

the long story

she pushed me out in a fever, what nearly killed her, what would have killed me. they kept her isolated from me for weeks until it boiled over and burned out, the old man bottle feeding me at night standing in the door so she could see me, a dour nurse taking care of me the rest of the day. but still it was a time of hope, march of '63, until the hope let out the president's head and onto the back of his continental for us all to see, newsprint traded for a black and white on the t.v., a john f kennedy memorial plate forever after a part of my mother's altar on the shelf next to her jesus and his cross, both of them grown into my memory. but memories are far worse than forgetting, the loss of faith worse than no faith at all. this place was a place of broken dreams, the crash of camelot or the cleveland browns, the hough riots, the cuyahoga river burning, four dead at kent state. the steel mills were closing down, the skyline rusting away, union jobs going the way of the city, the city rotting from the inside out. dreams were for sleeping and sleeping was between work shifts, the kind of work that bent your back and wore your hands down to the bone. dreams were for some other place, not here, not even the bridges get to rest, up and down all day to let the barges by.

my father was a research scientist for bf goodrich, between drunk nights and head of r&d before it was all over. he was born into a poor family, my grandfather worked downtown at a factory and on the farm when he got home. there was no water in the house or heat, a wood stove in the kitchen where my father was born, where his father was born before that. my dad wore a suit to work like people did then, but he wore steel-toed work boots with it like the blue collar folk from where he came and couldn't seem to step past.

i've always struggled to put it to words, some things are just no good in the air. there is an uncertain pall that comes with cleveland, a shadow if there were enough sun for a shadow, like the mill smoke blots out the sun and keeps you looking down at the ground lest someone might see you looking up your nose at nothing. you were going to do what folk round here did, my father wouldn't even change his shoes. the idea that someone here could be a writer or a poet, could be anything other than what their kin were, that was nonsense and conceit, the kind of conceit that gets you punched in the face and kicked in the teeth.

i had a silver tooth, right up front so i could barely close my mouth, i was eight and had just got them grown in when some kid knocked them out. broke them clean in half he did, it would define my childhood, "hey, silvertooth", and likely everything after.

my mother would have six miscarriages after me, the old man working with polyvinylchloride, what they wouldn't know causes a variety of tragedies until years later. the last miscarriage would kill her, i'd find her hemorrhaged in a pool of blood. i ran out of the house and looked for help, and then everything just as suddenly slowed down for me and sort of never sped up again. i walked back into

the house a thousand years older and called the number we were taught for emergencies, 526-1234. a policeman arrived first, kneeling down next to her, a resuscitation bag put over her nose and mouth, him telling me i need to wait outside, the paramedics siren arrival, the three of them bringing her back to life and carrying her away like the house was the culprit.

i wonder if that was the moment i fell outside of the world, like it was too much for my kid dandelion head, a big rip in the fabric of life and death, here and now, and somewhere else on the other side, me stepping through, me always on the outside looking in. i've had a hard sense of time since, like i can watch it pass around me and everything like water around a rock in a creek.

i was going to be a professional athlete, i took it on like a job even as a kid, a running back for the browns or a point guard for the cavs. being an athlete was the only thing that saved me from being a grade school outcast, an awkward kid from an alcoholic home with a big silver tooth up front like a grill on a chevy. but i could run, and i could jump, and i could play ball better than most everyone, in this town, that mattered. the world had a place for me even if i didn't have a place for it.

i read books like i thought i could never write. i read books that seemed like no one could write, but were magic spells or prayers or songs sung out from miscast gods and copied down by inferior hands. morrison and townshend and springsteen were my poets, rhymes you could

wash back with warm beer in a car. then i started to read the beats, because they read the beats. i started writing in the back of my school spiral notebooks, the last page the first page of my brash idea, moving backwards until that and my school notes met. i still have those notebooks, put away like kept baby teeth, like something that was a part of me that i can't put back.

i'd be offered a basketball scholarship to kenyon college, a perfect landing spot for an aspiring writer, but i would turn it down. i'd never heard of kenyon, i didn't know anything past big college football and basketball programs. my parents were screaming at each other and couldn't be heard, if they said anything about it, it wasn't to me. i wonder what that path would have been, but dreams are for sleeping... i went to ohio state, i kept on filling the backs of notebooks which would promptly be put in drawers. no one ever saw them past a brief passing through a required english class, the professor accusing me of plagiarism until i brought her my notebooks full of the same. i got an 'a' i think, but it would go no further.

i wouldn't make the state basketball team, i started lifting weights, a lot of weights. i built up a fist against a world i couldn't quite fit in. i didn't have any money, i lived in end of the month broke neighborhoods, picked up garbage, dug graves, paved roads, anything where you had to shoulder a load, the heavier the

better. i turned myself into a tree, working the door at college bars, concert security, carrying cash for guys that wore bad suits.

i quit grad school, i hated it, i only went because i didn't know what else to do. i opened a gym with the money i'd saved working every shit job that paid. my business partner was my life long best friend, he was a college football player and had an in. the gym wasn't making enough for the two of us though, so he brought in an investor. he was a coke dealer. he kept it in the ceiling of the gym wrapped in the plaster and gauze you'd wrap a broken arm in. we'd wind up losing the gym to back taxes that didn't get paid, but invested in the other business. i walked away with nothing.

my father would help me open another gym with "his farm money". i lived there, slept on the floor. i don't remember eating, but i weighed 220, i was eating something. i was lost. i was living out the life of a child of an alcoholic, of a no-show mother, a kite with no string. but i kept writing in notebooks, an only child, i copied down the voice in my head or perhaps the rattle from out my chest.

