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## Around an Image

Alexander MacPhail-Fausey

Cedarville University, [amacphailfausey@cedarville.edu](mailto:amacphailfausey@cedarville.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

This is a collection of poetry and creative nonfiction from the four years I attended Cedarville. Each of the pieces originated from a specific image and allowed that image to shape the rest of the work. I use the concrete images to engage complicated ideas or situations I have experienced. I use the writing in this collection to better understand the things I have experienced. The nonfiction shorts “Scar Tissue,” “Sunday 26 January 2014,” and “Malibu Beach: Camp Lot 29” have all been published in the *Marco Polo Arts Magazine*.

AROUND AN IMAGE

by

Alexander Daniel MacPhail-Fausey

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,  
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2015

Approved by

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## INTRODUCTION

Hello. My name is Alex. I write creative nonfiction and poetry, and this is the capstone collection of my four years of creative writing at Cedarville University. It features some of the best work that I have written, and sometimes published, since I started taking classes in writing. Now, please allow me to explain how I write, and what I'm trying to accomplish with this collection.

First, I am going to explain where some of my content comes from. I graduated with a Bachelor's of Arts in English from Cedarville University in Ohio. Throughout my time in undergrad, I studied my favorite band, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, and wrote two separate papers on them. One of the reasons I love the Peppers is that I dealt with a prescription pain killer addiction for a few years. I have chronic migraine headaches, or as Joan Didion would say, I have migraine. I was diagnosed in eighth grade and placed on pain killers, which were eventually discontinued when I was a senior in high school. After that I realized how addicted to the pills I had become, and how I had begun to abuse other types of pills.

I also write quite a bit about my experience as a Third Culture Kid (TCK). A TCK is a child that has spent several of his or her formative years in a culture different from that of his or her parents. Growing up, I moved seven times and spent a few years living in Affeln, Germany. As a result, I speak several languages. I have also had to say goodbye to a lot of friends, especially my best friend Ben Moyer. He shows up quite a few of the pieces, because I met him in college, and he moved to California after our sophomore year.

Finally, I write about my fiancée Sarah. The nonfiction piece "Scar Tissue," is actually about the first time that I sat down and talked with her. Since I started dating her, I realized how little I understand about conflict management. The poem "Earlier" is actually a fictional piece,

written entirely in dialogue, which I used to interact with the idea of conflict within a relationship. However, I'm excited to marry her, and I look forward to the difficulty of maintaining a serious relationship. Hopefully this offers a little context help understand my collection.

The title of the collection is *Around an Image*, because I center each piece of writing on an image. I try to describe what I experienced, and then allow the writing to disperse freely until it settles in the shape it wants. In some of the pieces, the original image does not even appear in the writing. For example, in my poem "A Ten-Day Migraine," I was sitting at a table in a coffee shop, where I had been for almost eight hours working on a paper about "Under the Bridge" by the Peppers. However, the image of me, pressing my palms into my eyes, with a table covered in books and notes does not show up in the poem itself.

In other pieces, the image is not the main thought of the work. In "Sunday 26 January 2014," I wrote the piece after seeing the basketball hoop described. But the piece ended up focusing more on my friend Ben, just like "Malibu Beach: Camp Lot 29." That piece is about the time that I got to spend a spring break out in California with Ben and his wife Alex (at the time she was his girlfriend). The image in that piece was Ben and I sitting on a picnic table with the cinnamon roll on the fire.

I enjoy the idea of allowing the image to take control of the piece, because I have found that trying to write about abstract concepts is extremely difficult. Ideas like missing my best friend do not translate well into concrete, poetic language. However, starting with a concrete image, like the reflector strips on highways, and allowing that image to communicate the abstract thought is simple. Then, I only need to control the quality of the language, while the story itself crawls out of the original image.

## FOREWORD

There is no valid argument proving that Christians should not engage the arts, more specifically, the literary arts. Many scholars and writers have argued this case already, and provide sufficient proof for the Christian artist, displayed in Genesis chapter two when God creates man and woman in his image, therefore, creative. Throughout Scripture, the writers of the Bible used several different literary styles, including poetry and nonfiction. Therefore, I would not present a case for the Christian writer's existence, but rather for his or her use of subject.

As Francis Schaeffer puts it, "Christian art is by no means always religious art, that is, art which deals with religious themes" (Schaeffer 45). He argues that not everything God has created deals with religious subjects, such as the beauty of the sound wind makes when passing through tree branches. Therefore, the Christian artist does not always have to handle spiritual themes (45).

