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## In Line at the Shell

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In Line at the Shell

by

Simon Montgomery

Under the Direction of Danielle Deulen, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2025

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a poetry collection exploring the intermingling of capitalism, toxic desire, isolation, and community. The goal of this collection is to find the connections between self and place and the role that hardships play in these connections. It follows a character's journey arc of a speaker facing strife from addiction, poverty, and isolation. It is split into three sections moving from deep set isolation and external observation to stronger community and internal explorations.

INDEX WORDS: Cigarette, Gas, Alone, Money, Broke, Thirst

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2025

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## **DEDICATION**

For friends who helped me make it this far.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my instructors, workshop peers, and fellow poets.

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## INTRODUCTION:

Poetry as a place of solace is the driving force behind this collection. There is a certain beauty within what can seem melancholy that I try to capture with these poems and the ability of poetry to recognize and reconcile these disparate feelings is often what I turned to when searching for inspiration. *In Line at the Shell* is a book of poems concerning solitude, addiction, capitalism, and place, exploring how these topics intertwine within one speaker's life. The way these elements manage to manifest themselves within the mundane is a running theme in the collection. Most of the poems center on moments of quiet within the speaker's life. His internal observations on places and items of seeming insignificance are lyrically amplified to show their ability for intense impact on the psyche of the individual. The collection, organized into three sections, follows a psychological character arc, with a speaker isolating himself in the first section, engaging with a more critical understating of his environment in the second section, and reaching for human connection in the third.

The first section deals with minor moments of connection between the speaker and those with whom he shares spaces, as in the poem, "Phlegmatic," where the speaker is observing a man smoking a cigarette before the man notices the speaker and gives him a slight nod. This subtle, minor moment of intimacy represents the ways the spaces the speaker explores facilitate camaraderie with his fellow person. There is also the woman the speaker interacts with in the poem, "Laid Off," who notices him buying lottery tickets and wishes him luck in winning. There may never be another interaction between the speaker and that individual, but just that moment of connection creates something hopeful within the speaker while facing a seemingly hopeless situation. There is a sense of isolation that the speaker is dealing with here in the earlier section that begins to thaw as the manuscript moves forward.

The longer poem titled “Filling in the Blanks” that makes up most of the second section of the collection offers more direct access to the speaker’s internal landscape rather than reliance on his external observations. This meditative piece aims to shift radically from the other poems in the collection by diving as deeply as possible into the speaker’s perspective and feelings through a more maximalist approach. This focus on the speaker’s internality presents another arc for the course of the manuscript as there is a growth in the speaker’s connection with others. The smaller moments of connection that occur within the first section are built upon in the second: The speaker’s internal perspective is held back during the earlier pieces, while this section dives as deeply into the speaker’s psyche as possible.

The final section deals most directly with the speaker and his relationships with those around him. These attempts to reach out to others grows into a more intimate exploration of the speaker’s connection with loved ones. There is a sort of maturation within the speaker throughout as they find a way to be more open and direct with their feelings and ideas. In a poem in the final section of the collection, titled “What Friends are For,” the speaker is observing a loved one suffer through the same struggles with addiction that the speaker has experienced. This external view on the problem creates a starker feeling within the speaker on these larger issues of addiction, as its impact on another makes the emotional struggle more severe for the speaker. There is a balance between solitude and lonesomeness that I hope to strike with these poems, and the third section of the collection contrasts with the solitude of the previous ones by including another person in the poem, one the speaker cares for, who the speaker watches poison them self. This shift in perspective on toxic desire in the third section marks the biggest shift in the speaker’s voice. As they watch their friend hurt them self with addiction, the tone of the speaker becomes less flippant and more compassionate. This tonal shift forms the emotional arc of the

collection, as the speaker now observes those around him with compassion as he recognizes the dangers of what he engages with rather flippantly earlier in the book.

Thematically, this collection explores the idea of connection with a strong focus on place. Growing up in metropolitan Atlanta, with family who grew up in Atlanta themselves, the city's impact on me naturally bleeds into the work. A uniquely car-centric, southern space, Atlanta's transit identity manifests naturally within the life of a speaker searching for some sense of respite. Grounding the poems in specific settings within the area allows the work to be present within the specific here and now of the speaker, allowing for more tangibility in the poem. Atlanta not only acts as the setting of the book, but as a being in the background of the speaker's life creating narrative tension by exposing the speaker to antagonizing obstacles, striking beauty, and other people in the environment. The work of Ada Limón heavily inspires this thematic focus. Her collection *Bright Dead Things* looks at the ways that areas like New York and Kentucky can compare and contrast in their ability to impact someone. Throughout *In Line at the Shell*, the speaker engages with spaces in Atlanta that feel empty and forlorn and finds reflection and comfort in these aspects of setting. The environments the speaker finds himself in are frequently "forgotten" (human-made spaces detached from their original use) and this aligns with the speaker's desire to forget himself.

This desire to forget manifests most prominently throughout the collection with the speaker's relationship to alcohol and cigarettes. In his collection, *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, Kaveh Akbar displays the growth out of addiction with a narrative arc that follows a speaker who motions through the stages of recovery. This collection's ability to vividly present the ways that addiction can seep into every aspect of the self influences *In Line at the Shell* strongly. Throughout the collection, I try to find different ways to explore what feels like the same

struggle. This power of what, in essence, may seem to be a singular issue finds ways to compound itself throughout the life of the speaker in this book. What may begin to feel repetitive instead becomes an opportunity for meditation on the plethora of experiences born from the range of emotions associated with addiction.

