and would leave for D.C. in the morning.

The whole experience was a little too frantic, but it was amazing to finally complete my journey to Hemingway’s birthplace, to the house where he had been raised and to the one museum which itself was a temple to the greatest author I have ever read. The museum provided an excellent overview of Hemingway’s life and works and how he came to fit into the literary canon as well as the ranks of celebrities and popular culture icons, but it was the house that served as the real nexus of his life. Here, under the control and judgment of his talented and egocentric mother, here, under the tutelage of his storytelling grandfather and his naturalist father, and here, with the gifts of suburban life which afforded him a strong literary education as well as the emancipating family retreats into the northern wildernesses of Walloon Lake and Upper Michigan, the “he-man of
letters” was born, ready to travel and write and to place his mark on the world of literature and the essence of what it means to be a man in the modern world.
Neither Clean, nor Very Well Lit

Marco sees baboons. Or at least that’s what they look like to Russell. He sees them at night and then draws them for the nurses during the day. He keeps the drawings and shows them to Russell.

Russell has come to recognize them, dozens of different characters but recurring ones at that. Some have longer snouts, some have smaller bodies, some have no teeth and some have countless teeth, enormous and jagged and sharp. Russell also recognizes the different parts of Marco’s room, identical to his own; small details hint at the darkest corners where the creatures huddle together, or the foot of his bed, the unbunked railing around which they curl their opposable thumbs and claw-like fingers. Marco has not yet given them names, but the details are consistent and distinct for each, and every new rendition of a familiar character becomes clearer and more identifiable. Russell snickers to himself when the nurses try to give Marco input or advice, like, “Why don’t you make this one a happy one?” or, “How about you try drawing a house for them?” Russell knows that Marco’s drawings have their own order; each baboon has its own past and its own habits, and that Marco believes that he will figure out, soon enough, what their real goals, motivations, and intentions are.

“He tried to kill himself last week,” one of the nurses mentions to an orderly, one of the new guys, a big white guy.

“How?” the orderly asks.

“Tried to chip away at the windows through the grates with one of the pencils. Probably thought he could get something sharp enough.”
“The pencils aren’t sharp enough?”

“They’re little Yahtzee pencils. Too small to break, and too dull to do any damage. We let him draw with them. He usually doesn’t act up like that.”

“How do you know he wasn’t trying to get out?”

“I don’t think he wants to get out.”

Russell plays Clue by himself, listening to the nurse and orderly transition from Marco’s near-suicide to their plans for the weekend. New big white orderly only has Saturday off, which means he will have to watch the Sunday night game on the small television in the recreation room. Last week, he would have watched it in the office where they had the TV set up next to the security screens, but one of the patients broke the recreation room’s TV with his elbow during an episode of “Married with Children.” Now the security office TV has been moved to the recreation room. Russell knows it will be broken soon enough. He listens as the big white orderly discusses with stocky black orderly and perpetually angry Mexican orderly whether or not the nurses will even let them watch the game with the patients around.

“You’ll get them too riled up,” the nurses will say. Several of the patients are already prone to screaming at the television during Andy Griffith. The last thing they need is a bunch of Cro-Magnon men yelling along with them.

Russell wonders if they will let Marco out before bedtime. He needs his partner back. Marco is the only other patient who won’t get upset if the Jenga tower falls over. In fact, Marco and Russell are good enough partners that when they play, they add the new challenge of setting each removed piece up on its end to see if they can get a full circle of Jenga-brick dominoes around the tower before it collapses. The better they get, the more
their circle expands. They don’t care that the object of the game is to make the tower taller. This is their game. If any of the other patients ask to play, they can just say, “Sorry, you don’t know our rules.”