When it comes to subject choice, I'm an advocate of using only those topics with which the author is familiar. Considering the argument that the Christian artist is not forced to deal with religious subjects, then he or she can use their hobbies or interests in their writing, whether those are spiritual or not. For example, I have been a photographer for over eight years. Photography, in itself, is not inherently Christian. The Bible does not speak on the matter, and as far as I know, there has been no special revelation about a camera. I do, however, have extensive knowledge on the vocabulary and usage of various tricks and terms relating to photography. Therefore, I can still write about photography, even though it is not necessarily a "Christian" subject.

Yet, from my experience writing at a Christian university, I have found that Christians tend to write on primarily spiritual subjects. This is not a bad habit, as many of the Christian artists at my school are interested in spiritual matters. However, I have found that the dominant idea is that writing should reflect some biblical principal or theological debate. I encountered this idea during a workshop class, when a fellow student pulled out my use of the word “predestination” and falsely assumed I was attempting to write a piece on that theological concept.

T.S. Eliot would argue against this idea when he writes, “moral judgments of literary works are made only according to the moral code accepted by each generation, whether it [the literary work] lives according to that code or not” (Eliot 197). By this he means that if a piece of art deals with a Christian subject, it is going to be held against the ideologies of the contemporary culture. Therefore, when writing to a larger audience than just a Christian university, it is important to write on subjects which can pass through the critique of a secular audience.

Eliot continues writing on poetry, displaying how “religious” poetry tends to dull the total body of poetry rather than add to it. He claims this happens when the author chooses to write on a confined subject matter, or one that relates only to a very specific audience such as the Christian community. Since he began his work with the idea that all works of art are judged by the secular standards, he claims that poetry specifically should also be able to stand up to that same critique (Eliot 199). Since nonfiction often uses elements of poetry in its form, these same principles apply to the Christian writer. The Christian poet should then be able to actively engage “what men consider their major passions,” or the current subjects of the world (199). This means that the Christian artist should be consistently aware of his or her audience when considering a subject and with which form and style to engage that subject.

Now, I am not saying that Christians should avoid spiritual themes. They should, however, consider their audience when they are writing. If the audience consists of Christians,

then spiritual subjects are excellent. However, if the work is aimed toward all audiences, then Christians should be able to engage the subjects of the secular world as much as the subjects of the Christian world.

The Christian artist should be engaged in creating aesthetically pleasing art, which may not always conform to a religious theme. As Schaeffer explains, as long as the work contributes to the whole of art, then it can be considered for critique and appreciation, whether it is religious or not (Schaeffer 46-47). Therefore, the Christian artist can, and should, write on non-Christian themes and subjects so long as the art is adding to the total body of work. Schaeffer claims that this body is the artist's personal portfolio, or everything the author is creating (46).

With Jesus Christ, God created a plan to bring beauty out of the chaos of the world. Since we are created in God's image, we too should be seeking to bring beauty out of the fallen world. This once again points toward the aesthetically pleasing side of writing, but it also shows how Christian artists should engage their subject. The Christian should be seeking to bring beauty out of chaos, much like Scarlatti did with his Cat's Fugue, when he took the random notes produced by a cat stepping on piano keys and turned them into a beautiful melody (Shaw 84). Therefore, the Christian artist should engage non-religious subjects and bring beauty out of their chaos. Sometimes this may mean taking a non-religious topic and looking for spirituality within it, as Luci Shaw demonstrates in her poem "Diamonds That Leap" (84). I would argue, however, that Christians should also engage those same topics and explore them without the addition of a spiritual emphasis, not to completely ignore spirituality, but to engage the topic as it stands without trying to fabricate a Christian theme into it.

Schaeffer writes on using the Christian worldview as a lens with which to view potential subjects for art. Every person has a worldview, whether they fully understand theirs or not, and that worldview will find its way into the themes and ideas that person chooses to emphasize in their art. Therefore, the Christian does not need to actively seek to create a "Christian" theme in his or her art, because their worldview will show through their work. Schaeffer uses the idea of

minor and major themes in Christian work to emphasize this point. A minor theme deals with the fallenness of man, and a major theme deals with the meaningfulness of life (Schaeffer 43-44).

