Traps in Plain Sight

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Traps in Plain Sight

A collection of stories I stole
and some I didn’t steal.

by Nathan Doyle
“But, small, filthy, unwinged,
You will soon be crouching

Alone, with maybe some dim racial notion
Of being the last, but none of how much
Your unnoticed going will mean:
How much the timid poem needs

The mindless explosion of your rage”

—James Dickey, “For the Last Wolverine”
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I
Snares
Valentine's Day

My girlfriend recently developed a knack for surgery. I lay on the couch while she sterilizes: her space, her scalpel, herself. Eventually she beckons me to the kitchen, hands me a blade, and says, “try to keep still.”

She traces a thin “T” across my collarbone and down my sternum, “Trust me.” I nod and try to breathe steady as she continues peeling back skin and pushing aside what little muscle mass my bones may carry.

She’s popping ribs loose, right there on the kitchen table, like she’s boning a chicken for dinner. And I watch as her fingers fill the gaps in my ribs, my lungs inflating against the back of her hand.

Suddenly, she stops. “Fuck, where’d I leave it.” There’s a snap as she jerks her hands from my chest, I cough and go cold while she swivels on her ass to find it, a fist sized ball of weathered leather wrapped in copper string.

Before the shock wears off she plunges her cold hands back into the cavity, and in seconds sutures the bundle to my pulmonary artery. “See, never better.” I cough while she smiles and licks her fingers.
In the Event that Everything Should Go Horribly Wrong

In the bottom of my dresser I left aspirin, a key, and $72. Swallow the key, save the aspirin, leave the cash. Allow three to five weeks for digestion. It’s best if you keep still, no sudden moves -- try to rest during the days, prepare at night. Breathe shallow, the metal will take it’s time. Buried below our porch is my father’s lock box. The worst should just be starting. Dig it out and forget everything you know about reunion. I have no presence left, no wisdom. Just rusted tin packed in raw earth -- the wealth of nations. Set aside a clear night, digging up this grave will take longer than I’d hoped.
Bait & Switch

She leads me to the porch, to the rusted chairs.

Chairs my mother painted, when she still painted.

Today we stand and listen, listen to the songbirds

argue about whatever it is songbirds argue about.

She smiles at my lethargy, but doesn't move,

just glides her breath across my cheek,

“This is what you've been missing.” and I flick

yellow specks of sleep from my fingers.
1. “I don’t give a shit about these eyes,” he says beneath the Red Line at Belmont and Sheffield. Half drunk, I light a cigarette and watch him do a bump from the dimple in the back of his hand. Those eyes constrict beneath the faux green as he blinks.

2. I dated a girl with those same eyes. She kept them stored at the bottom of her center console and would dig them out for special occasions: the closing night of Little Shop of Horrors, the time I met her mother over a dinner of grilled salmon and asparagus tips, when she left me in a parking lot somewhere in Northern Kansas City.
3.
I wore lenses in college. Tight, simple frames to compensate for my astigmatism. One weekend I left them on my bathroom counter, before three days in a van with the Texas summer, a five piece metal band, and a migraine. In San Antonio, a small woman with the Lamb of God on her arm offers to heal me with fire, and for a moment I weigh my obligations.
If Superman can fly, absorb a nuclear blast with his face, punch a hole through the moon and piss his name into concrete. then why the hell do a quarter of a million people die while he sits in an office forty hours a week hitting on Lois?

When Captain America debuted in 1941, he punched Hitler in the face. World War Two lasted another four years, despite the Army's greatest weapon having the fuehrer in his hands.

Bruce Wayne's net worth alone could rehabilitate and redevelop the infrastructure of Gotham City. Instead, he invests his efforts in gadgets and child endangerment, causing millions in collateral damage.

And I worship these guys. I’m twenty-five with a beat up white blanket tied around my neck, jumping off the couch to take down my dog while Russia invades Ukraine, and the guy in the alley behind my house peddles for quarters.
The Strangest Poem I Ever Wrote

I'm irreparably broken
and so are you.
We're children, dressed
in our parents' clothes,
like if we can some how
fill out these shoulders, then
tax forms will suddenly make
sense, I'll know exactly what
to do with my Masters, and
the world won't be such a scary place.

But chances are, in twenty years
you'll still get fed up with Turbo Tax
and I'll remember grad school as a place
I spent a lot of money on a piece of paper
and the world will still be a scary place.

And that's okay.

Today, I don't care if I'm shoving three
pairs of wool socks into my shoes
or that you have 734 safety pins
holding that dress in place.

You're here, and I'm here,
and we're here, together.

