

Outline for a Novel for a Friend

"looking for synonyms in their skin
as they hollered and wailed -- the ground,
like a liver, split and burned."

from "Inoculations for Sleep"
Theo Levin

"There is no immaculate conception. Every birth,
even of ideas, of feelings, requires fucking --
either beautiful or violating. It is impossible to know
which the next one will be."

from "Goethe's Churning"
Yvette Bourdeaux

Or something like that.
Epigraphs are tricky.
Best to make up your own.

Chpt. 1

Start in the hallway
of the brick Baptist home
for the old. Put your friend there --
the one you miss.
Slouch back from the kitchen
cheap vodka drunk
see him twitch, fuss,
mumble at
full volume. Make him high,
the chemical stench
around his ankles and
his hair. His eyes
flick and shiver
like a cigarette
in a cold man's hands
before he sees you.

Later, in his room, there is
more liquor for you
more burnt powders
for him. You play music. Break
keys and chords and hit
anything to keep a beat
to shriek to.
As back noise: commercials
from the 80s. Revel in it
briefly, this consumption of all
forms. Bodies rotting
in real time -- the brain's fat
and sparks chewed through.

You do this all night.
And the next. Sometimes
you bring your grandmother's
typewriter and
almost break it
singing the last sentence done
before dawn.

Chpt. 2

Something lighter.
Blueberry pancakes --
the bushes choked
with berries right outside
your window. Your first
love next to you
boiling fruit
into syrup. Light slowed
through greasy windows --
you poke her butt.
She smiles. Breakfast sizzles.

Right outside
your window,
details here and there
burn off.

Chpt. 3: Non Sequitur Seeming

A walk down the block in spring. There are crocus and prowling cats.
Down the road, money is exchanged. You don't know for what.

Same love, only later.
You have a cigarette and half a peeled orange and can feel the moss on the curb through your pants.

This is right before she leaves you and your face bursts often: tears, snot, etc.
Shoes with wooden heels are best. When you stomp and rave, it echoes.

Chpt. 4: Interlude in Sardinia

Sun wriggling into
everything. Hot and bright.

You walk across plateaus
measure bones and sharp flakes
of rock. One of your coworkers listens
to One Direction on repeat -- you ignore it.

The food is served

in family-reunion-sized portions.
Troughs of red-soaked noodles
mussels split and steaming
garlic fried and slightly burnt
wine in pitchers
figs olives bread plums melon. You
close your eyes for each bite
feel the crisp and chill and
melt.

You share a room
with three men. Share jokes and stories
like you're supposed to like
the one where you broke
your knuckles on cold steel
hollows, drumming
until you got scared and crawled
beneath the bushes because
acid can make you do things like that.

Some nights, you don't sleep.

Chpt. 5: Single Life

Start by waking up on the side
of the I-84 -- moon still
full, bruised, eyes
cracked -- laugh at it
then walk home.

Chpt. 6: Necessary Flashback and an Interlude Back Home

It is summer, 1990. You are on the porch with your sister. You are two and three quarters. She is seven and a half. You are on the porch of a yellow house – the wood of the porch is warm and the paint is new latex and the smell is still strong. There is a catalpa tree in the front yard. She is holding you. You are warm and the colors and bright sun hurt your eyes in a good way. This is your earliest memory.

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It is winter. You are in a small fifth wheel trailer parked on a small piece of property in a rural part of the state. The trees are half barren, half coniferous. The ground outside is cold and muddy. Inside is humid. Water collects in the trough-like tracts for the sliding windows and the water must be wicked out and sopped up with paper towels everyday because the heater runs on propane and the propane creates massive humidity and the trailer has no natural ventilation. If you don't, mold creeps up from the troughs to the walls. It is night. Your nieces are asleep. You are getting drunk with your sister and your brother-in-law using double shots of cheap rum. Your brother-in-law goes to the bathroom. Your sister and you talk about your family and family history. You ask her if she remembers that day in summer when you were young on the porch of the yellow house with the catalpa tree in front. She asks if you remember why you were out there. She asks if you remember what was going on inside the house.

Chpt. 7: Single Life Cont.