This permeation of addiction coincides with another aim of the book which is to find lyricism within quotidian spaces: run-down gas stations, a detritus filled street, liquor stores, and a front porch all play important roles throughout. The New York School heavily inspires this poetic perspective, particularly with Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died." The way this poem motions through what seems to be a typical day with language inviting as it is smooth compounds the eventual grief inherent in the final line of poem, "... and I stopped breathing" (line 29). This piece becomes a powerful elegy to Billie Holiday told through the lens of a speaker who feels accessible in his voice and actions. There is a strong sense of tangibility to this poem because of its direct real-world inspiration. Recognizable brand names and spaces in poems always fascinates me and I try to implement them where I can to offer some sense of immersion. This, combined with the use of approachable diction and colloquialisms, helps me find ways to fully realize a poem. I hope to cultivate something close to the voice of Frank O'Hara within this collection, substituting Gauloises for Parliaments and Strega for Evan Williams.

This use of real-world brands not only acts to ground these poems more deeply into realism but also to function as capitalist critique. The socioeconomic strife of the speaker is present throughout the manuscript, and beneath the surface of this work is the inescapability of capitalism and its culpability in this strife. Acts of commerce being so commonplace within the speaker's life that they connect with the speaker's indulgences gave me the opportunity to parlay

these explorations of toxic desire with explorations of capitalism's role in those desires. A direct exploration of capitalism is not present in the early aspects of the collection as their indirect presence serves as a representation of its all-consuming nature. The speaker takes a relatively casual perspective on these topics that evolves from a casual perspective to a more directly critical one. The subtlety of these observations is used as a representation of the speaker's desire to remain distant from himself as well as the reader. Throughout the early parts of the manuscript the speaker aims to preserve his disconnection from others via his use of intoxicants. These toxic desires fuel his disconnection from the world as seen in the poem, "Tips." In this piece the speaker is not truly engaging with the greater issues surrounding him, and instead ingesting unhealthy substances and distracting himself with an advertisement. The speaker has no particular perspectives that he is sharing with the reader; he is simply mentally checking out as best as he can from the unfortunate reality of his situation.

Creating a sense of realism with the poems became an aesthetic goal as I continued to write so many of the poems are inspired by locations or interactions I have had. These are fictionalized for the sake of either amplifying the themes or offering some lyrical motion that may not have been there otherwise. "Writer's Block is a Myth Dog," is an example of this as it is almost entirely fictionalized apart from hearing a Kelly Clarkson song at a CVS. Feeling fairly void of inspiration a lot of the time, taking note of seemingly minute moments in order to expand them into something poetic is often my most utilized technique for crafting a poem. The background noise at CVS while picking up toiletries is a mundane experience that managed to have a profound impact on me and the profundity that can be found in the mundane is a driving force behind many of the poems in this collection. As in the poem, "Tips," in which a speaker watches the commercial playing on a screen while pumping gas, there is something subtly

sinister, fascinating, and off-putting about being advertised too while already purchasing something. This poem is inspired by my experience at the Chevron. For the sake of fictionalizing the poem as much as I could to create a sense of separation from myself and the world of the poem, I chose not to include specific aspects of the commercial as I wanted to be able to take this detail in whatever direction felt most significant for the poem.

These slight fictionalizations of experiences also give me the opportunity to connect the approachable voice I aim for with a clear lyrical identity. In the piece, “What Friends are For,” for example, the poem starts with a line that I later noticed was in iambic tetrameter. I use this metrical aspect of the line as inspiration for using common meter for the rest of the piece. This more strictly formal approach is heavily informed by the work of A.E. Stallings and the way she is able to make reference to archaic subjects or forms and apply them naturally to a contemporary voice. In her poem, “After a Greek Proverb,” the second stanza reads, “We dine sitting on folding chairs--they were cheap but cheery / We’ve taped the broken window pane. tv’s still out of whack. / We’re here for the time being, I answer to the query.” In these lines the speaker, while using a rhyme scheme and syllabic consistency, is still able to ground the poem in a clear, relatable contemporary moment.

Additionally, I use rhyme as a way to move my poems along sonically. While I do not use rhyme in a strict pattern, I try to employ it, either through internal rhyme or slant rhyme, in a way that feels natural to the language while also adding to its lyrical identity. Yusef Komunyakaa’s work is a strong inspiration for this approach to sound as seen in his poem, “Fog Galleon,” where the first three lines read “Horse-headed clouds, flags / & pennants tied to black / Smokestacks in swamp mist.” With these opening lines we are faced with a direct expression of the image, while also pushing the lyric nature of the poem along without being behold to a

particular rhyme pattern. I have always admired this improvisational, jazz-like approach to rhyme and it is something I try to implement where I can throughout the collection.

*In Line at the Shell* is a collection that concerns itself with the everyday, with solitude as a driving force for observation of the commonplace. It moves through the perspectives of a speaker searching for some type of escape from self-imposed isolation and mental numbing. Cyclicality naturally involves itself in the arc of the collection as the appeals of toxicity have strength in their resistance to progress. Through it all, though, hopefully the book discovers beauty and triumph in what seems bleak at worst, and ordinary at best.

## 1 PART I.

### 1.1 Safety

A friend taught me to remove the safety  
from a lighter when I was eighteen.  
How easy it is to slip a pocket-knife  
beneath the mechanism designed  
for resistance and pop the pin  
to oblivion. The first flick without it  
came smooth as the cigarillo it lit.  
I had to use both hands to light my  
first Bic, one thumb resting  
atop the other, compressing into  
danger. I learned to appreciate  
the resolve it took to see flame.  
The necessary strength softened  
with time and, though my first cigarette  
at thirteen was not inhaled, the fire  
came just fine even with the added  
measure. Thumbs wither alongside  
everything else. After passing  
a dumpster fire, though, and thinking  
of any gasoline that may have been

hiding in the lighters I've tossed,  
I press into the safety of the lighter  
and hold the slight twinge of pain  
it offers within the other four fingers,  
as I hold the light up to a stranger.  
After, I flick it again for no reason.