i started training with david dearth, he flew me to miami for mr. america, i was 27, i'd never been in a plane. he would win and i'd win a qualifier a year later. we decided to move to LA where the bodybuilding thing is a thing. i lined up a job with gold's in venice, a place to stay with a fan and sponsor. i drove out with my stripper girlfriend and her three young kids, her husband just out of prison three weeks before, a game of hide and seek and a showdown i don't talk about. we'd pack a uhaul trailer with what the salvation army wouldn't take and make the drive in three days. there would be no job waiting for me, nor a place to stay, a "gay thing" i'd find out, but not quite understand, welcome to los angeles. we holed up in a venice motel until we had \$12 left. i'd heard arnold was in need of security for his office, it was christmas week. i got the job, they paid me cash because i didn't have a bank account, because i didn't have an address. they paid me double time christmas eve and christmas day, i worked 16 hour shifts, enough for a deposit on a two bedroom in oakwood in venice next to a housing project. but it had a palm tree and a blue sky and i could walk to gold's to train and it seemed like heaven for a kid from cleveland. then the rodney king thing happened, the riots happened, the earthquake and the malibu fires that burned to the beach. i started to wonder if i brought it with me, los angeles rusting around the edges, the ocean air will do that like a cleveland acid rain. i still have my journals from high school, not even proper journals, but those school spiral notebooks that had pages left. i wrote about wanting to be a writer, how i'd be happy if i could just write one beautiful thing, something someone would remember. i wouldn't remember that, but read it 30 years later going through my things, moving out after another breakup. i wonder what happened to that kid? where that wish went? up into the sky where it mixed with the gray

that always hung there, an affect of atmospheric great lake conditions and coal coke foundry smoke. i could have gone to kenyon, i wanted to be a writer, but

those things were for someone else, some kid from new york city or california, someplace else, not cleveland. but i was in california now, what springsteen and zeppelin sung about, at the edge of a whole america, i'd come as far as you can go, it was the end of everything before and the beginning of dreaming...

i finally got that job at gold's, i'd refer calls for a trainer to my pager, "yeah, he's the best trainer in town." it was 1992 and the trainer thing was happening. arnold was the biggest star in the world, terminator, a buff linda hamilton, a ripped rocky and rambo, everybody who was anybody was in the gym and gold's was the center of the universe. i played the gold's gig out until i started to acquire a certain clientele that wouldn't be caught dead there and finally opened my own small gym that suited their tastes in what was the greyhound bus station in santa monica. i'd sort of made it.

i started dating one of those clients, a senior studio exec. i was 34, i'd been living with a stripper before this, i'd been in a plane twice in my life, to miami for mr. america and to l.a. to check it out with dave after he turned pro, i'd never been anywhere else. i'd never done anything you can talk about in polite company, i didn't own any clothes other than what i wore to the gym and one pair of jeans, i drove a jeep without a top. i was suddenly in a world of first class tickets and downtown hotels, reviewed restaurants where it mattered where they sat you, who they saw you with, what watch you were wearing, her shoes. i'd write her poems like pleas, prayers to a goddess, to something better than me. i'd find her with another guy and realize then that i was the other guy, a sort of walk on the wild side for her and nothing real. i would take myself to london and paris, an education of sorts and write poems for me. she would talk about wanting to be a writer, between her count cotton sheets and drags on a cigarette after. that was her dream, to have a story, so i wrote a story and submitted it as a fuck you, to a prestigious literary journal. i had no idea what i was doing, but i'd lived my life on luck and lucky i was. it was accepted and published and i was finally a writer.

there seemed a river came about from a girl, 'the' girl it seemed, and our slow erosion, but it wasn't anger that fueled it like that first short story, but a lifelong sadness she let out of me, ten gallons in a five gallon bucket. we were engaged to be married and i was drunk with her so i could barely stand straight. she moved out because she "needed space", what you both know means it's over, but aren't ready to rip off the bandage yet. i'd turn 40 a month later and my father would commit suicide a month after that. i think he thought i was engaged now and had a house and he'd taken me as far as he could. we'd go to the funeral together, her and me, she and i, to bury my father, but we were ghosts and i was a tree toppled over, my roots right up out of the ground.

the girl and i would see to our end like you do, our last phone call interrupted by the operator with an emergency call, my mother's friend calling to tell me my mother had had a heart attack, that she was in icu and wasn't able to talk. i'd fly home the next day first thing, exchanging what were our tickets for our anniversary trip for a non-stop to cleveland, it's the last thing she did for me other than to mail me back her engagement ring wrapped in a piece of paper in a plain white envelope two years later. as we were approaching cleveland the northeast quadrant of america's power grid blacked out. the entire northeastern united states and canada went dark, power wasn't restored for days. terrorist or lightning or perhaps god had just given up on us, no one knew, all communication had ceased. our flight was forced to land in chicago. i waited for hours, trying to arrange for any alternative i could think of to get home, my mother in an icu being kept alive with the hospital's emergency generators. the airline finally flew us to cleveland with nothing, but black beneath us, the airport having one runway lit with emergency lights and no other lights for hundreds of miles. we were met on the tarmac with flashlights, we had to wait to have our bags handed down. i had to share a taxi, there was no gas, there was no electricity for gas pumps. i gave the driver what gas the old man had left in the garage for the lawnmower, the bottom of a five gallon can. i felt for the spare key where it's always been

and went into the dark house, where i grew up, where the old man had just done himself in just months ago. i sat down at the cluttered kitchen table with the light of my laptop and started writing...