Russell likes Marco for his steady hands. He is mostly on sedatives and doesn’t get the nervous shakes that some of the other patients have. And he is goal-oriented, like Russell. The Jenga circle gives every day its own challenge, as well as something to look forward to between dinner and bedtime. Without Marco around, Russell would have to find a book from the bookshelf that he hasn’t already read too many times. Russell has read all but one of the books on the shelf, some of them as many as ten times. They have all been donated by churches or left there by the nurses, so it is an odd collection of romance novels and literary classics, *Great Expectations* with *Lovers in Crime*. Russell hates Dickens. He has tried to read him two or three times, but has never made it through. It just makes him think about what a horribly boring place England must be, and he never understood what the big deal was about Estella. With the romance novels, Russell plays his own game of making up new scenes every time he reads them. Gregory, one of the other patients and a chronic masturbator, has torn out all of the dirtiest parts to keep for himself.

This is no hindrance for Russell. He has always said that he could think up better stories than any of those hack writers anyway. So when the two lovers-in-crime are cornered in a warehouse at the end of the novel with no place to turn and a helicopter spotlight shining through the windows onto their huddled bodies, Russell imagines that a flying saucer comes whirring through the sky, firing its lasers at the helicopter and vaporizing all of the police. Then the aliens pick up the lovers and take them to their
planet, where they are jolted by electrical implants in their brains urging them to fornicate in front of all of the other aliens during some kind of alien Superbowl halftime show.

Russell really hopes Marco will be out in time for Jenga. Russell asks one of the nurses where he is.

“Did you take your medicine, Russell?”

“Of course I took my medicine.”

“Did you really take your medicine, Russell?”

“Why hasn’t Marco come back?” He refuses to answer the question twice, especially since she hasn’t answered his.

“You should see him tomorrow. Don’t worry.”

“But he’s been gone since last Thursday! You said he’d be back today!”

“It’s time for bed, Russell. We can talk in the morning.”

Russell doesn’t sleep all night. He lies sideways on his bed with his knees hanging down from one side and his chin looming over the other, peering over a cliff of sheets down on to the wastes of linoleum. Each tile is a plot of land in a fly-over state. He notices the tiny pieces of grit between each tile as the edges peel up and break apart from foot traffic or bed-moving. One day each tile will deteriorate completely into the grit, and he will wake up one morning looking down at fields of tiny white and gray boulders across an alien landscape. His body will deteriorate as well, but only in size. He will grow smaller and smaller in his bed until he will have to climb down over the precipice, maybe holding onto miniscule folds and wrinkles in the parts of the sheets that hang down the sides of the bed. He will then travel across this desert and under the door where the hallway light always shines through. It will probably take years, but he will make it.
Marco is back in the morning. Russell first notices him across the room while wrestling Gregory shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the bookcase. He manages to claw one of the torn pages out of Gregory’s hand before perpetually angry Mexican orderly shoves them both away from the shelves in opposite directions. Marco hasn’t looked up during all of the commotion. Russell is nervous to go talk to him. They won’t start the Jenga Circle for another couple of hours. They usually keep a tight schedule, making sure that they each have their own time to ease into the action of the day before resuming the principal project of every afternoon. Russell knows this is what Marco would say if he walked over to him too early, so he hides his excitement for Marco’s return while folding as many shapes out of the ripped book page as he can at a small table by the window. He tells himself that he will only look over at Marco once every five minutes. He never sees Marco looking back at him when he looks, because Marco is always drawing on the half-dozen sheets of paper in front of him on his own table.

Lunchtime passes, and it is officially appropriate for Russell to greet Marco with the box of Jenga pieces.

“You’re back.”

“Sure.” Marco says.

“What happened?”

“Nothing really. Asked a bunch of questions. Watched me draw. Kept me in one of the padded rooms. It actually smelled better than my regular room.”

“So you’ve got more drawings?”

“Oh, yes. I’m about to get the screams just right.”
“The screams?”

“Well, I can’t draw the actual screams, can I? No one can do that. I mean their faces when they do the screams.”

“I couldn’t sleep last night.”