The Christian writer should engage all subjects, not just subjects with a spiritual or religious focus. Redemption, as a theme, can be expressed without the use of Christian language and images. The writer should also critique art through the scope of the moral standards of the generation as Schaeffer said. For Christians, writing should be an endeavor to engage the world as they have experienced, both the spiritual and the non-spiritual combined in the total body of their work.

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## LETTER FROM A PLASTIC SKULL TO A DAISY

If I could smell,  
you might remind me of bees,  
allergies and epi pens.  
I am a tool for medical students,  
disassembled, inspected, reassembled, repeat.  
You, I think, understand.  
Disassembled. Yes.  
Disassembled. No.  
Repeat.  
I'm sorry you are not constructed with interlocking joints.  
You are not reassembled.  
You cannot be.

## ALL THE REASONS WHY

An unplugged 1980's Epiphone Explorer  
sounds like 2am, waiting for my French Press to finish.  
I should've used a Keurig. I should've eaten dirt.  
This is a perfectly respectable time to learn the Police Dog Blues.  
Except bags wait vacant,  
they are the cars broke musicians jump.  
Or was it homeless? There is no difference.  
I said just one more episode.  
I'm certain someone is in rehab because of Netflix.  
I realize candy cane Oreos aren't as good as they sound.  
They are Hallmark Christmas, reminiscent of the original,  
but like the pilot to X-Files, something is in them doesn't belong.  
I don't think it will kill anyone this time,  
but I seem to be losing 9 minutes much too regularly.  
My laptop is the Colossus of Rhodes.  
His torch snaps across a disorganized sea,  
where drawers sit hungry and baskets only hold clean clothes,  
boxes of dishes and books wait for May 31st,  
and Tootsie Roll wrappers wait for Thursday.  
These are important matters when the argument  
on whether 4am is morning or night  
feels like four shots in a modified screwdriver.

## ON DRIVING OUT TO WASHINGTON DC FOR TWO DAYS

Threw a bag for one night,  
grabbed my interview suit,  
tie in chest pocket, suspenders in right jacket pocket.  
Hundred sixty bucks for gas and food,  
hope it lasts.  
Set the GPS to Janna's mom's house.  
Crank up Modest Mouse.

Large Coke, two McDoubles, Large Fry.  
8 hours. Cut rock slopes down in narrow steps  
to shape the highway scarring the mountains  
with headlights as the sun kisses the other side of the earth.

Interview at DC Bilingual from 9 to 3.  
Miss lunch. In the car,  
Large Coke, two McDoubles, Large Fry.  
I guess I'm predictable.  
8 hours back. Ohio I-70 is boring at night.

I didn't do homework this weekend.

A TEN-DAY MIGRAINE

It's listening to *Warlocks* on eleven,  
Red Queen on page thirty-seven.  
Square one, no way of my own,  
tone deaf giraffe with headphones of tempered glass

*Come Together* with Bee's wing beat a little off  
and each bend of high Sea  
draws crazy on my cheek twitch  
but the left and east can't hear flat.  
Tick tick. Ticktick. Ticktick. Tatickitytak.  
Clocks caught in Rain Dance.  
It's a knife storm  
coffee lightning and  
a ten-day migraine.

## UP IN THE CORNER

Does your mother know  
about the time  
you've spent in class?  
By the way you skitter  
it seems you didn't ask.  
I wonder what your writing is like.  
Quick ears must listen well.  
Learn the smells of every night  
unique for you to tell.  
You're quite small.  
Please stay if you can.  
Most of the class hasn't noticed  
    your black chair,  
        the furnace,  
    mother  
isn't happy with your coffee shop shenanigans.

## SHOOTING ULTIMATE FRISBEE SILHOUETTED IN A SUNSET

I didn't stare at the empty branch  
for more than ten minutes.  
It wasn't throwing paint in a runner's ear.  
The birds chase every tree but mine.  
Two of them,  
and a crow,  
but I don't trust You that much.

My 35mm is a little underexposed  
at 5:17 of a November Sunday.  
Aperture a heptagon only large enough  
for my own voice.  
I'm running out of print  
and the Peppers book hasn't come,  
that adorable chow from the Warehouse tears up my ticket to the concert.

Prescription kept in the second desk drawer,  
the crash of comatose fingertips gracing dust on a rosewood fretboard,  
playing songs about snow and police stations,  
but not the birds.