And together, tomorrow won't be
any more predictable. The world won't
suddenly shift into a kinder, softer place.
But tomorrow, I'll wake up,
and you'll be there.
And the day after, I'll wake up,
and you'll be there.
Together, I'm not that scared little boy. You breathe courage into me. You are my table, and I am your bed. and together, we can find rest. Together we can be still and know.

Know that God sculpted your palms to perfectly hold the side of my face, my fingers to cradle the nape of your neck.

Know that in a world of 7.2 billion people, we're blessed enough to find each other.

To be here.

Together.
Abracadabra

Santa may grant grandma cataracts and a jackass dwarf crack, watch an army draft karma at a samba class, can passably apply whammies and warts that act as a rat pack, pass black scraps that draw a slant, and has a mantra that starts, “Always crack a pack at last dawn.”

Santa may draw thanks that grandpa has a last Xanax and a damn at a pajama’s back hatch. At last, a start at that act that marks a paragraph.
The Best Way to Relate

I keep a glock in my glove box,
so, next time someone
sideswipes me on the highway
at six in the morning
while I'm exiting towards
Dunkin' Donuts, instead
of flipping the bird
I'll send a few warning shots
through the back window
of his Dodge Ram, faster
than he can say,
"Git 'er Done!"
and he'll pull to the shoulder
and I'll park behind him
and he'll say, What the hell
is wrong with you?
and I'll yell,

Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you there.
Tie Shopping

There's fuchsia, burgundy, and vermillion, but all I see is red. So when she asks my opinion she may as well ask the difference between a tabby and a maine coon. A cat is a cat is a… She explains, fuchsia is short and stubby with a vibrant coat, burgundy in docile and passive, vermillion can be a handful but when properly stimulated makes for a great pairing. Fuchsia was at my aunt's house the first time my eyes swelled shut, vermillion when my throat closed. She's picks each one up by their hind legs, inspecting their patterns, checking for health defects that may indicate some future unraveling, before setting burgundy on my shoulder. He paws at my face, confused and curious, big marble eyes full of sweet and terrible things. I pull him down and hold him against my chest as my cheeks turn red.
You once told Jonah to go.
So he went. Eventually.
Jonah bolts and we all know
that he’s gonna want
his money back for that cruise.
But, I appreciate his ambition,
the hope that escape is just
across the sea. That maybe,
on the world’s western front
there’s a fog thick enough
to blot him out.

What sticks with me
isn’t the lesson I learned
in Sunday School, a story
about your reach,
my obedience,
and your sly love for the theatric.
Stick me in anything’s stomach
for three days, and I’ll gladly
reconsider my life choices.

The next chapter
pulls me to the bottom.
When a man, caked in bile
and salt, crawls from the sea
to do your bidding,
and after seeing grace,
says, if you won’t kill them,
kill me!

The indignance of his gift
his shared with another,
the betrayal of seeing your efforts
shared with the undeserving.
That same frigid cold frost
in his chest weighs in me
like an anchor pulling
me to the sea floor.
I feel the loam between
my toes, taste the same water
that once filled his lungs.
It’s almost funny, the urge
to swallow, to breathe
the ice and hope you find me
fit to float.

What good is a sinner
if we haven’t got grace?
Places my Father has Considered Bombing

I: Houston
Oil refineries, and gulf access
would level already cringing gas prices

Last season, the Astros lost 106 games
This season looks worse

The month of July

Joel Osteen

II: Disney World
Have you ever
taken four kids
to a theme park

$3 for a Coke
$84.14 for a nine-year-old
to spill it on the camera

“It’s a Small World After All”

Lion King II

III: 650 Acres off 281 and 71 in Central Texas
The barn with the collapsing
hayloft is bound to hurt someone else.

Property taxes aren’t worth
owning the plot
your grandmother’s buried on.

Letting the hogs ravish the south pasture.
Post-Modern Protestantism

The first time I found Jesus, I was eight. Technically, I think this is where the whole saved by grace through faith thing starts. Technicalities scare me like sex scares me, like waking up in the morning scares me. I’m not convinced an eight-year-old is any more qualified to decide on the eternal fate of his soul than an eighteen-year-old is declaring a major. But anyway, I was eight, and I don’t even remember if I said any of the words, I just thought what the pastor was saying and figured that counted.

The second time I found Jesus, I was sixteen. Church camp is weird like putting hooks through your nipples and pulling a truck is weird, like babies are weird. It was at camp where, on three separate occasions, Sarah Comer chose to lock my heart inside her cabin and burn the building to the ground. Camp was about as careful with their matches as I was my self-worth. In my adolescent distraught, I thought it the appropriate time to dive right into faith’s kiddie pool. I cried a lot at camp that year.