“I figured that would happen.”

“Did they still give it to you?”

“They gave me something bigger now. Made me take it in front of them so they could be sure I swallowed it this time. It hurt my throat.”

“Did you sleep?”

“Eventually. At least with one of my eyes.”

“So you don’t have anything for me?”

“Well aren’t you Mr. Selfish today? Let’s play the game.”

Marco stacks all of his pieces of paper together and then puts them on the floor to clear the table. One of the nurses comes by to pick them up. On the top page, a scribbled black baboon has its mouth wide open, teeth jutting forward out of its face. Marco has penciled in lines of sound waves flying out of the creature’s throat, along with tiny sideways raindrops of spit which fly from the stained tips of each tooth.

It’s good to be playing Jenga again, but they have a rough start. Russell knocks over the tower early and then Gregory throws a book at the tower once they have it set back up. Big white orderly pulls Gregory away and sits him down. After that, things go much better. Russell and Marco coach each other on every turn, making sure the pulls they make are optimal in regard to their long term strategy for the tower and the circle.
Even some of the nurses watch. Russell struggles to block out the exaggerated gasps and sighs they make jokingly as he slowly slides his chosen piece out of the tower.

After a solid afternoon and evening of the game, Marco and Russell eat dinner and pick up their evening meds before shaking hands to call it a night. Russell notices that the new pill Marco has passed him during the handshake is indeed much larger than those from before Marco broke the window. He returns to his room, saying nothing to the nurse as she closes the door behind him. While he waits for morning, staring at the ceiling with its asbestos-ridden tiles held up by weak strips of metal framework, he rolls Marco’s large pill between his thumb and middle finger, focusing on the pill instead of the brown water stains on the ceiling, which grow larger in diameter every night. He tucks the pill in his sock and rolls over in bed, burying his face against the hard mattress and pulling the pillow over the back of his head. He knows the ceiling tiles are just filthy mat-board sponges that will eventually come crashing down through their overstrained metal frames. His pillow will be his head’s only protection.

“Get any sleep?” Marco asks the next afternoon.

“Yeah, lots of it,” Russell lies.

Russell has spent the morning watching Jaws on TV. He felt sick and fidgety the whole movie and all the creaking boat scenes didn’t help.

“I heard you puked this morning,” Marco says.

“Yeah, I think it was just the movie.”

“I’m not sure why they let most of these guys watch shit like that. It’s only gonna give them more to worry about. Warren over there’s already afraid of cannibals sneaking in at night to roast him on a spit. And you know I’ve got my baboons.”
“Yeah. How are you all getting along these days?”

“I think I’ve convinced them to stop throwing their feces. We’ve at least got that going for us now. The screaming hasn’t stopped, but we’re still working on that.”

It has always been very unsettling for Russell when Marco talks about his baboons. He doesn’t think it is normal for him to openly acknowledge what have to be hallucinations, or that it is even appropriate to treat them as such. Most guys who have visions, hallucinations, whatever, have enough respect for them at least to act like they are real. Still, no amount of conscious disbelief can keep Marco’s baboons from climbing up and down his walls and screaming at him from the corners of the room.

Russell figures this is why Marco likes the drawings. Examining them and remembering every physical detail about them makes him feel like he is getting at something he can’t figure out by just looking in the mirror.

After dinner, Marco passes Russell another pill when they shake hands. Russell squeezes hard, pulling Marco close enough to whisper, “Don’t you want to sleep?”

“You need it more than I do. I can tell. You look like shit today.”

“What about your baboons?”

“I’m still working on the details. I need to check up on them. Make sure I get it right.”