## 1.2 For Sake of Flame and Poison

Addicted more to smoke than nicotine,  
I pollute my own community for sake  
of flame instead of poison. Mix the filth

with noises. A Hellcat's scream  
of motion preceding a police siren,  
a silenced ring from family crawling

its way to voicemail, neighbors fucking  
instead of fighting. My lungs blow  
the smoke into the steam of a coffee

as they mingle and float into  
a false nothing. I singe taste buds  
in fear of lost heat, wishing I could

muddy my body in isolation. Wrap  
myself within my own complacence  
and choke alone. I withhold the last

pull in hopes that it adheres, close

the window, and savor control  
as my breath claws for escape.

### 1.3 Fifteen on Pump Two

The dim blue of this  
Chevron's lighting,  
always bright enough  
to see what I need, but  
still dark enough to help  
me forget what everything  
I buy here does to a body.  
It's 11 am and I'm standing  
in line with Colt 45's,  
pork rinds, planning to put  
whatever change on pump  
nine. The old man in front  
of me playing his lottery tickets,  
The weed man's out front  
offering baggies that he claims  
are a three-five. I approach  
the counter and the cashier's  
solemn look. I ask for a pack  
of Parliaments, White Owls,  
and a lighter. *What color?*  
he asks, and I go with grey.



## 1.4 King's Liquor

A wrung neck pigeon beneath the bridge  
precedes the familiar scent of piss.  
A box from Zaxby's is surrounded  
by what I would like to think  
were the bird's peers, family, and friends,  
pecking what they can from around  
the container. The carcass just close  
enough make me presume they don't mourn.  
The box itself looks pristine and, hungry  
as I am, I'll still be damned before I check  
to see if there's a few fries at least.  
About halfway down this mile  
and a half walk to the package store  
and I feel the train above calmly  
storm by. Its low yell only near  
frustration. Clouds bathe the pavement,  
overcast the only threat to the heat.  
A man draws near, cigarette dangling  
for dear life in the corner of his mouth.  
He's patting his pockets, and I dig  
inside my own to realize I left my light

at home. I still reach, with no luck,  
for eye contact. I pass scattered lottery  
tickets, populating the overgrown grass  
like dandelions. I make it to the store  
and see the cash only sign. I step inside  
and find the out of order ATM.  
I look to my man behind the plexiglass  
glass, he gives an understanding  
smile and says *sorry brother*.

## 1.5 Phlegmatic

*I'm more of a weed dude*  
my dad said *but some folks*  
*make smoking cigarettes*  
*look cool as hell.* I think  
of my father's statement  
as I look to the man  
next to me at the red light.  
His elbow out the window,  
forearm propped up, cigarette  
between his index and fuck-you  
finger, tapping in rhythm.  
The smoke from the Pall Mall  
being put to shame  
by the exhaust of his pick-up  
that's tattered as his tank top.  
Farmer's tan stopping right  
beneath a tattoo, faded enough  
to make me think he got it young.  
He pulls the filter up to his lips,  
and blows out, slow as the rush  
hour traffic. He looks at me,

raises his head a tilt then takes  
a drag that seems so relished  
it's almost romantic.

## 1.6 The Devil Gon' Get Your Ass

*Cheers to that my man*

I should've said while raising  
my flask. But instead,  
I barely catch the old dude's  
wild eyed glance as he walks past.

My smile's not returned  
and the next gulp's burned  
down the gullet as I concur:

The Big Man Downstairs  
has gotta have me on his radar.

And dare I say, I must be  
fairly enticing. Might've been  
the attraction to Dylan Rieder  
that did it or my wondering  
if a soul is all it takes  
to finally learn to skateboard.

Or was it the confused looks  
at the number of Southern Baptist  
churches within a two-mile radius  
that caught his attention.

I mean I do love the community

so I might've lost him there.

Fuck. The old man seemed

so scared of his ass.

I really got lucky.

On the way out the park

an old lady offers me a brochure

about god's kingdom. Oh no,

boy's please, don't fight

over little ol' me.

## 1.7 Lunch Break

Sat here on the city bench  
outside the building we give  
most our lives to, I'm watching  
this man tug on that cigarette.  
Good god, his cheeks are concave.  
It's like he's slurping ramen.  
Damn it. Two years clean but now  
a Parliament is calling my name  
because he is making that shit  
look scrumptious. I can't look away.  
Leaned against the light pole,  
consuming that smoke  
as if his life depended on it,  
which it might, depending  
on how you define living,  
he's looking at the concrete  
with eyes that could use some life.  
Ol' dude musta had a long day.  
And you know what, I did too.  
I'll grab a pack on the way  
home and maybe a couple

dollar, ramen noodles.

Not a whole lot in the fridge.

And I been killing myself

slower than usual lately

so I'd say I earned it.

On the ground next to me

is a fly-swamped takeout box

of half-finished chicken wings

and I think about decay,

the ironic reprieve of poison,

and if the delay's been worth it.

I walk back to work and see

the butt on the ground

still burning. What a waste.

