

How to float in a pool without water.

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I am drunk at a vineyard under a lofted barn ceiling and drinking more—white wine [I don't know what kind]—but the weather is warm enough for me to need ice cubes in my glass. There is a creek down a green swath from us that exhales a balmy breeze towards the wedding party, occasionally brushing orange and purple napkins screen-printed 'Emily & Joe' off green rod-iron tables. The hopefully-auspicious couple is dancing happy with a group of like-minded people. Those of us disinclined or too far into drink to join sit like lizards on the cement deck slab—belly up and sunbathing. I have nothing but a tertiary relationship tying me to any of these people: the bride was Girl's roommate freshman year of college. They have since kept up a cordial relationship without much contact. I'm here as an in-the-neighborhood stand-in. If you need a favor from me, know this: free liquor will get me damn near anywhere. I am neither the happiest nor most miserable person in attendance. There's a woman who's over-dressed [even for a wedding reception!] and she's proud of it. The food is being provided by a Mexican guy a few years older than me who's parked his smoker and truck just out of sight around a mock log cabin. While the food cooks he stands and taps his foot, not impatiently or to any particular cadence. He is covered in sweat and watches the reception with apathy. Like he's been to too many of these things to be jealous or hungry. There's a woman a table away from me wearing a paisley, floral-print dress that looks clipped from antique store curtains, who looks like she might be named Fern, or Evelyn, or Pearl,

or Edith, or Fay, because she's far too unshapely to be named anything like Carmen, or Veronica, or Annie, or Emma—meaning—if I shot her with a futuristic weapon that changed the victim into a physical representation of their life-essence [defined as: her soul, her spirit, her drive to outperform life, the way she feels about her diploma, about her reflection in the mirror, the way her back doesn't arch the way she it wants to, the way she feels when reviewing any 5 minute window of her life since-lived etc.], hers would appear as a busted trash-bag on the curb. She isn't sure what she is more self-aware of: her hair [dirty straw lying wet in a horse's stall] or her spare tire [rather than having little flesh too much alive, she carries on her midsection far too much flesh left with little life]. I, myself, can not turn away from her feet and upper-ankles, which appear covered in millions of shallow cuts, pink lines rising just above the outer layer of skin like a colony of ants passed through a puddle of paint and got lost on her legs. She occasionally lifts one sandal to scratch the other's stump in an absentminded way, before catching herself and placing the offending foot firmly back to the floor. I assume this means she is not proud of her injuries [my first thought had been thorns from gardening!] which makes me feel a slight curiosity towards this woman in front of me—and just as I begin to become aware of these emotions, the woman begins scratching an ankle with her hand [a rarity!], her fingernail catching one of the cuts beginning to form scab, sending forth a half-second dribble of blood. I'm not sure if it's the bloodstained chunk of middle-fingernail or the way she draws the blood or the wedding constricting this whole event into something that it isn't—but the woman begins to cry and as she cries she gets up to go and no one follows to make sure she's ok—and in this series of events I

feel—for a brief second—profoundly sad. I look up at the dance floor and I've missed the garter toss to this woman and I realize that this is maybe why I am [in my twenty-third year] much less popular with friends than I used to be. The need to understand my every second has stolen my privilege for hours. The weather is the poetic notion of ideal. I have wine ever-flowing. There are beautiful, happy people here. Yet I spend my time wondering if sneaking the Mexican barbecue guy a bottle of water or a glass of expensive wine [that I'm getting for free] is racist, or classist, or considered an attempt at politics or imperialism and whether he'd even want one or would be offended if I offered one. I worry so much about empathizing with as many people as possible that I miss second-to-second opportunities to actually do so—and doesn't claiming so brutally this compassion for my fellow man make me nothing more than a egoist? A megalomaniac? I don't know. I think about good and I worry so much about how my actions are being perceived that I sometimes forget the action of doing. This is the shallow end of memory.

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A stump sits in the middle of a gravel road. It's three feet long and lying sideways. Its core is gone, worn hollow with time. Danny's standing next to it with a full gas can in his right hand. There's a lighter in his other. He clicks it on. It throws a small circle of light across the road. In the flickers of the flame I can see Danny grinning. When he's drunk he likes to play with fire. Once lit, the stump burns white on the outside, turned to bone. A light breeze blows through the center of the stump. It spins the whipping flame and creates a vortex of fire. The inner walls burn a deep orange. The

heat creates a hazy, flowing effect, reminding me of blood running through a vein. Every couple of seconds the breeze rips embers free and sends them shooting through the core like blood vessels. The whole thing heaves with every breath of the mountain wind and I am jealous of the life within it. I hold my hand up in front of my face. The light makes my skin thinner. I can see the purple lines pumping through my flesh.