Yet at 5:23  
I catch the frisbee before the player,  
although my film is still  
underexposed, Your lavender  
and vermilion make the shot worthwhile.

## LIGHT-UP BATMAN SHOES

I wish I had a home to run away  
from, because there are simple reigns around  
that boy's ankle, crayon drawn map to Grandma's  
house on the back of a Scooby-Doo poster  
Confidence carries Buzz Lightyear's backpack  
down blue and red streets, but never purple,  
because purple is a girl color and  
girls don't know how to get places that's why  
Daddy always drives. A look at his dead  
Spiderman watch decides it's been enough  
time for one of the thirteen Oreos he  
borrowed. Oreos are the best, but no milk.  
Milk lies. His arm still broke when he jumped  
off the slide. Ann did think it was cool.  
It rains, but the map says Grandma is just  
around the water-logged mess of paper.  
But ten steps back Mommy watches him  
follow his purple streets.

COLLINS' STAIRS

What if we weren't designed  
to sit at the top of the railing  
and look out the window who looks  
at the tree across the street  
in front of Cedar Cliff?

What if we missed  
the blue jay to pick up  
his feather and find one  
half lost in a child's backpack  
and the other  
against a poorly painted wall  
marked by the turn of pages?

What if home is an abstract  
only concrete for birds and foxes  
whose feet don't mark like mine?

FROM THE WINDOW OF MY ROOM OVERLOOKING W. CEDAR ST. DURING A FLURRY  
(attempted style of James Wright)

A gray squirrel embraces  
a telephone line. Wind drags  
his legs, thin from sleep,  
toward a police car.  
The driver would most likely swerve to pretend  
he was relevant in this town.  
The wire shivers, but does not let  
the squirrel paint the snow drifts.

## EARLIER

You say, write me something beautiful.  
I write on a napkin,  
    *me something beautiful.*  
You say, stop being so sarcastic.  
I say, it's my dad's fault.  
I say, I only know truth to sound like a joke.  
You say, is that why we fight so often?  
I say, not often,  
    only sometimes.  
    I need a cup of coffee.  
You say, often  
    you don't answer my questions.  
I say, I'm stubborn.  
I say, it's my dad's fault.  
I say, it's because my transmission was stuck.  
I say, this coffee got cold.  
You say, my mom didn't think we had fights.  
I say, we don't.  
    I handle conflict well.  
You say, my parents don't.  
You say, I'm still trying to escape those fights.  
I say, I'm becoming my dad, not yours.  
You say, are either of those good options?  
I say, let's make dinner.  
I say, let's watch an episode.  
I say, maybe I don't handle conflict well.  
I say, can we reheat that soup or should I cook you something?  
You say, I don't care.  
    You choose.  
I say, I asked you first.  
You say, what would you rather have?  
I say, I don't care.  
I say, the soup is good.  
You say, my mom's was better.  
I say, it was your first time making it.  
    It was a half batch.  
You say, it's hard to split a packet of taco seasoning.  
I say, it's better than I could do.  
You say, you're a better cook.  
I say, you're better at conflict.  
You say, I got to learn what not to do from my parents.  
I say, I didn't learn anything from my parents.  
I say, maybe I didn't look hard enough.

I say, maybe I didn't care.  
You say, are we watching *Friends*?  
I say, just one episode.  
You say, OK.  
You say, are we good?  
I say, we're going to be.  
I say, one more episode?  
You say, [ ]

## IN MY MIND I'M HOLLY KID

His toes dug track spikes into the second layer of paint on Fenton High School's track, each foot deliberately spaced apart. His head tilted to observe the bar at 6'8" and then smoothly jerked into a body roll. He paused for a second, then took off, his thin, mocha legs bounding in predetermined steps, each too damn perfect. At the tenth step his left knee bent into the right angle I never fully achieved, and, like a piston, released. He lingered in the air like cottonwood seeds in Mid-Michigan spring, as his body contorted with calculated fluidity: raise fists at God, drive right knee to left shoulder, extend left wrist over bar, follow wrist with eyes, pinch a dime between butt-cheeks back arch, fall to the mat in a fetal position.

## REFLECTOR STRIPS

I stare at reflector strips on highways when I drive at night. The slower speed limit of highways encourages tired drivers to detour down the quicker interstates, illuminated by white headlights in their windshields and red tail-streaks glimpsed in rear-view mirrors. But I, indebted to the limitations of an older car, tend to travel back-roads and scenic routes, where my Beetle's weak lights almost don't reach the reflector strips.