Russell feels uneasy but glad to have another pill. Later, that night, he tucks the two pills he has saved into a large chip in the tiles beneath his bed, covering them up with a piece of linoleum he has pulled up from another tile. With his pillow covering his head, Russell still feels and hears his bed creaking more than usual. He holds his breath as it groans and sways beneath him. Every couple of hours, a bump or a thud reverberates
through the mattress. Russell can feel it twisting around him, ready to split apart and empty his sleeping body into the darkness. Every time he coughs, he fears the whole thing will crack, drowning him in an ocean of wooden splinters and the twisted ends of bedsprings. He stretches out his arms and legs, holding onto the headboard with his hands and stretching his toes as far as they will go over the foot of the bed, bracing the two ends with his body, the support beam of a storm-tossed vessel.

The next morning, one of the doctors stops him in the hallway. Russell assures him that everything is fine, that he is just a little nauseous like yesterday. He will make sure to get a full breakfast today. The doctor writes something down in his notepad as he asks him a few more questions.

“Sure, that sounds right,” Russell says, but the hallway moves too fast and he can’t actually make out what the doctor says. He just needs to sit down and read for a little while and get some food in his stomach. He grabs a book from the shelf without looking and takes it to one of the more comfortable chairs in the common room. Russell wakes up to Marco shaking him by the shoulders, looking straight at him with wide, bloodshot eyes.

“I thought you hated Dickens.”

Russell looks down at his lap, where *Great Expectations* sits unopened. The side of his face is wet with drool. He must have passed out immediately.

“Did I sleep?”

“Yeah, one of the doctors told the nurses not to wake you. Those pills must be really working for you.”
Russell rubs his hands up and down his face. “How were the baboons?”

“Oh, that’s why I wanted to wake you!” Marco whispers, but it is a shout of a whisper.

“You guys back on good terms?”

“Good terms? Ha! No, of course not, but I’ve caught a few more details!” His voice lowers and he moves closer to Russell’s face. “I think they might not be baboons after all.”

Russell tries to keep interested, but the smell of lunch is drifting into the room. Something like frozen fried shrimp, he thinks. He gags, lurching forward out of the chair into Marco, and knocks him backwards as he jumps towards a trash bin. He heaves little more than water into the bin.

Within seconds, the stocky black orderly has his arms locked around Russell’s shoulders, lifting him up from the floor. Russell’s vision turns dark as he rises. Another orderly’s large hands fall upon him, and they start pulling him out of the common room and down the hall, through a couple sets of doors which Russell has never been through. They sit him down in what looks like a dentist’s chair with heavy, padded straps. A rubber mouth-guard is shoved between his teeth.

“No?!” Marco asks, about a week later.

“Yes, I think it did. I think it really hurt.”

“Have you noticed any difference?”

“I slept last night.”

“Without the pills?”
“Yes. I still have them if you want them back.”

“Will they make you do it again?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know. They said they need to keep running some tests on me for the next couple of weeks to see what the treatment did.”

“I can’t believe they just pulled you away like that.”

“I actually think I told them to.”

“What?”

“I mean, I think I signed up for it. I can’t remember. I think it’s what everything was leading up to, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, isn’t it what we’re all here for?”

“Let’s just play the game.” Marco has stopped making eye contact and draws a piece from the very bottom, the middle piece, placing it upright a short distance away from the base of the tower.

Russell pulls his own piece, about midway from the top. His hands are steady, but he moves slowly, staring at the tower itself for a long time before finally placing the piece at the top, perpendicular to the three beneath it. He sits back, breathing heavily. Marco is looking at him.

“What are you doing?”

“What?”

Marco takes Russell’s piece off the top and places it down next to his first piece. Russell looks at the two pieces standing side by side. It looks very normal to him, to see
them there instead of on top of the tower, but he can’t understand why they are there, why Marco had put them there, of all places, standing up.

“But don’t they go on top?”

Marco stands up. He looks down at Russell and tightens his lips so that his chin sticks out. He reaches down and pulls a second piece from the bottom of the tower. It topples instantly, smashing loudly onto the table and sending pieces clicking onto the floor.

“You want to make fucking jokes? You can play with someone else!”

