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# 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.

*Impulses*

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.

*My Heroes are Jerks*

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.

*Abacadabra*

Santa may grant grandma  
cataracts and a jackass dwarf  
crack, watch an army draft  
karma at a samba class, can  
passably apply whammys  
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 vermilion,  
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 is 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, vermilion when my throat closed.  
She 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.

*A Prayer in Open Water*

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.

*Open Water* continued

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.

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.

*Franklin* continued

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.

*The Butcher's Daughter*

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.

*The First Bump of Many*

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.

*Sparks*

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."

## *LEGO*

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.

*Kyle*

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 after dying  
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.