\*

Not quite a week has passed since Ben was in town. He was road-tripping from New Jersey to California: stopping to see me at school, buffalo on the plains, and I think maybe the Grand Canyon, I can't remember. I do know that we drove around a lot. It was almost like nothing had changed, the days at school when we took his truck to and from the Goat or John Bryan in Yellow Springs, the bonfires, the cigars, discussing woman problems and recorded sermons, theories on why dating is the worst idea ever, unfinished plans to drape Cedarville University's student center with a "We are not silent" spray-painted tarp, trespassing warnings in Springfield where we both managed to forget any form of ID, attempts to rent an apartment together and move out from our parents houses, shared discontent about university boards or trustees or whoever was in charge of the decisions to change our school.

\*

But last Sunday it seemed abnormal to be in my car. His Chevy S-10 sat in Fairborn, loaded with more than the leftover canvases and loose backseat parts and dashboard skulls it usually housed. I knew we only had one day together, but it didn't feel real, it still doesn't. I still expect to wake up to a text that says he's not getting up to hit the gym. We drove a lot that day.

I'm certain we passed hundreds of reflector strips, but I didn't notice them.

\*

I wonder what Sidney Heenan had in mind when he invented raised pavement markers in 1963. Did he expect OCD children to complain when the drive home ends before they counted an even number of the reflective surfaces? Probably not. He wanted to make roads safer, not entertain the few people still taking the old highways home, people like me, people that think over the radio when it echoes against empty passenger seats.

The color of the pavement marker varies based on its use: white marks the right pavement edge, yellow or orange mark separate traffic moving in opposite directions, white or yellow and red for a one way street — white or yellow for normal use in one direction, and red to indicate "do not enter" in the other direction.

\*

I'm fairly certain the pavement markers were white when I took Ben back to Fairborn; which appears suddenly when traversing back-roads, a series of odd lights with the appearance of an alien mothership. If I could see out my rear-view mirrors I could expect the other side of the reflector strips to be red; at least it felt like I was taking a one way road, I ended up returning the same way though.

The pavement markers were yellow after I dropped Ben off at his hotel. I spent the twenty minute drive home studying them. Does it mean something that yellow represents the presence of opposite traffic? Maybe. Maybe I'll figure out my fascination with pavement markers as I watch them more. Maybe I won't. I still haven't figured it out after leaving behind so many friends, Bre, Mel, Jess, Shay, Rachael, MacKenzie, Nabil, Jack, Zachary, Brian, Daniel, Jenelle, Kelsey, Cannon, Max, Josiah. But as I drove away from the mothership of Fairborn, my good-byes were the reflection strips on the road; placed between passing lines for night drivers. My passenger seat was empty, again.

## MEMOIR TO BASHO

I'm not allowed to tell this story at my university. Sixteen hours in airports between Dayton, OH and Azusa, CA in Los Angeles county. Ben's 21st birthday at the *Equator* off the 210 with Cassidy and Alex. Mojito, vodka and champagne, irish coffee, and Ben's first legal – the *leg spreader*. It's against Cedarville University rules to consume alcohol.

Post-mudslide sunny and seventy degrees California for Spring Break. Three timezones between Dayton, OH and Azusa, CA in Los Angeles county. Longboarding from Bowles apartments to Utility Board Supply off Citrus Ave. Clip a manual and tear up \$55 Vans. Bottle of Jack, bottle of Kraken, and gauze bandages. Ben's girlfriend calls us muggles and soothes my cuts with lavender oil. I left a piece of me on the Bowles parking lot asphalt.

This is the story I will tell when I get back to Cedarville. Two seasons between Dayton, OH and Azusa, CA in Los Angeles county. Cold brew coffee like Vincent Vega's five dollar milkshake. 4 hours of catch up conversation and the best fucking chai latte at the *Bourgeois Pig* off the 101 on Franklin. *Of all the money that e'er I'd spent, I spent it in good company.*

## CHAMELEON

I was diagnosed, in a circle of my co-counselors at camp in Antalya Turkey. When you grow up a Third Culture Kid, you're accustomed to the quirks of hybridity. But something happens when your doctor (or in this case camp director) gives your symptoms a name. It was just a kitten with tapeworm until my little sister called him Tom, even though *she* is now called Admiral Wolverine Lightningbolt, and I hate her. Now. I'm still trying to determine exactly what that "something" is that names make happen. I think it's positive. I think it's terminal. In that circle I was called Chameleon: I hide in my surroundings, blend into everyone around me.