Find a rash colonizing your arms, legs, and torso. Think
it's ringworm. Avoid leaving your room for fear
of contaminating your house.

It isn't ringworm. Learn
how to mesh into the world again
and dance often.

Soon after: Irritable Bowel Syndrome.
A touch of the mystical.

Chpt. 8: First Pleasant Not-Love

Her bed is huge.
Big enough to fit
the vitruvian man
whose arms and legs
are stretched and
being ripped off by horses.

Twice a week you take
16 hours in this bed. You kiss,
fuck, sip whiskey and watch
Doctor Who. Sometimes
there is the opera (which
you hate) or plays (which
you love) but never
do you stay.

Chpt. 9: Hallelujah Moment (buildup)

Don't start with ecstasy.
Never start with ecstasy. Build it
slowly, like a culture --
swabs taken from your teeth
and throat. Begin instead
at the bookstore. Look around
into signs and placards and sales
that are full and make you
feel empty -- like a shelf-end
dedicated to a meme
like grumpy cat. The line is
long. You are waiting:
for the line, for a call, for

Chpt. 10: Hallelujah Moment

It doesn't happen when you see her

or even later at the bar. After 5 drinks
and all those easy hours
talking, talking even through the picnic,
the graveyard, that night
you first danced swing
and you spun her so fast she slipped
and you clutched her breasts
just to catch her. It doesn't happen
even after that second kiss
and all those hungry nights sweating
and using -- your flesh full
of teeth and claws and blood and
bruises -- pinning each other to what
you wanted.

*

Does she remember
when it happened?
Somewhere between you
leaving Ruth (how she screamed at you)
and her on the floor
naked under a towel
because she'd just
puked so hard she pissed herself
as you lay naked too
shaking with fever and nausea. How
your hands grasped
each other and the sheets
just for balance.

*

Or was it
the cool blue of Crater Lake?
Playing footsie in that water and
pushing, pulling each other in
cackling, kissing -- almost
perfect except all those mosquitoes and
how she saw that chipmunk
mouth full and chewing
on the corpse of another chipmunk. You drove
all night. Each wanting nothing
but to dig in and eat
every slick and shivering cut
of this -- to build
a family out of all this flesh
you've chewed and used.

Plan of the Coliseum

Sad, to remember walking
through it. I pushed my hands
into everything, wanting
some notion of dust to take root
in a cut or abrasion. I was
with my step-Dad then
with the smoke

from my first cigarette still
soaked into my fingertips. That first feeling
into my imagined past
ended poorly.

There was only one entrance
and too many tourists'
feet, like my own,
staunching the wounds. I sank back
to a corner, pressed
my hands against the stone to feel
for screams
or maps
toward living.

What a marvel,
these lines and angles and
perfect ellipses
with space for seating. Space
for shouts, bets, corpses,
mercy. Perhaps,
like connecting dots in the night sky
with our fingertips, looking
in possibilities
for the lines
to hold our blood in, we grow --
replicate ourselves over and over
with incalculable deformities.

Eventually, the dotted lines
from one bright light to another
lose their clarity.
We imagine our violence held
back in a clean informational placard. Defined forms
blur, our astigmatisms worsen. An idea
for sound, like the groan of stars
in empty space,
becomes the brain. An empty building
becomes our past. Cut from our eyes
the world softens or breaks. My hands
lose their innocence. The Coliseum presses back.

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I still remember
his laugh, the story of carnival tricks, how
he ate a living goldfish after
someone finally beat the odds.
I remember the cold, wet smoke
that lived with him.

But how candid can we be
before the words fall out beneath us
and twist into familiar caricatures
of what actually happened?

We laugh
at such things now. Knowing that
there's no saving the present.
At every encounter with

the living, our memories
hobble towards us -- their zombie legs
freshly stitched -- their craving

for us
the same as ever. Is it moral to get better?
To look on things from a distance
until the gravity
and the jokes dissolve? No more world-cut eyes, no lungs
collapsed, no fingers left to reach
and break -- just reams of new white paper
waiting for dust. The maps
in the heavens still
unreadable -- the screams
a familiar, ignorable burn.