There hasn’t been a third time, but not for lack of interest. When I give up, I concede with a whimper like giving up seventeen-year-old girls, like giving up smoking. I’ve come to the point in my life where I don’t expect Jesus to come down and expect me to play Simon Says or to fix me when I’m hurting. I just want to sit down and split a pizza, let him describe the dinosaurs, or what he was thinking when he created mosquitoes, tell him I understand why he hasn’t come back.
II

Leg Holds
Bare Knuckle Elegy

You were drinking
*Busch Light* from a *Camelbak*
the last time I saw you.
Now, I should be thinking
about your smug grin –
bold as God's judgment –
all teeth that said, "You couldn't
hate me if you tried."

About the dog-eared
*DC* back issues,
you claimed taught
everything you cared to know
about the world.

About the Cross hanging
from your rearview
that we either ignored
or implored, depending
on the weather. Instead,

I imagine chop
blocking your bad knee.
Your weight driving me
to the ground, the smell
of blood and tobacco
like a butcher's garbage.
I imagine picking
my teeth from your knuckles.
Chops

I missed dinner
when some bastard
dove under the Red Line.

It’s a shame,
I really wanted
a plate at that table.

Pork chops cut thick
like the man’s thighs,
beans snapped like bone
and seasoned with chunks
of bacon fat.

Fat like the man
sucked beneath the undercarriage
and ground like pepper
in my potatoes.

My potatoes went cold
while I sat in the rail
car and waited,

waited while they power washed
the bits of red and gray from the engine
and sent us rolling again.

The chops were drying out.
Franklin

I think the truth is
I have to go
to the dentist,
have to be
reminded my gums
are receding,
that under
my third molar
grows a dark
that will seeps
into my jaw
line until I can
cut it out.

I think I like it
there, like the sharp tinge
that jolts me awake
when I bite down,
the progression
from tooth to gum
to bone, evolving
like a message passed
between children.

Think I'd rather
keep it, name it
Franklin, travel
with him to exotic places,
where we can regret
eating exotic foods
together, wake
in a favela
with a sudden understanding
of Portuguese.
I think I’d rather
wake in Berlin
with a good blood
sausage, but Franklin
can’t find the nerve
to pierce the thick casing,
can’t accept that he’s nothing
more than rot.
She calls the one armed man “Daddy”
without the slightest irony.

She laughs and lights
his cigarettes
while he drives
and teaches her words

like “slough,” “reckon’,”
and “panty waist,”

or how to throw a dart,
tan a hide,
or separate a porterhouse
into the strip
and the tenderloin,

“Just trim the bone.”

And when she slips
with the boning knife,
puts a finger to her mouth
to still the bleeding,

“I’m proud of you,” he says,
“You didn’t bitch once.”
The Art of Wrestling

You’ve perfected the flying elbow.
Granted, I’m more of an ankle lock sorta guy, but the way you soar from the sofa—hair wild as morning—

I pull my arm in and for a second feel you against my chest, feel you breathing with me. There’s a moment, a blink before the air is pressed from my lungs, where our personifications disappear, where my gimmick doesn’t matter.

You can play the bad guy, and put me through a table as long as every bruise says how real I need this to be.
Johnson County

I’m finding strands of you
in my voice, twangs twisted
between the folds of my throat.
Origin is the difference
between charm and agitation.

To say we had a good run
is a numbers game, supply
and demand demands more
sacrifice than supplied.

And so the next time
I come home, just shut up
and let me remember
what I sound like.

Let me feel you
slip out from
between my teeth
as I my throat.
To Myself in Ten Years

Don’t bother
with the funeral plot,
They’re all the same.
with our eyes closed
When you were three
you buried a kernel
in your ear canal,
so watch the kid.
Stop smoking,
and when Katelyn asks
if she looks older, lie.
And remember:
I will pull you under,
like a drowning man.
Gag Order

She thumbs through
dresser
drawers for a handsome
pair of lips.
"Perfect," she says,
"let's see
him talk his way out of this,"
zipping
the teeth
shut.
Outgunned and Unprepared
August 1, 1966 near Austin, TX

5:53 AM — the east pasture

Damn boars would break into cattle feeders, gore you through the thigh if you got too close, so I’d take pot shots at piglets from fifty yards.

They’d squeal, and I’d rack the bolt before they hit the ground.

12:18 PM — the kitchen

The radio broadcast was buried in static and scattered shots. Momma chewed her nails over the sink.

They said white man, pat clap, or maybe Whitman? pat clap.