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A transvestite lion confesses plans for murder—[redacted lineman]—6 foot 6 inch, 300 pound offensive guard, assembled from scaffolding and old tires in some ex-military, Mojave bunker—sits in full drag on my leather couch, joint lit, molly hit, clicking 9 mm shells into the 12 round extended magazine of a pawn shop Glock. Ja Rule radio is on Pandora. It smells like chicken and wet rottweiler and cigarettes. Tuesdays have what we call unexploded rocket syndrome—it's about to pop off. The subject of tonight's rage is the starting place-kicker, [redacted special teams], white-trash superstar, wannabe goblin—perhaps most well known for breaking into a basketball player's home, looking to take a few hundred dollars worth of marijuana using only his cunning foresight and a BB Gun. Most people have put this event out of their minds, choosing instead to focus on his poor on-field performances of late. [Four missed field goals last Saturday. FOUR. An old woman in line with me at the grocery store on game day laughed and said, "Oh he probably just didn't get a chance to get high today," and I wondered—for the first time in a while—if the world was truly irreparable.] [redacted lineman] seems mostly consumed by the

steady coke problem [redacted special teams] has inspired in his ex-girlfriend. I can't say for sure if [redacted lineman]'s more upset about her doing drugs or the fact that she's sucking [redacted special teams]'s dick to get them—but I can tell you that he claims to have “only” cheated on her once. Regardless—fucking with somebody's ex-girlfriend is pig in a small college town—enough to get you swissed up or worse. L's is here too—dancing behind the couch with some beige bitch named Holla that won't stop talking about rehab and living across the street from Dick Cheney. Since they got here an hour ago, they've split two blunts [L's keeps calling them “Old School J's”—I have no idea why] 15 mL of codeine, six beers, half a bottle of tequila, and three 5-Hour Energy's. Dreads hopping, pupils chewing up white space, I'm not even sure they're hearing the same music we are. I crank the noise down a bit and finish off a 22 of beer. I have one paragraph left on a catering proposal for a second-string linebacker—my third and final paper of the day for an athlete—and I'd like to finish before we go out. The clock says 10 pm—which is fine. I bang out the last two hundred words and close the laptop. L's pulls his eyes from the ceiling long enough to ask if I'm done. When I gesture in the affirmative he throws me another beer and tells me I'm too sober—a chronic problem. In the past half-decade I have done enough interdisciplinary essays/portfolios/proposals/etc. to earn a second and third degree. As a semi-regular college attendee, I was a solid B- student. As a collection of athletes—I hover somewhere near the 96th percentile. My advantage is speed. I can do a 10 page paper from scratch on any subject in just under 70 minutes and guarantee it'll score at least an 80. Most kids hate the time of year when finals roll around. I get excited—call that Bonus Week. At ten to fifteen

dollars a page [depending on length], I make almost a hundred an hour. If I work a thirty-hour week, I almost cover my annual rent in one semester's worth of finals. Game day is only 48 hours away—but for now we have a winning record. Fans are satiated and everyone who's supposed to be making money is. I'm sure that the FCS mandated rules could be reduced to: compete fairly, be a good student, don't do drugs—but officially, it's something more like: win, don't get bad grades, and don't fail any drug tests. This is an important distinction to make—the second is much more open to interpretation.

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Girl hovers between two forms of existence—the first: a dirty blonde rubber band of a girl, snapping off of kitchen counters and couches and the arms of friends, bouncing in contained spaces, barely able to hold herself inside a container so lackluster as a body, so she cuts a round hole in her chest to let some of it free and finds a papaya where her heart should be and this makes her smile and split the fruit open and pick out the seeds and smash them between her index and thumb, producing a red juice she smears on canvas and calls paint, the second: a disgruntled shadow hiding in corners in her underwear, picking at half-eaten food with a plastic fork, drinking last night's flat beer, opening the internet and chatting with whoever, presences from her past that have been reduced to nothing more than a box online where she can type her problems and get back flash-in-the-pan reassurance, which is—I guess—maybe all she needs. Remember: this is wetter than proverbs.

