

Shooting Stars

The universe is no longer up there—it's all around us. I try to find constellations in the mess of light. If you've never experienced a clear, moonless night in Wyoming, you couldn't possibly comprehend how many stars there really are. The black of the sky vanishes between the specks of brightness.

David looks at me and hands me a beer. “Killian's?”

“Why not?” I say and give him a good hard look as I take the beer from him. I can't decide if I like the way he looks—his hair is too short, his eyes are too close together, and I find it annoying how he always tucks in his shirts.

He gives me a funny frown as though I have no business studying him so closely. We've only known each other a month, and in another two months, we will go our separate ways. Maybe I shouldn't look at him so closely.

I sink down into my worn green fisherman's chair, dig my old, black dusty boots into the hard dirt, and try again to find formations in the much too bright sky. Somewhere along this odd path of existence that was set in motion for me, I decided this idea—that the brightness of stars engulfing the nothingness of the universe—was the metaphor of my life. I'd written it down in an old notebook under a section I labeled *notes*. But at some point else along this path, I changed my mind because I decided that it really didn't make much sense. As each chapter of life unfolds, everything begins to morph. The metaphors always changing. In college, I had taken notes. I knew *things*. *Things* made sense. Now I take notes on life. Nothing makes sense.

“Marty, look. Cassiopeia,” David says shattering the absolute stillness of the night.

He points toward the sky and waves his finger in a W, but nothing stands out at me. A shooting star slides across the sky. Shooting stars are a warning of change. I know this because I've seen thousands in my life. Back in November before I graduated college and left that tiny Greek town in Ohio for the open road and a summer of working in Yellowstone, I didn't just see a shooting star; I saw an entire meteor shower.

Waking up in a tent next to David at dawn leaves me feeling a little nauseous.

“God damn, I need coffee,” I say and kick my legs up and down a couple times to get the blood circulating. I struggle to make my way out from under the warm blankets and out of the tent. The glaring sun slaps me with bitter cold brightness. I've been bitten by a star. I jog laps around the tent to keep warm and recite every constellation I know as loud as I can.

When I was in the third grade, I bought a sky map and memorized all the constellations. I still remember most of them though I can't remember why I needed to know them all. Two years later, in the fifth grade, I bought an atlas and memorized all the states and their capitals. Those I still remember.

“Would you calm down,” David says and pokes his head from the tent.

I don't stop; I yell louder. There's probably not another person in a fifty mile radius from where we are camping—the half way point between the eastern entrance to Yellowstone National Park and Cody.

He emerges from the tent when I finally wind down. We stand there and take in the landscape—the dirt brown dry brush and tumbleweeds, motionless in the still cool morning air.

In a couple hours, the dry July heat will hit us. Rocky dirt stretches out before us in every direction—mountains loom in the distance. Desolate. You never really understand the word until you see desolate. Empty, breathable air.

Wyoming is the least populated state, yet it has one of the highest suicide rates. Years later on a mid-January night somewhere just outside of Laramie—traveling through on my way to Missoula, Montana, I really begin to understand this mindset. *I hate it here*, the girl at the hotel front desk tells me in the most defiant way, *they say we are in the mountains, but do you see any mountains out there? I sure don't*. And she points out the front door. Layers and layers of white powder fall from the sky, dance in the wind, and light up the night the way the stars or moon might. The city sits high on a plateau. Of course she can't see mountains. No one can from this angle.

The afternoon sun sings the already dead patches of grass throughout the town of Cody—Rodeo Capital of the World. That's what it says on the sign coming off Highway 16 into town—Welcome to the Rodeo Capital of the World. Everyone who lives in this town is a cowboy—do cowboys gravitate to Cody or does moving to Cody make you a cowboy? I shouldn't think about these things too much, but I can't help myself. Once the mind has been trained to analyze everything, it's hard to reverse what it has done for so long.

Buffalo Bill. Bars. Bulls. Bison. Barb wire. Our day in Cody. We have been sucked into a wild western tradition dimension. David and I stand outside the Stampede Grandstand. With one

hand, I play with the ends of my braids that hang down against the front of my once-white Fraggie Rock baby doll t-shirt, and I try to flag down scalpers with my other hand. A man with an entirely too large silver belt buckle sneaks up on me.

“Anything for you, blondie,” he says.