## 1.8 That's Gon' Break Me There

Dad changed the station to V-103.  
Big Zak's introduction to Greg Street  
poured through the Black Boneville  
as if there was enough room. The traffic  
on Wesley Chapel seemed to swallow  
the car whole, leaving no trace  
of our Pontiac, slowed to a stop  
while Dad's on the phone  
with pop telling him we're good.  
He hung up as we turned  
into the McDonald's drive thru  
Dad asked *Whatchu want, a Quarter Pounder?*  
I nod my head yes. Never stopped  
to think what, if anything, it means  
when *want* sounds just like *won't*.  
He asked if I'll eat the whole thing.  
I replied *I'm o' try*. He ordered the burger  
and two *fish fillet sammiches*,  
which got a laugh from the cashier  
who asked *Anything else?*  
*No, that's gon' break me there.*

## 1.9 Apathy

The wind is blowin' out his cherry.  
Nature can be annoying sometimes.  
The shutters to a shut-down business  
are rattling as he tugs until the light  
comes back alive. At least his lungs  
are strong enough for that. He leans  
against a flickering streetlamp  
and waits for the orange hand  
across the way to change. A man  
passes by and asks for the last  
of his cigarette. He pulls the pack out  
his shirt and gives him three fresh ones.  
*Save me from myself* he tells him  
as they share a laugh. The man asks  
him for a light, and he hands over  
his spare. *Keep it*, he tells him.  
God bless you the man replies.  
The streetlamp steadies into a dim  
when he reaches the end of the smoke  
and flicks the filter, still lit, into the street.

### 1.10 Writer's Block is a Myth Dog: An Ars Poetica

Walk to the nearest CVS,  
take note of how empty it is,  
and get used to the lonesomeness.  
Pick an aisle at random,  
and grab an item that reminds you  
of the last time you gave up  
on something you love.  
Now just stroll around,  
aimless as you please,  
and if they're playing  
"Breakaway" by Kelly Clarkson,  
go ahead and hum along,  
or maybe even sing,  
then find an item with an iambic name.  
Cascade should do... I think.  
*Cascade... Cascade...*  
yea that's good. Now hit the register,  
and on the way, grab whatever  
makes you think of the best advice  
you've ever received.  
Standing at the self-checkout,

because there's no cashier in sight,  
scan that bottle of Neutrogena,  
look at the light blue, and think  
of how it reminds you of the shirt  
your high school counselor wore  
when he told you being a singer  
would never pay the bills.

Then when you scan the pack  
of Orbit gum, let yourself  
fall back into being a kid hearing  
your parents fight about the light bill  
before your dad came into your room,  
smackin' on that same gum,  
and telling you to never end  
up like him. Now, after you scan  
the dish detergent, go home  
and, without thinking  
about what makes a good poem,  
cascade your thoughts onto the page.  
Before you know it,  
you'll write a poem  
long as that damn receipt.

### 1.11 Chevron Sonnet

The front adorned by ads for Monster, Newport, Swisher Sweets. The Reddy Ice beside Blue Rhino tanks. Some lotto numbers glow in red and plain typeface. I step inside, walk past the slot machines whose drab shine engulfs a man, entranced by chance minute as bags of chips, now fifty cents apiece. I stare into the beers, try to convince myself the extra buck's not worth it but I cave and throw my last the cashier's way. I trip along the curb while looking toward the man across the street dancing away. I'm in the truck, quarter-mil deep, still truckin. It all takes more these days and hey, fuck it.

## 1.12 In Line at the Shell

The cashier at the Shell on the corner  
of Bouldercrest and Panthersville  
looks tired as hell.  
And there's no blaming her.  
These folks seem exhausting.  
Can't even sit down,  
having to turn back around  
to grab the pack of blunts  
behind the first one,  
and waiting for someone  
to play each lotto number  
under the sun, while some guy  
is cracking jokes to someone  
who ain't laughing,  
and I don't think I've heard  
a single thank you to the cashier.  
Everyone else is exhausted too though,  
and you know, we're all going  
through one thing or another,  
usually both. But damn,  
those lotto tickets are not the answer.

Or they are, who am I to say.  
Y'all just taking too long  
to play em. But hey,  
what's time when trying to find  
some semblance of ourselves  
in the remnants of life we have left  
is futile anyway. Oh shit,  
it's my turn. I put twenty in the tank,  
plenty enough to make it,  
grab a couple number nine scratchers,  
and forget to say thank you.

### 1.13 Tips

The dollars outspurt the gallons'  
extra decimal place as I'm tearing  
into a bag of Baken-ets. In the tiny  
screen, someone is talking to me  
about a healthy alternative  
to sour cream. I nod along,  
licking my fingers, then washing  
down the pork rinds with a Red Bull.

The pump is halfway to fifteen  
as I look at the cars near endless  
through the intersection  
and wish there was some way  
to tell them they're missing out  
on valuable information here.

I jostle every last drop  
from the nozzle, pat my pockets,  
and feel relief that my empty ass  
wallet is there. Keys to ignition  
and a sigh as the needle moves  
to just beneath the quarter mark.

## 1.14 Laid Off

I sell some scrap metal, make eight bucks,  
and luck out, I guess, since I didn't think  
the box of doorknobs my cousin dropped off

would be worth more than me.

I'm heading to Chevron.

I use the bread to buy a beer,

a bag of chips, and two lottery tickets.

Thank the clerk, who's started saying  
*my friend* when he sees me,

and the person behind me who says

she hopes I win. I climb in my car,

dig for a quarter, but a dime will do.

Scratched away at the nine

which hit for shit, and the five

which hit for ten. I Go home

crack a can of High Life to bask

in my good fortune. Chips for dinner

is not so bad. I drink from the tap.

Tastes just like my lucky dime.