12:27 PM — the front porch

Patrolmen raided the closet for firearms: Dad’s single barrel and the Enfield left from Korea, that Remington I used to chase hogs.
Dad’s service .38
was already with him
at the tower.
River Rats and Warrensburg Water

I swam to your shore
like a piston in full rotation,
and pumped muddy water
from your collapsed lungs
until your throat cleared
with a rattle and
I could taste the sulfur

grabbing at my throat

I could taste the sulfur
with a rattle and,
until your throat cleared
from your collapsed lungs
and pumped muddy water
like a piston in full rotation,
I swam to your shore.
Hair in My Teeth

Momma’d always say I had a tongue
like a switchblade. Well, I’ve been grinding
it across my teeth, sharpening cold
edges from thick flesh,
waiting for my gums to bleed.

I’ve left martyrs, slit from throat to thigh
and stacked like sandbags to block out the sun.
until someone catches on, someone recognizes
a shade of purple nail polish and a scar,

If I could just find a little mortar for my bricks,
I’d build a road to that cavern in my heart built
for better men. That place I’ve packed with smoke
and cement you swear still exists.

And if it does?

Then hide your eyes, cover your nose
‘cause I wouldn’t be surprised if there were
a few straggler’s I’d forgotten about—
some passerby who caught my eye
on the corner while I was working.

Not working,
just workin’.
An Autobiography

I ran into Jesus at a punk show.
Two songs into the set, he
threw up a fist and broke
my nose.

Barefoot and beardy,
I hardly recognized him amongst
the other half hundred middleclass
kids in their busted jeans and exceedingly
long hair. And like any good savior,

he apologized, picked me from the floor,
and led me to the back. He pursed his lips
like he knew how to set a bone, but had to sift
through millennia of omniscience to remember.
I blew blood into my palm, wiped it on my pants
as he touched my face, lining his fingers
with the deep ridge of my eyes.

I realized I was staring through his palms
as he pressed my nose into shape.

Three alignments later he washed
his hands and bought me a beer.
Said, "There's gonna be pressure,
but it'll heal."
III
Deadfalls
Building Better Bombs

My mom used to say
I’d piss myself
if I kept playing with fire.
It’s been fifteen years since
my last incident and I’ve been
feeling confident lately,
like the escape artist’s son
with a pair of handcuffs.

Right now, there’s a four
pound bag of fertilizer
in my garage sitting next
to a stack of brass pipes
and a nail filled coffee can.
I didn’t plan it that way,
it just kind of happened,

Like in grade school
when I went to the bathroom
and the stream splashed off
and down the leg of my jeans.
I had one foot in the cafeteria
when someone started laughing.

I wanted to fade
into the cream-white
of the walls and let everyone
forget about my uncanny ability
to screw up taking a piss.

But, I’ve never been the most
coordinated sort. Fortunately,
there’s no precision in throwing
a brick through a window. No
tact in dumping sugar in
a gas tank.

I’m no creator, but if I was,
I’d pack saltpeter
into the empty space
of half-dead machines,
fill the useless fuel
lines with ammonia and
try to keep a steady hand
as I add each cap of bleach.
I shat myself at the jewelry store. That's not hyperbole. I shat myself right in front of the round cut diamonds. I wish I could blame it on something I ate, or nerves, a stomach bug, or a sudden inexplicable drop in my large intestine, but no. That's what I get for trusting a fart.

By the time I snuck away from the display case and into the men's room—every time you refolded a towel because I didn't do it right, every time you claimed I wasn't allergic to cats, every time you hit me when you were scared—were all sitting in the mirror waiting for me.

So we talked for a minute, and they told me I should reschedule. That I had a perfectly good reason to go home and comeback another time.

And as I stood there, shit starting to seep into my briefs, I thought that maybe God had started speaking in poorly contained bowel movements, that maybe this was an omen. For a second, I considered walking out and driving home.

Instead, I wiped my ass and bought a ring.
You looked so small under there, like God had taken most of you and left the packaging. What was left of you hidden under that quilted vest, denim button up in the July heat to minimize the shiver that danced through your arms, I was surprised you put on a shirt at all, but “Dammit, we’re going out,” seemed as good a reason as any.

You forgot my name by then, but you knew my face, your face. Your strong jaw, deep set eyes taken from you and put on the boy sitting across the table. You looked at me like an old friend that had finally come to visit. We went to the Blue Bonnet, ordered $2 beers and $10 prime rib, got exactly what we paid for,

I finished your meat, let you finish my beer. We both swore when the Buick sputtered. You hadn’t driven in years, but took the keys and shoved me under the hood, said to bang on the starter. So I wailed on it with a flashlight while you cranked the ignition, and after a few minutes the solenoid skipped. And as she roared back to life you stuck your head out the window, yelled, "Christ, Nathan, get back in here before she dies."
The day we met, you and I built warring empires in my bedroom. Twelve years old and playing God like with a half-dozen man army of Stormtroopers and Ninja Turtles, piecing together plastic shapes into home bases and bomber jets. The first assault when I brought my fist down on your Apache. The blocks imprinting my awkwardly large hands like teeth.