Four years ago you wouldn't have noticed me. I have no form or majesty that any should look upon me, except of course, for skin that changes color. But we live in a world of snakes and birds that can't distinguish teal from pine, turquoise from cerulean, German from American – except in accent. So I accent myself, and you look past me, thinking I'm a leaf, branch, flower, something you're supposed to see on trees.

Place me on a plane, any two dimensional shape with infinite length and zero thickness and I'll melt off the z-axis. Place me on a plane to Turkey, Austrian Air actually, and I'll become black, red, and gold again, at least until I forget how to say "do I need..." (*brauche ich* I remember it too late) and the people I'm talking to realize it's been nine years since I spoke my second tongue. I fooled them for a while. I saw genuine surprise in the faces of the Austrian couple in Miami, waiting to fly home, waiting in line to board the plane, talking to what appeared to be the familiar blue of the gentian blossom.

I'm in Advanced Composition, and Beau Salgado asks, "What's weird about you?" I tell him, I don't know, because everything I do is completely normal, to me. I tell him I'm "Yes

Man,” I tell him I’m experienced. I don’t say no to many opportunities. Secretly I want to tell him that I’m afraid of the society that once condemned my differences, so I became all things to all men. Instead, I ink my skin the off-white cinderblock walls of the classroom, and disappear again.

The first day of university. Away from family, away from Fenton fucking high school, away from eight stagnant years in Michigan, *Tangled’s* Pascal was on my shoulder again, contorting his complexion to copy all the corn, brick, coffee shops, longboard wheels, chemically enhanced water, snapbacks and sag-beanies and yellow-jackets. I didn’t want to be one of the puzzle pieces Papa Ned used to rubber mallet into place. I’m a third culture kid, my skin is red, white, and blue and black, red, and gold.

The first day of university. I decided to create my own drive-thru through Ruby Tuesday like that drunk from Fenton. I took up my favorite Grumbacher Goldenedge and carefully painted over every Cedarville University pigment with the oil-based uncertainty and imperfection of an individual who realizes his name is not replicated. My skin cracked color-blind with courage unattributed to chameleons. I’m not afraid anymore.

I’m not afraid to take pride in my mutt culture that middle school boys and ice breaker games told me to hide. I’m not afraid to walk around discolored. I’m not afraid to wear sunset shoes on gray mornings. I’m not afraid to speak the wrong language to you. I’m not afraid to play blues at a Hipster university (but who knows, maybe blues is just outdated enough for Hipsters). I’m not afraid to spray paint my tag on every sign, street and school as I make new drive-thrus. I’m not afraid to glow red in grass. I’m not afraid to stand arms crucified and scream at birds and snakes. I’m not afraid to wander into mistakes and prison cells and apologies I might collect on my explorations. I’m not afraid to discover the human being behind my name, outside of the expectations of the various societies that I’ve let dictate my colors.

SUNDAY 26 JANUARY 2014

Bridge street was loud until it turned into Cedarville Yellow Springs road, just outside the University campus. The semi-constant scattering of cars re-drew the trails previous drivers left in unplowed streets, until I passed the last Cedarville University sign. Then there was just an extra wide Ford truck headed away from the village.

Butane burns blue as it blackens bound tobacco. A red circle glows near my hand, bobbing as I crush the imprints of tire treads in snow. Not pure snow, but street snow. The kind that mixes with gasoline and seeps into the canvas of shoes when the sidewalk ends.

There is a garage on the left side of the road with a light above the farther of two vehicle doors. Doors covered in what looks like paintball marks in the dark, but might be rust or moss. I don't care. I only care for a bent basketball hoop post. It leaned out over the driveway, just enough to tell that someone had been dunking in it for years. Or as if someone had hit it with a car, not enough to leave a dent, but enough to shake it loose from its concrete foundation. The net hung like an old elementary school playground net before the administration finally replaced it with chain link. One or two strands swung out of mesh. I don't know why, but it was interesting at the time.

There is a bridge where the POSTED signs end – the owner of the basketball hoop apparently doesn't want anyone hunting, fishing, trespassing, hiking, camping on his property. But the bridge isn't on his property, but rather over a stream which had succumbed to the cold weather. A light from a small building with a semi-truck out front is aimed at the bridge, or at least it seemed like it is. From what I could see, I wasn't sure what was smoke and what was breath hitting the air.