The rodeo is a cross between prom night, the Kentucky Derby, and NASCAR—girls in too many sequins lead horses around the inner ring while sloppy, drunk men hoot and holler at them from the grandstand. The scalper sells us tickets for seats in different rows. David sits one seat below me. My knees rest against his shoulders, and I stare at the back of his head. There is nothing distinctive about its shape or the dull blond color of his hair which is so short it just pokes out in fuzzy spikes. I don't know him really. I'm thousands of miles away from anyone I know. You never really know anyone you meet on the road—these fleeting relationships, friendships. David is not many things to me, but he is a reliable hiking companion. And he takes me places I find reasons to fall in love with—strange places like ghost town Virginia City, Montana and wild west heaven Jackson, Wyoming. That's all I really need here, now. I think it is anyway. Like dreaming, once you wake up, move on, it's hard to grasp what was once there.

With time, it becomes easy. Memories and pictures are timeless.

I press my knees hard into David's back. He turns around and glares at me.

“Just checking to make sure you're still there,” I say.

“With your knees...?” His voice trails off, and he turns back toward the bucking bull.

The crowd goes wild. The clown jumps upon the rail separating the crowd from the ring and dances a jig. At that moment, the whole scenario becomes my new metaphor for life.

Another one I realized later on didn't really make much sense.

We pull our fisherman chairs up the hill behind the cabin we rented for the night. With a bottle of Jameson between us, we settle in to watch the explosions of color against the already lit sky. Fireworks—man-made shooting stars.

David's vague outline presses against the night around us. Put anyone there. A sinking numbness settles in my stomach. David shifts his attention toward me and smiles. I turn my head quick. I don't want to look into his eyes. I don't want him to kiss me.

The first time David kissed me was two weeks ago after our first hike together to the top of Avalanche Peak. We were shin deep in snow until we pushed our way above the tree line where the landscape became rocky and where we realized we had lost the path. *Fuck the switchback*, I had said and began to scramble up the rocky side of the peak—David at my heels. I stopped in abrupt breathlessness when I reached the top. Vastness stretched over the mountainous volcanic land, dark clouds settled beyond the peaks west of us. I felt lightheaded, dizzy, high. I grabbed David and pressed my lips into his—a non-kiss, and then spun in circles until I fell and slid down the snowy mountain side. The cold, jagged rocks ripped at the back of my jeans numbing me as they slid me along. Lack of oxygen compels one to act rashly.

That evening after the hike, David and I found ourselves lounging against the back of a big log behind our work dorm, Columbine, watching the storm clouds move toward us—thunder and lightening having their way with the atmosphere. He kissed me then. Uneasiness came over me—a sinking numbness in my stomach and over my body. The same uneasiness I feel here,

now. Cody, Wyoming. *Where am I?* A question that jolts me, but reoccurs over and over through time and places. The sensation of facing the unknown loses impact. *Where am I? I am here.*

* * *

The next morning I shower for the first time in three days. A dirty film runs off my sun-kissed olive skin. Since I've been in Wyoming, I've taken to not bathing regularly. I rationalize in my notebook that cleanliness is for those who lead clean lives and that my life is messy. That one still makes sense to me. College, thousands of miles of road and places and people, odd jobs, seasonal jobs, more road, places, people. I have lived a million lives in this one lifetime. *What comes next?* I've gotten use to messy.

We pack my car then walk around the remnants of the holiday in the warming mid-morning air. The street vendors are packing to leave. I buy a black and purple silk scarf for my hair from a woman who looks like she's never been settled for more than a week in her life. Her gypsy clothes flow with her body as she shows me how to wrap the scarf in my hair.

"I'm going to be a wandering tarot card reader in my old age," I tell David as we walk away from the woman.

He gives me a blank stare. What does he care? He won't know me in my old age. He won't know me beyond this summer.

"Wandering tarot card reader," David says and turns his gaze back toward the street. "Buy yourself some tarot cards and get an early start."

David will be a junior this fall. He studies chemical engineering at Michigan State. His life is still in one piece.

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It takes almost three hours to drive back to Old Faithful Village, where we are living and working for the summer. The traffic inches as Bison move along the highway, weaving between the cars. Hiking from the window David and I joke.

The surreal landscape stretches in every direction through the Park and beyond its outer realms—from the ragged edges of the Teton Range to the south and Beartooth Range to the northeast to the bubbling volcanic ground of color between Old Faithful and Mammoth Villages. I wonder about the people who are born in the area—what do they see, are they in awe? Do they step outside each day and appreciate the clear, clean air and vast expanse of space around them? It's easy to overlook the wonders around you when they are all you know.

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Mid-July. David and I drive to Castlerock in the Gallatin Valley just south of Bozeman, Montana halfway between Gallatin Gateway and Big Sky. Highway 191 weaves along the Gallatin River between the crevasses of the mountains. As David drives, I watch from the window the fly fishermen, the white water rafts, and the kayaks battling for control with the river.