Five years later, I'm parked outside your house. It's midnight and you aren't home. Earlier, my mother called me at work, a mess of frantic syllables. Something about your dad, something about another woman. I walked out midshift and sat on your curb for three hours before you got home from that concert in the city, thinking how fucked this all was. How I should say this wasn't your fault, that no matter how things ended I'd still be right down the street. You pulled in, drunk off the spectacle, and all I could manage was, “I needed a drive.”

Another six years after that, you’re rebuilding Apaches in a desert somewhere while I type with hands that aren’t so awkward these days. The night you left, we sat on the curb and split a beer. You said you weren’t sure God exists anymore, and it was the first time I ever thought you could kick my ass. When I saw you under the streetlight, I didn’t see the guy I tackled though a wall in high school, or the guy I punched for mouthing off an ex. I saw that kid I met a decade ago, building something from the pieces in front of him, praying for the bombs to stop. For me to keep my fists at my sides.
Rapture

One day, I hope
to wake & find you
missing.
Broken Bells

In a bronze shell
we hang like heartbeats,

thumping hymns
through limestone veins,

jaws slicked
with Holy Water.

Locked in suspension,
we are wedged

with a splintered yoke
between twisted heaps

of stone, a congregation’s
atonement, a jewel.

We carry our weight,
while hibiscus blossoms

force their way through
cracks in the concrete.
Traps in Plain Sight

I
When I was a kid, my dad
stabbed me with a fork.

More belly than brains, I snuck
bits of brisket from his plate—

There's still a scar if you look close enough.

He struck— hand to fork
to the thin flesh of my hand
like he'd done it before.

II
When Dad was a kid, his pop
took him for a hunt
in the hill country.

There's still a scar if you look close enough.

They sat for days,
With summer's frail browns
and spotless blues

until something shook the brush
until someone bumped the trigger
and buried a bullet in Dad's chest.

III
When Pop was a kid,
he hitchhiked on the backs
of flatbeds from San Marcos
to San Diego.
When he rolled into port
they put a Garand in his hands,
and pushed him into the Pacific.

There's still a scar if you can get close enough.
I know growing up sucks and being eighteen sucks most of all and I wish I could say it gets easier and at times it does, it’s easier just long enough for you to fill your lungs again, just long enough for you to tolerate your shitty complexion for another day maybe just long enough for it to start to suck again and for all that bedwetting loneliness to sucker punch you in the kidneys, I know it’s hard to sit in Econ and know you’ll never need any of that crap because you never planned on being around long enough to need a 401(k) in the first place, I know, but dammit, things change, and sure, you get to keep the pox scars and you still splash your shoes when you pee, but eventually you grow into your shoulders, learn to comb your hair, learn to say hello to pretty girls with only a subtle tremor in your legs, learn that, even if its not today, someday there’ll be something and I know that’s all ambiguous optimistic bullshit, I’m sorry that ambiguous optimistic bullshit wasn’t enough for you to click the safety, turn the car around, and just go back to bed.
The Underachievers
an open letter from Joseph, Son of Mary

When big brother can raise a man from the dead
and call it a Saturday, your family dynamics shift.
Mom becomes a saint, James is suddenly Just,
Simon turns into a zealot and Jude gets a chapter
in the best selling book of all time. All while I
try to carve out enough bowls and hammer enough
nails to get someone besides my father
to remember my name.

How many carts do you have to handcraft
to remind your mom's friends that Jesus
isn't the only one in this family helping the disabled?
And when He came back, who wasn't on his
list of people to see? Sure, he died and you skipped
the funeral and I'm sure
for the weekend his memory was a bit foggy
and he had disciples to commission and kingdoms to build.

So I left Nazareth. Moved to Egypt,
then to Syria, anywhere when I could walk down
the streets without someone stopping to talk
about how awesome my brother is and how
sweet he is with little Gracie and how he never
runs out of wine at parties and how everyone's so proud
that he's gone from our little town out
into the great big Roman Empire to feed all
those hungry people and heal all those sick folks and help
pull all the world's cats from all the world's
trees. I'll gladly keep my sins if it meant getting
my family. No one writes songs when
the carpenter's son stays in the tomb.