Sometimes the black paint of the yin yang bleeds onto the white. She has a black

sleeveless shirt painted up with a crowd of cats, all staring out into space at whatever, some wearing necklaces or hats or sunglasses, all of them piled on top of each other, showing people who meet this girl that, yes, she is indeed obsessed with cats, their soft hair, their smell, their cautious nature, their inability to question or talk back—but she’s hip to the ‘crazy cat lady’ stereotype and not worried about it being applied to her because her cats are cute and accessorized and fictional and this makes her appear casually ironic not spatially neurotic. There are days she climbs back into bed and lies next to me, head rested on my shoulder, and says, “Miss me?” I say, “Yeah. You’re like a little space heater.” She laughs. “High metabolism. I’m a hot sleeper. That’s why I can eat all day long and not get fat.” She pats my stomach. “Not like you,” she says. I laugh and she flips over to face the wall. I pinch the bit of fat starting to form around my belly button, pulling it away from my body and letting it go.

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Two nights ago I did an open mic event. To loosen up the crowd, I said, “Burroughs shot his wife in the face in a William-Tell-gone-wrong. I put on a button up and went to work today. Who’s the bigger rebel? But seriously, being this provocative is exhausting.” One guy laughed and I felt immediate anger towards him. I didn’t tell them that the only reason I go to these things is because I have extreme paranoia and it constantly feels like everyone is watching me so I get on stage where everyone is supposed to be watching me anyways and for a few brief minutes each month I feel in total control of my life. There are nights the noises I hear sound

orchestral. Beautiful in the way I think of fossilized jellyfish as beautiful. There are nights I am overwhelmed by one single, violent note.

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I wonder what Girl is doing when I'm gone. We don't get intimate as often as I'd like and I think about this nearly constantly—although I shouldn't. Although, I'm not sure why I shouldn't. When I think of sex I think of her already backing out of a kiss that hasn't started yet every day for weeks until—once a month—she slinks across the hall from bedroom to bathroom, dropping her towel along the way, calling for me to come fuck her—quickly—standing up in the shower, which is never enough to fulfill either of our needs. These nights I end up on the couch with my pants around my ankles, looking at strange and violent fetish pornography because I'm more angry and dejected than I am horny. Or maybe I think of her in terms of her ability to make me appreciate the emptiness around her, the way I sometimes wish I could wake up in bed with her and use my fingers to color-by-numbers the blank spaces in her tattoos, specifically the collection of black-lined geometric shapes that gather to form a diamond on the back of her neck—this desire only highlighting the least common denominator of Girl: the lack of her physical presence in my life, even if we spend most of our time sitting together on the couch. These nights, I drink enough and measured reality becomes immeasurable. I end up scraping fruit flies out of a fifty cent glass of wine, sitting on the crusted carpet of our walk-up because most of the furniture is gone—sold to pay the rent—cleanliness, at this point, an overrated myth, my list of things to worry about becoming minimal, allowing me a night to

stare at the television on mute and listen to the fifty's soul crooning out of a stereo with only the left speaker working, sipping wine, realizing that this is maybe how one gets to the point where thinking, true reflection becomes possible, where I can control the noises that I'm hearing and I don't have to listen to any sounds I don't want to and this is a revelation—I understand everything because there is no longer anything to understand except the floor vibrating and the slight pressure on my temples from the alcohol and because this is all I am aware of, my mind is free to go anywhere, so I wander Saharan sands all the way to the North Shore or I go to Japan on a book tour, riding in rehabbed 1978 Lincoln Stretch Continentals, until I'm about to pass out on the living room floor, choosing this exact moment to crawl to my laptop and bang out a few thousand words on whatever, knowing that in the morning, when I read it, it will change me in some way, regardless of what it says, because this is how art is made, not through skill, but through desperation and booze. Because if I don't succeed, I'm not an artist, I'm a drunk. She is the worst kind of muse.

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[redacted lineman] never makes it off the couch. Drugs bring in the blackness too swiftly and he passes out. A puddle of drool is forming on his dress—large enough that I can see it from the bathroom where L's is holding a gun to the side of my head. It's metal and the end is cold when it brushes against my ear. "So he just nutted all over himself?" says L's. "Yeah. Chasing after this Indian who was in the country illegally." "Hold up. So Indian's are like the Japanese version of a beaner?" "Yeah