Several weeks earlier, David and I went white water rafting on the Gallatin with my roommate, Lisa, and her co-workers from the Snowlodge dining room. The end of June is about the last good week of rafting for the season—the river lowers, the rapids diminish. Our guide narrated the entire trip like we were on a ride at Disney World.

“There's the Brad Pitt Rock,” he told us and pointed to a large rock jutting out of the river

near the edge. “Brad Pitt stood on it when they were filming *A River Runs Through It*. Any of you girls want me to guide the raft over there so you can stand on it?” He winked at me.

“Why don't you stand on it,” I told him. “Roll around on it and giggle. Give us a trip to remember.”

David and Lisa and crew cracked up. The guide avoided eye contact with me for the rest of the trip.

I laugh out loud thinking about it now. David looks at me.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing,” I tell him and recompose myself. I get better dealing with flashes of memory over time and experiences. Something will remind me of another time, another life. Sometimes I divulge to people I think will appreciate it. Most of the time I don't.

We park and set up camp then hit the trail. The hike is fairly short—only six miles round trip. David and I hardly speak. We let the surroundings speak to us—the lodgepoles, the grass, the deer, the moose, the elk. *I am no longer in college. I no longer have a home. Where am I? I am here. Who am I?*

Reincarnation. It's an obsessive theme that begins to knock on my brain within the first mile of the hike. When there are no more tests to study for, no more papers to write, no more wild nights with friends at O'Hooley's or Casa or the Union, subjects like this slip into the brain while walking through an unknown vast land in silence. *Who is David? Who was David? Who am I? Who was I? What Karma has led us to this juncture? What purpose does it serve?* This is just the beginning. Once you begin dabbling in the matters of Eastern Philosophy, you tend to

push it as far as your imagination will let you. Every person that crosses your path is now significant. *Why has the Universe pushed our paths to a crossroad? What am I suppose to learn from it?* Thought patterns begin to connect the dots and add up in ways that before were meaningless. Every move you make, every person you meet will affect your destiny.

After the hike, we drive to Gallatin Gateway for dinner at the Gourmet Gas Station—a typical Exxon Station with an attached five star dining room. In the bathroom, I brush off my dusty worn jeans and wash my face. I stare at myself in the mirror; I can't decide if I look healthy or not. Without makeup, the dark circles under my eyes sink back into my face—I look like I haven't slept in months. But I feel energetic; I feel *alive*.

I walk over to our candle lit table and immediately look at the wine menu. The Most Extensive Wine List of Any Exxon Station in the Nation it says across the top. Indeed. I order a bottle of cheap red wine for David and me. David, only 20, shares a glass with me when we go out to drink.

Six women sit at the table behind David. They break into shrill giggles every two minutes. Gift bags scatter their table—it must be a shower or a birthday of some sort. I try to eavesdrop—something about a husband, a penis, and a water bed. Then an eruption of giggles.

“Jesus,” I say to David, “if I ever become anything like that, I hope someone shoots me.”

David gives me his famous blank stare. “Stop being cynical,” he says.

Cynical. I try to picture myself among the women at the table, laughing with them, enjoying their sense of humor. But I can't. I picture myself rolling my eyes at their jokes and cursing the decisions I had made in life that led me to that moment.

I sleep under the stars that night and try to find the zodiac until I fall asleep. It is too stuffy inside the tent with David.

Our weekend is over. We leave early the next morning to get to work on time—to sell memories in the form of t-shirts and mugs and postcards. We listen to a live Fleetwood Mac album as we wind our way southbound on Highway 191. I decide that every song on that album is a metaphor for some aspect of my life. *Oh Lindsey, Stevie, Christine! You understand!* I play “Sweet Girl” three times before David tells me, *enough*. I sing “Tusk” in my most demonic voice at David until he says, *would you stop it*. The album burns in my memory. The metaphors slowly fade.

I stare at all the little white crosses we pass along the highway. I try to count them. *Who were they? What happened? Who are they now?*

* * *

Lisa had invited too many people to our room while David and I were away hiking for our weekend. The always musty room now smells like stale beer. Empty beer cans scatter the room and sloshed daiquiris stain the floor. A boy I've never seen before lies in my bed drinking a bottle of Jack Daniels through a straw reading my copy of *The Rum Diary* from my book collection. He glances over the rim of the book and smiles at me. My stunned look of exasperation must have jarred him to react.

“Good book,” he says, “is it yours?”

“Who are you and where's Lisa?” I ask and cross my arms over my chest.

He sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bunk. His mess of mucky brown hair

hangs down over his sleepy blue eyes. “I’m Ryan. I work in the Hamilton Store. And Lisa was here earlier. Left with some guys. I don’t know. I was too enthralled with this book to leave. I didn’t know Hunter Thompson wrote fiction.”

We stare at each for a good minute before I finally tell him I’d like to have my bed back.

“You can have Lisa’s bed,” I tell him and point to the bunk below mine.

He sighs and climbs down. “Can I borrow this?” He holds my book up with no intention of handing it over to me.

I’m too anal about my books, about everything I own. I’m not sure how to tell him—*no, please leave by books alone; I am not a library.*

“I’ll bring you one of mine,” he adds.

“Oh yeah,” I say as I climb into my bunk, “what do you got?”

“Kerouac. Got all of ‘em. I’ll bring you one now.” And he’s gone before I can respond.

That now familiar sinking sick sensation comes over my body. I lie on my bed and look at the pictures on the wall my bed presses against. Postcards from places I’ve revisited again and again—fishing villages along Lake Erie and on the coasts of South Carolina and Florida. Posters from local college bands I love hang among the postcards. A picture in sepia of the interior of an old train car my best friend gave me just before I left Ohio awkwardly stands out from the postcards and posters. Lisa’s pictures hang on the wall across the room and consist mostly of friends and family and wildlife. I knew where I was going when I chose the fate of my summer, but now I’m not so sure. It’s as though I’ve become disconnected and derailed from a path I don’t think I was ever on. I close my eyes and try to ground myself, but my mind won’t listen and it

takes flight. *I wonder...I wander...I wonder...I wander...*

My eyes snap open at the sound of the door knob turning.

“Found one.” Ryan stands at the foot of the bunk and holds up a book.

Before I can sit up, Ryan has climbed into the bunk with me and hands me the book—*Dharma Bums*. Another overwhelming sensation sweeps over me—oceans of lost connections and memories fighting to surface until I take a deep breath and let them sink back. *Who is Ryan? Who was Ryan?* All I can do is lie back down and read. Ryan lies down opposite me and reads my book. We lie there yin yang style and read until we fall asleep.

Kerouac's spiritual wanderings resulted from his yearning to confront the Universal void. Unable to come to terms with the void, most people find ways to fill it, to give it meaning—career, family, religion, and in some cases, self-destructive behavior. Kerouac was no different; he inevitably filled the void with alcohol. I have filled the void with Yellowstone, but Yellowstone is vast and silent and full of explosive energy.

Ryan is gone when I awake the next morning. We only see each other once more during the summer to exchange books again. *Purpose served*. Every time I add a Kerouac book to my collection I think of him.

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David and I don't choose well traveled trails. Yellowstone National Park receives about five million visitors every summer from Memorial Day through Labor Day. The land covers two million acres and 800 miles of hiking trails, yet most visitors cling to the villages, they cling to the roads.

Late July. We trek ten miles to the peak of Mt. Holmes—skip through a meadow, ford two rivers, and up up up. The tree line fades fast and the wind begins to whip against my cheeks. At the peak, we find the fire lookout ranger station anticipating our arrival. The ranger greets us with a big wave and immediately hands us his guest book to sign. Only thirty people have hiked Mt. Holmes this summer which he tells us is about average. His National Park Service uniform suddenly becomes pointless, his clean cut look odd. Lone mountain men don't wear uniforms, they don't shave everyday. We sink into the soft couch, out of the elements for the moment. The ranger makes us coffee and feeds us granola bars. He shows us all the fly rods he's made in the three months he's been there this season. That's what he does. He makes fly rods in the summer to sell in his shop in the winter. He has been doing it for eight years. He's got life figured out.

“Bet it gets lonely up here,” David says.

He gives David a crooked smile. “You get use to it.”

“Dharma Bums,” I say.

When Jack Kerouac worked as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascades the summer of 1956, not a single person hiked to his lookout that summer.

The ranger smiles at me. On the shelf above the stove where the water boils for our coffee, I see a copy of *Dharma Bums* among his many books. I think of Ryan and the ripple effect that our meeting started that will spread out and beyond this summer.

It's late in the afternoon. We decide to head back down. The thick clouds have moved in closer. We pull out our raincoats and prepare. The hail hits before we make it below the tree line. Flashes of lightening and thunder claps follow. My heart races, but then I think that I would

rather be struck dead by lightening than die in any sort of bleak, trite fashion. To die from a drug overdose or an accident, you become a statistic, but to be struck by lightening, you become a metaphysical phenomenon. We walk fast and make it back to my car before sunset.

