

Appendix: Fiction Selected for Publication in 2023

Scrapyard

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There's nothing quite like the air of a suburb late at night. A city at night is always populated, whether by the screaming laughter of distant drunks or the rustling of bundled sleeping bags in narrow storefronts. The countryside is empty, but in its own inviting way – the smells of nature and crunch of soil underfoot clear the mind, the stars that fill the sky, watching like a reassuring parent ready to catch you if you fall.

But a suburb at night is truly barren. The flat black sky overhead is as hard and featureless as the concrete underfoot, the air still and neutral, held in stasis. The rows of dark houses are almost pointedly at rest, filling you with a feeling of perverse trespass for daring to walk before them at that hour. The introduction of noise into an environment like that never fails to make me feel guilty. Especially when I have other things to feel guilty about.

That night, I was guilty that I'd lifted my dad's keys again. Guilty about making my parents worry even more about me, if they woke to find me gone again. And most of all, that deeper guilt I felt whenever I visited my brother, that strange sense that I was wronging somebody whom I didn't even know.

So I made my way across the driveway as quickly and noiselessly as possible, fumbled open the backdoor of our car, and fell into the backseat. I couldn't resist slamming the car door closed behind me, so desperate was I to get in. I worried about that for about a second before the calming effect of the car took over. That feeling of protection from the outside, of separation. That the rest of the world didn't exist anymore. I let myself slump back against the seat, tilted my head back, closed my eyes, and waited.

First came the faint stirring of wind, whistling past my face. Then the rumble of the engine, gradually building in force. The sensation of the seat moving beneath me, jostling me slightly. Finally, the darkness of my eyelids began to brighten as sunlight fell upon them. I opened my eyes and looked.

I'm back in that shining afternoon again, sitting in the sun-warmed leather of my brother's car. Rolling green hills fly past the window, the glare of the sun flickering through the knotted greenery of the hedgerows that divide the landscape. Outside the opposite window, a meandering river broadens, stretching out lazily as it senses the end of its journey to the sea. Daylight skips across the water's surface, a gently shifting plain of light. Everything on this quiet country road is the same as it was that day, with just two exceptions that held every time I visited him.

The first was that I was in the backseat. For some reason, this only ever works when I try it in the backseat of our car. I was beside my brother in the passenger seat back then, staring out the windshield as we talked, checking the map on his phone, listening to his stories of settling into his new apartment. Now I was in the back. I was never sure if this was a deliberate choice on his part – something always held me back from asking him – but I have to assume it was, since the other difference was the flat streak of duct tape that covered the rear-view mirror. All I could ever see of him on these visits were his shoulder,

his right hand on the wheel, the back of his head above the seat.

The first time I visited him like this, I had a lot more on my mind than why I was in the backseat instead of the front, or why the mirror was covered. By the time I adjusted and made these trips regular, it felt too late to ask. I spent a few minutes sitting in silence, feeling the tension stir in me as I stared out the window at the water. By now I should have felt calmer. He finally spoke.

“So,” he said, spinning the wheel theatrically to bring us around a tight bend along the river’s edge, “what’s today’s calamity been?”

Normally I’d smile at that. He always made a show of being blasé when I came to him for help, even when we both knew just how seriously he took my problems. Always ready to listen, to provide support. It’s amazing what a calm voice and a firm hand to lift you to your feet can do for you. Today though, I couldn’t seem to find it in me.

“The usual,” I said. And I told him about what had been happening lately. About the trouble I had getting to sleep. About my parent’s clutching obsession with keeping me safe. About how nervous I still was about driving. I told him about something that had happened that day during my trip to school. I was halfway there on the bus when I felt my breath catch, my body tense, heart freeze. I kept thinking of how fast it had been back then, how quickly we’d gone from safety to the explosion of noise and pressure. I ended up getting off the bus early and walking there, was half an hour late. I felt my breath get shallower and my speech quicken as I went on. Soon I wasn’t just talking about today’s events, but the week’s, the month’s. About this horrible, pervasive air of vulnerability I couldn’t shake. This paralysation that followed me everywhere I went, and the weakness and shame and disgust I held for myself when I failed to control it, when I gave in and shut down.