### 1.15 Free

I'm drinking another cigarette since the sixth  
beer convinced me I'm invincible. The mind  
is distanced just enough from the body  
for me to forget the way lungs and livers  
can beg. Just enough for me to escape,  
for just an evening, from the perception  
of loved ones that consume each truly  
conscious action. I'll begin, again, to long  
for tethers in the morning. Slumped in a busted  
wicker chair, I watch the pink seeped  
sky as a pup approaches, growls, and leaves.

## 1.16 Where to Now

The raindrops on the gazebo  
sound like applause,  
I pretend my hung head is a bow.

I'm stuck waiting for a pause,  
staring at the crowd of pines,  
as the rain continues its onslaught.

What's in front is behind,  
A maze of monotony,  
I wish the surrounding vines

would just wrap around me,  
pull me into the empty park's  
ground, and let me sleep.

My smile stands in stark  
contrast to the overcast  
sky as I daydream of the dark.

Nothing but a pain in the ass,

this splintered, tagged up bench,  
a testament to the strength of the past.

How much longer can I clench  
my scarred elbows  
and watch the grass replenish?

It'd be easy enough to let go,  
give up on the idea of home,  
and love that something can grow.

### 1.17 A Pack of Smokes and Forty in the Tank

A pack of smokes and forty in the tank  
is 'bout all I can make happen right now.  
I need something else but I'm drawing a blank.

I make it back home to clothes scattered  
like detritus across the floor.

A man holds the door and I say thanks.  
He asks for a beer, and I oblige. Colt 45s,  
a pack of smokes and thirty in the tank.

I dig into the fridge for leftovers, black  
beans, forgotten and decorated with mold.

Back again, a stop to make it to the bank,  
while puffing on an ashtray roach.  
A pack of smokes and twenty in the tank.

I wake up to an empty bottle of whiskey  
on the floor beside me and the hiss  
of a bathroom sink still running.

A pack of smokes and ten in the tank.

Enough to make it to Monday.

I grab a scratch off for something to play.

A wood tip and ten in the tank

I need something else but I'm drawing a blank.

### 1.18 Alone at the Old Park

The Parliament between my lips  
burns brightest when broken,  
trading rises, like sun and moon,  
with the Stella. They age  
what they can. Taking my conscious  
toward numbness complete  
with a bare, seemingly bending  
street. The filter clinging  
to the paper, finger bridging  
the split, hoping to give  
the smoke one exit. Playing  
the flute, like we used to  
with the remnants  
of mom's ashtray. The bottom  
of the green bottle searches  
the sky, in vain, for reflection.  
Tonight, there's a full moon.  
Leaned against the hood of my car  
I look to my right and see  
the fields where we'd sit and give days  
enough reasons to stay.

But they'd always leave. I'm hanging  
to the past by threads, thin  
as the smoke becoming nothing.  
I grab another lukewarm beer  
from the still standing hand  
me down Oldsmobile and tuck the lighter  
under the top, tilting until a silent pop.  
I look down to see absence  
burned into my shirt and my phone  
cracked on the road below.

## 2 PART II.

### 2.1 Fill in the Blanks

I.

Kudzu spreads like commerce at the bottom  
of this hill at the back  
of the park where I'd bottom beers and see how close we could get  
the cans to the trash, not  
twenty feet away—  
where the dog shit  
never sticks  
around too long, where the tennis courts  
have weeds peeking through cracks, where a basketball net hangs  
by one thread from a double rim, crooked  
for the past two years. I'm standing  
here now, middle of the night,  
and kicking a can I found along the way, adorned  
with a mohawked skeleton wearing an aviator jacket,  
The character seems cool. His devil-horned fingers and gold tooth  
make his commodity of friendship  
worth the 9 percent abv he wears

as a badge of honor on his jacket. Such a cool companion for the low price of four  
dollars. We make it back to the parking lot  
and I toss the guy  
in a bagless  
trashcan. No one to pass him to.  
I turn keys in the ignition of this Oldsmobile  
Cutlass Ciera where dirt accumulates  
all over, degrading its appearance  
despite the trustworthy rev  
of an engine, twenty years old and still going. The ways it's dug  
into my ability to love  
what is machine.  
So cheap  
and capable of taking me  
where I need  
to go, though thirsting  
for gas so swiftly  
after the last fill. We share thirst. The ways we relate making me wonder  
why I won't allow  
a person in the same way. It will break down  
at some point and I won't be able to fix it  
but I'll keep my distance  
from everyone I'd care to love

just because  
I don't think I can stand to be  
seen  
and this fucking car gives  
me the chance to feel like I'm worth  
something  
because I've convinced myself I'm the only one around with just enough  
shame to be willing to drive it,  
and how privileged of me to feel that way. I'm nothing  
and the emptiness  
of this park is a reflection that feels right.  
I check  
my bank account with a panic  
while I watch squirrels run up a tree with  
just enough  
to last  
them til tomorrow.  
All these trees just outside the city.  
How long before this land  
seems to have  
just enough  
value for someone to rubbish the place for a new apartment building.  
I'll watch in awe for month

after month  
while the workers build high  
er and higher,  
no fear of heights,  
or just little enough  
that a paycheck is worth it  
as it often never is,  
and once the building is finished, the spectacle is vanished,  
a final product sometimes never as impressive as the work,  
who worked eight hours every day for months  
to create  
a building  
where nothing existed but these trees were here.  
Across the way from this park is a neighborhood that became barren dirt, fenced  
off for what  
I don't care to find out.  
I've begun to break down  
in the car about everything but this  
as my mind gaslights  
the body  
into feeling as though the throat  
won't open and  
I keep turning

for

breath.

## II.

Apart from the aviator jacket haphazardly  
tossed on the coffee table, there's nothing  
in here to distract my mind from itself.