We stop in West Yellowstone at the first pizza joint we see. The place crawls with tourists, but we are starving and decide to go in anyway. As the hostess walks us to our booth, families stop eating and glare at us from various tables we walk past. My matted hair sops with sweat and rain, my jeans are damp and muddy, and my running shoes squish with excess water. We just hiked twenty miles up and down a mountain. Years later at a bar in Tahoe City, I meet a boy who turns me on to a book called *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey. I never see the boy again, but I read the book over and over. *Get out of your cars*, I hear Abbey's words echo. *Walk somewhere*.

* * *

David leaves the Park for a week to travel north to Glacier, Montana with some friends visiting him from Michigan. Loneliness creeps in, but it's soon washed away with relief. I sit in the Old Faithful Inn up in the balcony and stare at all the contorted logs and sip on my Jameson. Hordes of visitors are still out at this hour looking for a piece of nature, a peace of mind. Kids too young to appreciate where they are run around in circles chasing each other.

I stumble back to my room, that odd sinking sick sensation enveloping me. An unsettling anticipation that has come in waves since I've been here. At first, I attributed the feeling to my body adjusting to the high altitude, but I know that's not what it is. More like a building anxiety. It's already August. I leave in a month, and I have no idea what comes next.

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The next morning at breakfast, Randy, a gift shop co-worker, sits down across from me at my table and tells me to stop talking to myself. I've hardly spoken to Randy outside of our gift shop antics. In his big hazel eyes I see a spark of recognition. Nothing I can explain or will ever really be able to explain. *Who are you, Randy? Who were you? I know you.*

“Yeah, what do you know about it?” I ask and point my cereal spoon at him.

“We're working registers together today. I need to know the trivia question.”

“Name all the Fraggles and they get a free postcard. That's always a fun one.”

“Including Doc and Sprocket?” Randy stops eating and raises his eyebrows.

“That's the bonus part,” I say.

Randy smiles and finishes his breakfast with me before he leaves the employee dining room.

I know. *I will always know Randy.*

He leaves in two weeks, but unlike most people I've met here, Randy stays with me. Months later when I stop through Flagstaff to visit him on my way to a job in Big Sky, Montana, he takes me down to Sedona to climb on the red clay rocks so I can scream into the high desert sky. He also takes me to an old, desert psychic with dark ancient eyes and an unidentifiable accent. *You know each other*, she tells us.

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When David returns from Glacier, he only has two weeks left. We snag a back country permit and hike down to Heart Lake and up Mount Sheridan. Two days of pure hiking, pure thoughts.

“Are you ready for school to start?” I finally break the silence.

“Mmmmmmm I think I'm ready.”

He doesn't ask me anything. He already knows the answer. I don't probe him further. I don't care. The morning he leaves I will hug him, but I won't say goodbye. We've been saying goodbye to each other since we've met.

There's still snow at the peak of Mount Sheridan. I drop my rucksack and roll around in the untouched whiteness. I make snow angels. I look at David and throw a snowball at his blank face.

* * *

Lisa stands in the doorway of our room—I can see her in my peripheral vision. Her arms crossed—brown shorts, hiking boots, scabbed knees, Lisa.

“So. Where you headed when your time's up?” I ask without looking at her. I slowly pull my clothes from the dresser and place them in my bag.

“Probably back to Portland, I suppose. Or maybe head down the coast to Newport to wait tables with my mom until winter. Then I'm heading back here. What about you? You're one of the few people who hasn't mentioned what you're doing.”

Because I don't fucking know what I'm doing, I want to scream at her.

“I applied to work at the ski resort in Big Sky this winter, but until then, I don't know.” I shrug. “Visit family and friends.”

“You get used to it after awhile.”

“Get use to what?” I ask and tilt my head in her direction.

“This lifestyle,” she says most matter of fact. Her red hair hangs just to her chin. It matches her scabbed knees.

* * *

September. I pack my car. I sign some papers at the gift shop. Most everyone I worked with or lived around is gone. Now it's my turn. *Where am I? I am here. What next?*

I drive out the northeast entrance over the Beartooth Pass toward Red Lodge, Montana. At the peak of the pass, I stop to absorb the still, crisp night. I lean back onto the hood of my car and watch the sky. Two shooting stars fall one right after the other. They shoot across the sky and arc downward before they disappear into the night void. Once I reach Red Lodge, I check into a motel for the night.

The next morning I sit in front of a coffee shop and sip on my coffee and read through the notebook of notes I compiled over the summer before I hit I-90 and continue east. *Where am I? I am here. I am here. I am here.*