something like that. Anyways the cop is chasing this Indian and he just stops and falls and starts orgasming uncontrollably.” “Shit’s fucked up.” “Yeah.” “Alright you ready?” “Is this going to hurt?” “Nah you should be ok. I’ll count to three. One— Two—” A pain shoots through my ear like the worst kind of vaccine needle. With my eyes closed I swing blindly at L’s. Holla laughs. “You fucker. I thought you were going on three.” “Chill. You want the other one or not?” I take a deep breath and compose myself. “Yeah just do it quick.” He loads up and sends another bolt of lightning through my other ear. I don’t say anything this time. Just clench my teeth. When the sting dulls to a throb I open my eyes and study my reflection. “They look ok?” says L’s. I step back. “Yeah. Let’s do the hair now.” He grabs an electric trimmer off the counter and sets it on the lowest trim setting. They come to life with a gentle buzz. He puts them to my forehead and makes the first stripe, revealing stubble and skin. Over the hum of the trimmers he says, “What’d you say that book was called? The Japanese one.” I meet my reflection’s eyes in the mirror and say, “In Search of a Distant Voice.”

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It is March and I am in Venice, that watery, stone bitch of a city. I’ve spent the hour from 7 to 8 am embalming my internal organs with a bottle of Chianti and three cappuccinos. At 8:30 I am to be at the Academia. I check my watch. It is time to leave. A step outside of the café’s awning, I inhale from an electronic cigarette, dress myself in the fog, and collapse into the canal to float under bridges weighted down by padlocks towards the museum. Water vapor from my e-cig hangs above the

Vaporetto like the tangible evidence of a whisper. It's cool in the back of my throat and takes the edge off the battling caffeine and alcohol in my body. I pay 9 euro for the museum ticket and wander through rooms of devout artwork. A burglary alarm is going off somewhere down the street. The whine of the alarm and the clanging of bells in the distance drift lazily under the window shades. I lag behind a tour and listen to the Italian guide preach art history to a group of students who are nursing hangovers or hungry for more drink. I break away from the group at a thin hallway and cut between the blue walls that hold, on either side, paintings of the Madonna by Venetian legends: Tiziano, Giorgione, Carpaccio, Tintoretto—but when I stop it is not for the gold-framed Bellini depicting the Virgin Mary holding a dead infant Christ, but the next—a miniscule Hans Memling portrait of a merchant framed in drift wood that seems mis-hung in this hall of veneration. I don't give a shit about the Virgin Mary, which isn't a remark made in ignorance. For three of my younger years I carried cross to altar, not because I cared about God but because I loved my mother and for two decades a framed rosary has hung on my bedroom wall, black-beaded with rusted cross, carried through Europe in the soggy pockets of my great-grandfather in World War I and again around the neck of my grandfather in World War II as he barreled through the crisp sky over Japan in the bubble gun of a bomber screaming, "I don't believe in God, but goddamnit do I believe in my father"—which is, I guess, how I feel. The Virgin Mary is to the Bible as Kelly Clarkson is to American Idol. The painting of the young merchant is captivating to me not because of the artisanship, but because it exists at all. His story will stay untold. He could have been anyone, yet a picture of his face hangs in one of the most

famous museums in a city renowned for its artists. Isn't that what everyone wants? To be remembered after they pass? Five weeks before Danny slipped into the coma that would kill him, he came up to visit the college we both attended during a break in his chemo. I picked him up at the airport and we drove to his old dorm. We found his old roommate's bedroom (who he hated) and broke in. I watched the door while he shaved his pubic hair and sprinkled the trimmings inside the roommate's pillowcase. Later that night, we got drunk with old friends in an apartment and shot videos. In the low light, he looked vacuum-packed inside himself. He was tired and frail but still smiling. In the third video we made, the camera zoomed in on his hands holding a white pill bottle that he tilted until five capsules rolled onto his open palm. He ate them, laughing, and said, "THC pills. I have a prescription now." The rest of the video was one continuous shot of Danny fighting an imaginary opponent with two movie quality replica light sabers while the Joy Formidable played loudly in the background. I wonder if I can get these home videos on the air. MTV. If they play one after a music video on their morning countdown, is Danny immortalized—the merchant? The alarm has gone quiet outside. The bells begin to toll ten o'clock. I wander down double stone staircases installed by Napoleon centuries ago. A museum employee says, "Bon giorno," and asks me in English if I had a good time. I flash him a wine-stained smile and say, "No," and I mean it. Outside the sun is humidifying stone. I follow a stray dog across bridges until we find the Island of Saint Michelle.