The whiskey bottle is almost empty,  
and the commotion outside a calming  
reminder that every weekend's escape  
to a couch bound stupor is surrounded  
by a safe hiding place. Cheek pressed  
to cushion, the outside liveliness of music  
and new friendships congeals to white noise,  
while the apartment's silence is too heavy  
to stand in. Alone, hammered, and stoned,  
an escape from myself,  
into an idealized mind, void of light.

*Whose jacket is that?*

III.

It feels empty at Constitution lakes. Dusk. Not  
desolate, just quiet,  
a tire place to the left as I pull in and the gravel  
of the parking lot  
making entry as slow  
as it can  
to get  
me  
to stop and think why I feel like I need  
to park as fast as possible and why I can't  
just stay here all night,  
I'll wake up  
tomorrow and feel miserable, but for the next couple of hours  
maybe I'll be happy as I can walk  
in silence  
through the park and everything else won't matter and there's no price  
to walk here, aside  
from the gas to make it, aside  
from the car troubles I may face for the audacity to go  
where I don't have to, and by have to,  
I mean somewhere that I won't make money,

and by make money I mean think about how miserable my family has been my  
entire life

Sunlight peeks between branches

as shadows cross each other around the heads of dolls sectioned inside

old tvs

with scepters of energy drink

cans

honoring their strength.

“please

do not add items that were not on the trail” says a sign

I step through and trash is art

and maybe

the same can be said for me at some point in the future

if I can learn to make some money

and provide

for anyone that’s not me. A dress fashioned from an empty

Lay’s bag on an action figure.

headless doll cradling

a Bud Light lime

and I feel sick,

but don’t want to make any alterations.

I just observe

with eyes unnerved but entranced by the doll’s head

atop a toy fighter jet.

I'd unearth all the trash I could

for more ways to create.

## IV.

Sunlight runs feebly into the drawn curtains  
of his bedroom, as he begins to bounce his leg  
to the speed of his wasted days. The failed attempts  
at discovering himself keeps him in place  
while time sprints away. He dreams to be vague.  
It's November, and seems like Christmas  
was just last week. *Fuck* he mouths to himself silently  
through the desperate sobs. Forehead to knees,  
he begins to plead to himself, *just change, please,*  
*just change.* He catches his breath, crawls into bed,  
and knows what to expect. The days will continue  
to roll by and he won't catch them. He'll sit  
alone in this room. He'll smoke some dope.  
He'll hope no one calls. He'll laugh at nothing.

V.

I pull into the same old goddamn  
Chevron at the same goddamn pump,  
  
on of two with a black plastic bag  
deterrent around it, and I have  
  
the same goddamn twenty bucks  
In rare alignment with my  
  
better judgement, I walk straight  
to the cashier. His smile and recognition  
  
of me is warmer each time. *How are you  
today brother?* he asks, and I always  
give what was a fib before I see him:  
  
Good  
  
How about you? *Good Brother.*  
I say twenty on pump two

dropping what I like to think  
of as a mugshot of Andrew Jackson  
beneath the glass between us.

*That's it?* he says I think to myself  
there must be surprise. Yes.

*We only have regular gas,*  
*that okay?* Yep.

I make it back to the car when  
a man asks if I have a couple dollars

I tell him no and look out to the corner  
where a man dressed like a superhero

dances to music I can't hear. A full suit  
of green, red shorts, and a green cape

suit him and I wonder where he found  
the get up. And how much it cost.

And I feel sick. I wish I'd be willing to tell him  
thank you, he's beautiful And I wish I could be  
convinced he'd ever care to tell me.

The pin holding the pump in place

clicks. And I look to the commercial playing  
on the screen above the other screen and  
the distance between the dollars and gallons.

VI.

I wake. Stuck in place. Unable  
to move, unable to speak,  
scream for help as I hear

the front door open and in  
walks family telling me  
to wake up, in walks a home

intruder, here to do the dishes  
I've been neglecting. In walks  
the demon they always talk

about, creeping to the foot  
of my bed where I rest opposite  
the headboard before I scream

myself awake and worries  
what the neighbors might think.  
But I can't bring myself from

the brink just to ask. Or even

see how they've been. The  
lease will end and I'll leave

this apartment and never see  
anyone around again. Neither  
me nor them will feel sorrow.

We'll focus on the bills for  
tomorrow and tomorrow and  
yesterday. We'll say *love you*

to those with time to be  
within our lives. We'll try

and we'll try and we'll try.

VII.

I've tried  
time and again to love  
myself  
unconditionally. I'm a failure to some  
degree.

I will always believe that  
whatever it is  
you saw in me could only exist  
in the distance

I've learned to keep.

No need to do anything but listen  
along with the smiles and laughs

I've fashioned into outfits.

That's okay. But today

I'm eyeing the fifth of whiskey,  
bare as the Sunday morning streets,  
chilling on the nightstand.

I hear myself say, *Never again.*

And grab my phone, at twenty percent  
full of thank-god-never-sent  
texts, and send them

to some sort of ether. A hangover,  
somehow prevented with glass  
after glass of tap water,  
is waiting for me,  
arms wide open, in the land  
of love and poor decisions.  
I almost fall back asleep,  
but intermittent breathing  
keeps me in the land  
of whatever's living.

## 2.2 Dear Past Me,

I wish you'd pour  
water into yourself  
with the same ritual

you feed the plants.

Fold the laundry  
the way you'd fold

yourself fetal while  
watching the television  
set whisper static:

an image resembling  
ants racing through  
a maze. Savor the taste

of air as much as you did  
the instant ramen  
at your aunt's house,

with a dead ant

inside that your cousins  
taught you was free

protein. Treat my breath  
as less guaranteed  
than your own.