He storms away, or at least gives the impression of storming away, since he only has about eight feet to go before sitting down at another table where one of the nurses quickly brings him a pencil and some sheets of paper.

Russell doesn’t play by himself. He picks it all up and rebuilds the tower piece by piece within its box, which is tearing at the corners and might not hold the blocks together at all after a few more weeks of playing. He hopes that Marco will play with him again tomorrow, but today he leaves the Jenga pieces stacked in the box in the middle of the table, getting up to leave for the bookcase and the comfortable chairs. He picks a chair facing away from the tables so he won’t have to look up at Marco.

Russell is halfway done with a romance novel, *Secrets on the Sea*, when he realizes his mistake.

“I didn’t remember,” he says, now standing over Marco, who is using his arm to shield whatever he is drawing from view. “I’m sorry.”

Marco says nothing for a few minutes, but Russell stands next to the table, waiting. One of the nurses watches them from the hallway door, making gestures toward
coming over to pull Russell away. As she approaches, Marco lifts his arm to reveal a small note he has scribbled next to one of his baboons, which has more of a beak than a snout. Russell reads the message quickly before Marco scratches it out, crumpling up the piece of paper and shooting it into a waste basket by the wall.

At dinner, Russell brings what Marco asked for, slipping them out of his sock and passing them to him under the table. They don’t speak while they eat, but they do shake hands at the end of the meal before going to their rooms. That night, Russell falls asleep quickly, as he has done for the past several nights since his treatment. His bed feels firm and does not creak as much. He has heard from one of the orderlies that they will be fixing the ceilings soon, taking out some of the old, water-stained tiles and replacing them with new ones. Someone has mopped the floors and swept up the grit during the day.

Russell and Marco don’t play Jenga the next day. Marco has put together a folder for his drawings, and asks for more pencils, which the nurses seem happy to give him. They don’t seem worried that he might use them against the windows again, but they still take them at the end of the night. Russell and Marco do not play Jenga for the next four days. Marco stuffs hundreds of drawings, one after another, into the folder. Russell hears him ask the nurses for some way to bind it. He is worried that the folder is not big enough, and that some of the drawings might fall out. He asks for a shoelace to weave through the pages, or a three-ring binder that might keep everything safe, but none of the patients are allowed to have shoelaces, and the nurses don’t have anything to spare from the office or the craft supplies that would work any better than the folder. Marco numbers the pages to keep them in order and to make sure that nothing is ever missing.
Russell tries to play Jenga by himself, but too many of the other patients, seeing that he is alone, try to join him at the table. It wouldn’t be right, he thinks, to play with someone else. On the fifth day of no Jenga, Marco sits down across from Russell again for dinner. The folder is in his hands.

“I think I’ve got the treatment coming up soon,” he says. “Like you said, it seems to be what we’re all here for.”

Russell says nothing.

“I want you to hold onto this tonight. In case I forget them. I’ll need you to know everything about them.”

He passes the folder to Russell. Russell pushes his dinner tray to the side, opening the folder, careful not to let anything slide out. As Russell flips through each page, Marco explains each one. He has now given them all names for the simple purpose of helping Russell remember them and tell them apart, easy ones like “long-face,” or “dog-howl.” Marco tells Russell what they each like to do, and where he could usually find them in the middle of the night. He explains each creature’s different personality, different habits. Not one of them ever speaks, Marco says, but he mimics the different noises each one makes when they accost him in his sleep. Russell takes notes in the blank spaces on each page, knowing there is no way he could remember all the details of Marco’s baboons, or whatever they were, but he has to try out each noise and call which Marco made in order to make sure he could do them later. He jots phonetic reminders and clues like “Ooooo-rough! Raugh! Raugh!” or “Like a bird, but like a dog.” At the end of the night, Russell tucks the fully catalogued folder under his arm as the two of them shake hands.
They take Marco out of his room the next morning during breakfast. Only Russell notices the gurney as it rolls by the doorway to the common room while everyone else eats. He doesn’t understand why the sheet is pulled over his face. Russell’s face was never covered when they took him in for the procedure.