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I'm sitting next to another trainee, Leland, who looks like he'd rather be playing golf than sitting here listening to our trainer who's across the table from us, comparing notes with a sorority girl on how often they each shave their vaginas. The trainer is a girl with punked out hair puking little strands of purple all over her scalp, running down to her teeth, yellow like bad clams from sucking down cigs—but for whatever reason—I still think she's moderately attractive but can't focus on her because I'm too focused on the audacity of her conversation. The sorority girl says something about a sex swing and the trainer responds with a quip about how much she loves getting choked and spit on when she's getting fucked and I have to wonder if this is a regular training exercise at quote/unquote Christian fast food establishments elsewhere in the country—still—I find myself looking at the trainer and imagining that I'm choking her and spitting on her while I'm fucking her and I have to stop because I'd enjoy it too much and I don't want to get a boner through my apron at my first day of work. I look at Leland at some point to see how he's reacting to all of this and see that his eyes are open, but for all I know he's in a coma, dreaming about crushing 350 yard drives off the tee so I stare at the ceiling and distract myself with thoughts of my recent college graduation, the 140 dollar speeding ticket I received the other day, and Val Kilmer, the 8 week old puppy, who is probably shitting all over the carpet at this very moment, realizing my life is one busted stereo speaker away from a Citizen King song, which is funny to me because by the time anyone reads this (if anyone reads this), Citizen King will be even more irrelevant than they are right now—which I guess makes this an even better analogy for my life than

previously anticipated. Training ends at noon with a test on what I have learned, which is a lot about female masturbation techniques and nothing about being a fry cook and initially, I panic—then realize I’m not retarded—and finish the test. I score 80%, which is apparently high enough for me to immediately begin working at the deep fryer with another trainer—Virgo—who is tall and the same color as Nutella and has an oblong marijuana leaf tattooed on his right inner-forearm that I stare at when he introduces himself while simultaneously around-the-back dunking some hushpuppies into a fry basket. I’m told to put on at least three pairs of plastic gloves if I’d like to keep the skin on my hands intact. I listen. The work is simple and monotonous—read the ticket, put what it says on the ticket into the Styrofoam tray, hand the tray towards the front of the store, repeat for four hours or until covered in sweat and salt and grease. At four o’clock I am told by the current manager to go on break for 45 minutes, so I exit through the back door and stand next to blue dumpsters behind the building with a kid dressed the exact same as me and smoke two cigarettes and eat a hotdog while watching some sort of disturbance breaking out in the parking lot, maybe a hundred feet away from us between a woman pushing a stroller and a man on a unicycle. The kid says something about unicycling being impossible, like, there’s no way anyone can actually do that, it’s all a matter of illusion, like Kris Angel’s levitation trick, and I tell him that everybody, including me, knows how Kris Angel’s levitation trick works and he says, Yeah, but can you or anybody else tell me how to fucking unicycle? And after that I stop talking and grey ash falls off our cigarettes and floats to pavement while the smoke hangs over dumpsters and I think about choking a girl with purple hair until the clock reads: go

back to work. Virgo asks what my major was in college because he graduated three years ago and he's just as bored as I am cooking hushpuppies and I try and think of a clever way to tell him I studied literature, thinking of all the jokes professors made about being homeless after school, before catching a bit of my reflection in the fry-oil between baskets, head stuffed into a black baseball cap, skin soaking up so much grease I can feel the pimples already starting to form on my chin and I realize the jokes weren't far off, I can barely afford to split a shit apartment with Girl because working at a fast food place is my only career option at this point, so I resign myself to a singular word—English—and he says that's cool and tells me he was a History major and bets me he can name all of the presidents in order backwards and forwards and I believe him. So I spend the rest of the day cooking chicken tenders and brushing up on my United States history and at the end of it Virgo takes me aside and tells me what a great job I did for it only being my first day, and I feel a sudden swell of pride, then an overwhelming wave of embarrassment, possibly stemming from the fact that I was just enthused by a compliment on my novice fry cooking skill and my hat and apron suddenly feel like they are made of lead and I muster a measly—Thanks—before heading to the door. Virgo stops me before I can leave and says quietly—Listen, don't worry about your degree, a college degree doesn't mean anything anymore because it's all bullshit—and maybe I believe that too, even though I'm not sure why. Maybe I'll get stuck at this job for seven or eight months, finding myself slinging more sandwiches than sentences, and through this I'll come to learn the same life lessons Virgo was referring to when he pulled me aside: Google is better than a diploma, bodies are only glorified hard drives, children

would rather look at a picture of a tiger on the internet than see/smell/hear it in person, existentialism and cynicism are the new teenage angst, Food Lion coupons are the new Pokémon cards, and eventually I'll have been at my fry station so long that my forearms are covered in little pink grease-burn scars like chewed bubble gum stuck to my skin and I'll get new ones every hour and pick those scabs two, three times a day.