### 3 PART III.

#### 3.1 Forget About It

*What can time fix, really?*

He asks, eyes fixated on the scar

on my hand. *Not much*

I reply, wondering how

pain only subsides

when I stop thinking

about it. *Sometimes that's enough*

he says as I pull my hand back.

### 3.2 After *Gas station and buildings—Chicago, 1956* by Robert Frank

Three gas pumps and a single person  
peaking in the frame from the right.  
Obfuscated by a lone light, the figure  
resembles me staring into this computer  
screen in the middle of the night.  
I wonder how different this station  
is from the Chevron I frequent.  
It's out-of-order stalls forever  
bouncing between each other.  
*THANK YOU* repeating along  
the black bags that envelope  
the nozzles. The strip mall across  
the street, offering some semblance  
of clarity not found in the photograph.  
A background of buildings seem  
to intensify the surrounding darkness.  
I stare into the screen, wondering  
what space of mine will be perceived  
with no way for me to look back.

### 3.3 Escape Attempt of an Asexual

I gasp myself awake each time I fall  
asleep. Roll over to see the cans  
populating the nightstand, ten in total,  
their greens and silvers shining off  
what light the curtains can feed.  
I'd tear into my body with love  
if I could. Reach inside and caress  
these keepers of breath with fingertips  
that refuse the sex of lovers. No  
longer let in the spit of others, not  
even through shared cigarettes. Teach  
the self to make love with something  
besides its own cells. Blow you balloon  
sculptures instead. No synonym for  
this action as alluring as 'fuck' but  
I'd shape them into these fucking  
lungs that refuse to breathe. Place  
biscuits on a baking sheet, slide  
them beneath the eye I was too  
drunk to turn off. Sit in front  
the oven and watch them rise

and drift me back into sleep.

### 3.4 Waiting for a Ride

Inside a twilight cloaked city  
wind breathes through a flag,  
half-mast, for god knows who.

Skateboarders adorn courthouse  
steps, one going for a tailslide  
again and again. Failed tries  
don't stop her. Hell, she seems

to enjoy it, cracking a smile  
with each bail. I turn my head  
with each rising hum of a motor,  
hoping my ride is running late.

A cameraman rolls next to her,  
lens transfixed to each attempt  
before a fall that scares me enough

to stare down at the phone in my  
hand. Helmetless head bouncing  
on pavement. *Be there in a fifteen*

a text reads as I begin walking toward  
the parking lot. A huge shout from  
behind as I turn to see that she landed  
the trick, with just enough sun left,

and all her friends going nuts  
beneath the slack flag.

### 3.5 Show Starts at 8

On stage the band jams away, bass drum echoing  
inside my chest, reminding me of how hollow  
I am, when my friend sees me looking down  
and asks if I'm okay. I smile and nod,  
looking at everyone dance and sway.

The venue's just big enough for the hundred  
of us, we're brushing shoulders as I lift  
my foot from the beer-sticky floor to try  
and give some distance to the man to my right,  
eyes closed and smiling, as the jam band's  
guitarist just goes and goes. Listening  
to a local psyche rock group sounded  
so fun this morning, but now surrounded  
by people who look so at peace,  
the intimacy only makes me think  
of how easily I could ruin everything.

I slip through the crowd  
into the bathroom where I breathe in, deep  
as my dropped heart, and stare into the mirror  
until it really is just me.

### 3.6 Tyrant Poem

I inflated the lungs of a sixteen  
year old boy with the entrails  
of flame. Judged him, harsh,  
for waiting so long to embrace  
deterioration. Fed his curiosity  
through conversations with an  
acquaintance who'd soon have  
a deviated septum. Let him watch  
the bottles of vodka empty loved  
ones into strangers, each night,  
each morning. Told him *develop  
nothing but thirst*. Loved the way  
he numbed himself, found it  
amusing as he did. Wonder if  
he'd ever forgive me if given  
the chance. Hope he wouldn't.

### 3.7 Aspirations

That specter fell from the roof last night  
and I think it smiled on the way down.

It seemed taller than I remember  
and its teeth were brighter than the outside

lights, but there were no moths to love  
it. I talked with a couple friends

in my dream that night. They told me all the ways  
they'd ascend into the future. I said I wouldn't

mind just falling, *I don't have any aspirations.*

The words startled me awake when my voice

collided with the day. I walked morning's  
cold greeting and shivered

to the specter laying in the front lawn.

It stood at the sight of me, smile

plummeting with its rise, and it climbed  
the house again. I watched but didn't

follow. The descent could only last until  
the ground. And the house is one story.

### 3.8 Aubade

The strangers who'd walk in,  
not demons like you'd think,

but normal people who'd scare  
me all the same. I yelled

at them all until I was awake.

But now I lie still, in isolated

thrill, with no one to trick me  
into thinking this house isn't empty.

Those sleep paralysis entities  
are all gone now.

Probably because I haven't  
been myself lately. Drinking

less and getting rest  
has never been my M.O.

before. The A.C. doesn't yell  
its plans to kill me anymore.

The peering spirits no longer  
stroll in unannounced.

And my loved ones don't sit  
by my bed, telling me to get up.

### 3.9 Westbound

The forest wraps the trail of taillights along I-20,  
like a hand me down jacket, giving the illusion  
of a straight path. As if there's no way  
to move towards the past.

### 3.10 Discounts

The price is rising at the Kroger self-checkout,  
and the security guard is paying  
me no never mind. I think of my father  
and all the cracked car's for joy rides.  
I scan the butter and the budget  
inches closer and closer. A peak  
to the cashier focused on his phone  
and I think of the Snicker bars  
snuck into my friend's pockets,  
and the cold feet I had  
with the Skittles I couldn't pay for.  
I tell the cashier to put the rest back.