Russell decides to let the others play Jenga, but they soon lose patience with the game and tear the box apart. He finally reads through *Great Expectations* in its entirety and still thinks it’s crap. He has now completely read all of the books, and asks the nurses to order more. He has given up playing board games. Most are missing too many pieces, anyway.

The orderlies bring Russell to one of the doctors, the same doctor who once confronted Russell in the hallway before his own treatment.

“Russell, did Marco say anything to you about his upcoming procedure?”

Russell doesn’t remember anything significant.

“Did he tell you anything about his problems sleeping?”

“Sure, but I know he had medicine for that. Is his treatment over?”

The doctor hesitates. “Well, Russell, yes, I guess you could say that.”

Russell thinks about giving the doctor Marco’s folder, but decides against it.

“Russell, did you know that Marco was saving his medicine?”

Russell doesn’t want to get in trouble. He tells the doctor that he doesn’t know anything about Marco sharing or hoarding his pills.

“Russell, were you aware that a person could die from taking too many of the kind of pills Marco was taking?”

He had certainly entertained the idea himself.
Russell flips through Marco’s folder after lunch. He memorizes the names, and eventually can match them with each picture without even looking at his notes on the side. He keeps himself occupied with his own memorization games and practices, seeing how fast he can recite all their names in the order of their size, their order in the folder, or their individual natural habitats throughout Marco’s room. It proves difficult to remember everything without constant repetition. The other patients complain when Russell practices the noises, screeching loudly in the middle of the room.
Conclusion

I find it difficult to look back over the trip and still frame it all as my own Nick Adams adventure. When my parents asked me if I would do it again, I told them, “Definitely, but not without a GPS, and maybe without my brother.” So much of the experience depends on whom you’re with and what you’re looking for. I had met Sam on the ass-end of his own self-defining cross-country journey, and I am grateful that he was able to put up with me as much as he did. It became a challenge to take ownership of my experience or to prove myself as self-sufficient or individualistic within the myth I was desperately attempting to inhabit, but I’m not sure I would have enjoyed it any other way. As much as my journey was about enjoying literary history and the “Great Wide Open” of America, it was also about googling directions to breweries and stopping at coffee-chains and finding the right motel for the right price. The entire trip became a question of whether or not Hemingway’s America still exists, and whether I could still really set off into the wilderness, or into the world for that matter, without leaning on the crutches of wireless internet technology, fast food restaurants, and industrial strength bug spray.

While the world is flattening, the American wilderness is shrinking, and the prospects of setting out on my own into something distinctly natural and truly individual seem to be decreasing rapidly, I have to wonder what kind of place the small bearded hero in the back of my mind can possibly find in my own contemporary reality. Hemingway himself felt the world closing in on him toward the end of his life. He had lost his home in Cuba to the embargo and his failing health kept him from hunting in Africa or fishing in the Gulf Stream. He was losing his memory, and hence his ability to
write as he should, eliminating his one last method of self-assertion in an alienating new world.

As my own world tightens around social networking and globalization and the infinite interconnectedness of modern business, I hope that I will always have the urge to swerve off the road in Yellowstone and sneak into the woods with my tent, my buck knife, and a can of baked beans, but the simple enjoyment of the purity of nature and one’s own rugged individualism has paradoxically become impractical and even expensive. I would either have to accept the reality that the Nick Adams mythos and the self-sufficient American adventure could possibly be dead, or, which is more likely the case, purge myself of the comforts of microbrews and hotel beds in favor of a more ascetic and perhaps more antisocial life on my own. Regardless, I am sure that the Hemingway mythos will continue to influence my writing and my life, and that his example will remain emblazoned within our understanding of what it means to be a great writer and a quintessential man for many years to come.
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