I know it was quiet. There were only two sounds. There was a dog somewhere, he may have been at the next house, barking at irregular intervals. And there were embers consuming my cigar – the sound of being perpetually half of a mile from a moving train.

The Ford truck returned and forced me off the road. It was loud, like my head when Ben finally said goodbye. These cigars were his gift to me. I had to sneak them into the dorm of my school because, even though I'm twenty one, I'm not allowed to smoke. The truck was out of sight in less than a minute. I started walking back.

I passed the basketball hoop and garage doors again and stopped for a few minutes. There was something about that picture that I liked. I don't know what it means, if it means anything at all. If anything, it was a moment of meaninglessness, the kind that allows the mind to recalibrate.

(I crashed my car that morning.)

## SCAR TISSUE

Her coat wasn't calf length, black down. It wasn't a checkered pea coat unraveling after surviving years of neglect. It was red, and only reached down to where a belt would rest. North Willets Hall seemed oddly deserted on a Wednesday afternoon, but I don't know much about where she lives.

Several houses down Main street in Cedarville had unplowed sidewalks. They reminded me of trudging around downtown Springfield the weekend before.

She got a tea bag from a pale green, maybe teal box. One tea, one small Generals Blend – black. Stoney Creek Roasters probably smelled like roasting beans, steam, and espresso grind, but she could tell you better. I have a stuffed nose from spending two nights outside in minus degree temperatures. She hadn't gotten sick, but a week later she would hyperventilate for an hour and a half.

The compass room had two empty tables. The largest table –near the northern windows – was occupied by two men talking business. Two tables along the eastern wall were each occupied by one person, on computers, books and drinks decorating the tabletops. A table near the room entrance at northeast was empty. The table under the southern windows was occupied by two young women sharing expensive lattes. A student did Pharmacy homework at a table in the southwestern corner. We took the small table on the west wall, near the stairs.

The steam rose from our cups like smoke from fire barrels lit dimly by street lights. Her voice quivered and she squeezed a few drops from the tea bag into her cup. She looked at the wall sometimes, at the table sometimes, at her cup sometimes, at me sometimes. She laughed to keep from crying. My phone buzzes once, hers beeps once, the clocks on each change two and a

half hours, the other tables vacate. The analog clock hanging in between the two windows in the compass room is perpetually 2:03. We leave to go to a meeting shortly after 18:30. One thing she said is still circling in my head, waiting for a clearance to land.

*I didn't think you would remember our plans. My mom doesn't even remember plans she makes with me.*

## MALIBU BEACH: CAMP LOT 29

We were baking a cinnamon roll in an orange peel over a fire. In the pale morning sun, smoke made our fire barrel look like an Instagram with a bad filter. Alex was still asleep in the tent. Ben and I were sitting on a picnic table waiting to see if the roll would cook, waiting for the seal I saw to resurface out of unusually high waves for an early morning.

I rinsed sand and leftover Doc Ock out of a mug and filled it with milk. I remember how dry California air is. Our pallet wood burned quickly, hints of lighter fluid and wood treatment. I had started the fire, like always. Ben and Alex set up our tent. It was Alex's first bonfire. Ben and I light fires whenever we hang out. It's tradition, we say, it's just always happened.

But that was last night over Oscar Mayer's, candles melting to the table, Ballistic Gorgon and Ground Pup, s'mores with Reese's cups, glow in the dark roasting sticks, mini sandstorm attacks, *Horton Hears a Who* on a MacBook, thunder as the tide pulled up almost two feet from our tent, the rain tarp breaking off, Ben and I jumping out to take it down, seeing the clutter of stars through the tarpless tent roof, *hot sand on toes, cold sand in sleeping bags, I've come to know...*

*Love, and War, and the Sea In Between* melds well with the Pacific tide schedule. Ocean wind tossed our barrel fire in roars like when it extinguished our candles, like when it folded our tent in half last night, like when it pulled my hair into my face while we sat with our toes in the Pacific with *My Uzi Weighs a Ton* small batch cigars. My feet have left the shores on all four edges of the United States. mome

I don't remember any words, even though I remember talking. We smoked to ease in the last morning before I went back to Ohio. We watched birds hover above the water's surface, then

dive, then float.

“How does the pelican know when to dive?”