### 3.11 I Think He Was High

If only I could remember  
what we talked about

on that ride back home.

I'm here at the new place

while Diamond Life plays  
in the background while

I smoke a cigarillo. and

I think of the time when,

eyes freshly Visened,

I climbed into the front seat

of mom's Suburban

and in recent years

I've learned she knew

I was stoned. Said we

had our best conversation  
on that drive back. Worth it

to not remember so long  
as it happened. Hope

I call to ask when  
I sober up tomorrow.

### 3.12 Enough

Morning calls of brown thrashers  
intensify the silence, aiding  
the quiet until each step  
down the road damn near  
echoes. The sky reflects asphalt  
through the loblolly pines  
as I walk past the scattered  
houses. Most one story,  
some two. I make my way  
past the corner of Stonewood  
and Mt. Vista and wave  
to the German shepherds  
hanging over the chain link fence,  
fighting against the silence,  
with cries of intimidation.  
I try not to idolize the unphased  
quiet, knowing the limits  
of my own aspirations.  
The streets are empty  
as the house to my left  
with boards on its windows

and front door.

I walk up to it and stare inside,

wishing.

### 3.13 Ode to a Still Intact Orange Peel

He peels the orange with enough deliberation  
to drive the less patient insane. But all I can do  
  
is stare in amazement that he cares more  
about the cover of the orange than the torn  
  
apart floor he stands on. The concrete beneath  
the kitchen counter set free by the leak from four  
  
months ago. His feet shuffle atop the constellated  
cracks to the tune of quiet. I guess he's decided  
  
he likes the disarray. He gives close as he can  
to a smile at the spiral he's concocting, the orange's  
  
skin twisting into hypnosis. He hands the orange  
to me and throws the peel in the trash before  
  
walking back to the couch. A few minutes  
and, finally, he's found some sleep. I try

to fish the thing but it catches on a crushed  
can of diet coke and I rip it in two.

### 3.14 Blunt Smoking Bunnies

Me and dad didn't really have a reason  
to believe those things they were puffing  
on weren't joints or just cigs but damnit  
there was a feeling. We stopped to relate,  
admire the way they posed. Cool as can be.  
One white with black shorts, the other vice  
versa. They were adorned on a green electrical  
box. My little brother asked what's a blunt. I sipped  
a beer, looked at dad, and he told him straight up,  
it's weed rolled in a small cigar. The rabbits were  
always there down the way from our house,  
serving as something of a gatekeeper to the lake  
where we'd take the little man to skip rocks.  
Now I'm back for old time's sake, I guess,  
while he and pops are in a different state.  
I stumble up to the graffiti, look at the dried  
drips of spray paint ran down the art.  
The smoke only vaguely discernible.  
Maybe they want to get sober  
too. Maybe they'd love to leave,  
but never found a reason.

### 3.15 Neighbor

The empty fridge is not your fault.

Or maybe it is. The pack of cigs

in your shirt pocket could've been

something worthwhile. You step

outside and illuminate a speck

of night with a cherry that proves

you're still alive. As you exhale,

you watch the smoke dissipate

the same way a paycheck does.

The makeshift ashtray, a small

Pyrex glass, a graveyard of butts.

Some half-smoked, saved for later,

others puffed until the filter began

to blacken. That doesn't stop

you from dumping remnants

with each pull, flicking the filter

with your thumb, soft as you can

to get rid of the fire-succumbed

scraps. You begin to wonder

if you even like the buzz

anymore when your neighbor

walks out his front door,  
parallel to yours, takes a seat  
on the step beside you  
and asks to bum one. You oblige,  
and block the wind as you hold  
the light up to his face.  
He says thanks, and asks how  
the day's been. *Same ol', same ol'*  
you reply. He recounts taking  
a shit this morning and y'all laugh  
about the busted plumbing.



just a few yards away.

Maybe the change was completed today.

And how exhausted it must be if so.

Not much time left for it. Or so I think.

My lessons on butterfly lifespans  
countless butterfly lifespans ago.

To watch it drink its fill

with what time it may have

makes me feel a bit better about  
the years I fear I've shaved off my own.

I lean forward, and instead of a getting  
a better

look it sinuously flies away

like smoke

before I drop the butt into the can.

### 3.17 Jaunt

Sunlight reflects off ripples of the lake  
onto leaves of a handsome water oak,  
hanging just a few feet above the surface.  
Like an earring, a fishhook twirls around  
one of the few bare branches. On the ground  
is a bag for ice that outlived its use,  
while in the distance a pair of siblings walk  
through the water, high stepping in uniform.  
Every few seconds, just close enough, a car  
drives by and the noise of the engines washes  
through the trees. I sit alone and smile

### 3.18 What Friends Are For

The Parliament between his lips  
shines brightest after laughter,  
as if more life becomes a pull  
to death. His eyes are plagued purple,  
and I'm ashamed to feel  
relief. Insomnia a chance for me  
to feel connection with a man  
I don't know how to help. That smile  
returns each time he lifts  
the cig to see a filter, blackened  
from an absent-minded flame.  
The ash that finds his tongue  
with each and every tug  
is washed to none with his ninth  
beer. The porch must whirl beneath  
us, and I ought to say he's had enough,  
but his joy looks so gorgeous,  
even from poison. He digs into  
his empty nicotine box, and I think  
better of sparking one from the pack  
I bought with him in mind.

He thanks me for stopping by  
as night spills into past.

We sit in silence and watch  
the streetlights turn off.

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