He listened patiently, sitting still. The motion of the drive seemed to settle as he listened, calming down somewhat, though I couldn’t tell if

he had slowed down and stopped turning as sharply or if the winding road we were following was easing out. He eventually broke the silence I'd left when I finished.

He told me what I'd more or less expected. That it was alright to feel that way, that I'd been through a lot. That he knew this was just a bump in the road for me, that I'd be strong enough to overcome it. That life isn't easy for anybody, that we all go through challenges, but that facing them head-on and overcoming them is part of our lot. Part of what makes the upsides worth achieving.

I ended up lashing out, interrupting him, telling him not to say anymore unless it was something I hadn't heard before. I was very angry then, or at least, thought I was. Really, I was terrified. Terrified that my brother, the last person I could rely on to make me feel better, the one person I could count on to give me a reason to keep going, wasn't going to help me. That nobody could. There was nothing I could do but keep going through it, again and again. To march on and on and on.

But I couldn't even admit this to myself, let alone him. So I sniped at his insipid advice, spat at his useless little condolences, told him I'd heard it all before. Asked him if he ever intended to think of something new, or if I could just play a recording of his platitudes the next time I felt the need to see him and save myself the trip.

There was a moment of regret after I'd finished. My brother, as good a listener as he was, always had a short temper. When he lost it, I couldn't help being afraid of him, however old I got. But it didn't come out this time. Instead, he just gave me a dull, muted laugh and kept driving.

"I guess you're right. I'm in a rut. Time to move on," he told me. "I was always a little worried about you, I have to say. Let it hold me back for too long." A slow, exhausted sigh left him before he spoke again. "Time to go. Now."

I sat dumbfounded as the car began to quicken, the road wind more

strongly again. I was surprised by the tremor in my voice when I finally managed to ask him if he was really leaving me.

"No," he said, his hands turning the wheel more sharply, motions exaggerating, "Not leaving you. I'd never leave you. That's been the problem, you know. I couldn't leave knowing you still had problems, but you're always gonna have more problems. It's a dilemma for sure."

Something inside me acknowledged the rattle of the car as we picked up speed, but I barely paid it any mind. All I could do was focus on his words.

"But I can see now," he continued, "that the answer was staring me in the face. I move on, but I bring you with me. We'd be together for good. No more problems."

It's hard to describe the feeling his words had on me. There was something cold in the pit of my stomach, some instinctual fear at what he said. I felt terrified. And yet, I couldn't stop fixating on what he'd said. Moving on. Not in the emotional sense, no meaningless aphorism. Not moving on in the sense of giving up and accepting your beating, or distracting yourself with some petty busywork. Actually moving on from this, all this. Finding something that was, for once, completely new.

The car sped up, faster and faster, the countryside blurring into a haze, the sun flashing blindingly at each flicker through the rows. I could feel what was coming down the road – the sharp turn, that other car. The flash of disbelief and crash of metal, the pressure and pain. My brother seemed to sense the feeling in me.

"Don't worry," he murmured, his voice low and calm, reassuring, "It won't be anything like last time. No pain, no panic. No decades of aftermath. Just one bump and it's all over. Then we can move on to something better. A change for both of us, the first real change either of us have ever really had. Just close your eyes."

The sense of terror and fascination mounted in me, desperately vying

with each other. I thought of what awaited me back home, thought of everything I left, everything I'd have to return to. The endless fear, and shame, and regret. On and on.

The turn was approaching. In just a few seconds we'd be there. I looked through the windshield, trying to see ahead, but we were moving too fast to discern anything. Something else caught my attention instead, something inside the car. A single bright red bead of blood, running up my brother's forearm to his hand on the wheel.

All other thoughts left me as I clutched at the handle of the car door, feeling the roar of wind hit me as I pushed it open. For one moment I froze at the prospect of throwing myself out into the screaming wind and racing tarmac. Then I felt us reach the turn, lurching to the side to go around it and meet the other car. I jumped.

I landed on my driveway, the cold hard ground grating my skin. I landed badly, aggravating the old pain in my leg. Or maybe getting that close to the turn was enough to aggravate it, as if it was scared of meeting that turn again. I pulled myself to my feet, shut the car door, and went back inside.

I never saw my brother again after that. No backseat would bring me back to that road.