

Through the Cracks, Into the Sky

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My friend Michelle and I came of age in the summer of 1986, tripping on acid and playing badminton on a tennis court edged with weeds. The times were hardly auspicious. Caught in Nancy Reagan's long shadow, we were losing the War on Drugs to adults with stiff drinks in their hands and tough love on their lips. We even ran afoul of our authoritarian phys ed teacher and ended up in gym summer school. There, we discovered the failings of a system ostensibly designed to reform inept and otherwise troubled youth falling through the cracks of state-mandated fitness programs. Gym summer school remains, to this day, an ugly blot on our permanent records. It remains, in my memory, the low point of a cruel summer.

When I try to explain everything that happened to us, I do what comes naturally to most convicted offenders; I blame absent parents. Michelle's father, only a year before, had suffered "death by misadventure" in a situation involving several grams of cocaine, a hot tub and a desk clerk at the Starlight Motel next to Burger King. The loss left Michelle a bit unhinged. Once, she tried to explain the official cause of death listed on her father's "gift certificate" and spent hours laughing about her Freudian slip. A self-medicating manic-depressive, my father was hardly the sort of guy who could have steered me straight. To be fair, he did impart, to me, one valuable piece of wisdom. In doing so, he inadvertently gave me and Michelle the intellectual tools to dismiss him out of hand.

He imparted this, his singular nugget, one Saturday morning, a few months before Michelle and I were sentenced to gym summer school. That morning, he found me slumped in our living room couch, tugging strands of synthetic stuffing from a split vinyl cushion and crying. Bristling, he turned from my blotched face and glanced at my eleven-year-old brother, sitting on the floor, hunched over an open book, and our German Shepherd Duke, shredding a sock between his paws. Finally, he looked at Michelle, sprawled

in his TV chair—her MTV chair—looping her bleached bangs around her middle finger and watching Cindy Lauper sass a cop. Michelle pushed her gum against her teeth and blew a large pink bubble to block out my dad's face.

My dad turned back to me. "What the hell's wrong, now?"

"I just got dumped." I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

He considered the acne blossoming on my chin. "If everyone liked you, it would mean something was wrong with you. Just move on."

I picked at a callous on my thumb. My brother leaned over his book and started rocking. Michelle sucked her gum back behind her teeth and muttered what sounded like an obscenity.

My father patted his shirt pocket and considered an ashtray overflowing with the ground-out butts of Pall Malls, Marlboro Reds and Virginia Slims. "No one said you could smoke in the house. Whoever's got them, hand them over."

Michelle finally drew a hard pack of Marlboro Reds from her army surplus bag.

My dad lit a cigarette and slid the pack into his shirt pocket as Mötley Crüe replaced Cindy Lauper in MTV's rotation. "A bunch of hysterics in drag." After a moment, he dropped his half-smoked cigarette, our cigarette, into an empty Tab can. "Get up," he said to my brother. "We have to go next door and tell the Byrds you're going to pay for the damage to their car. We've waited too long."

My brother looked up from a photograph of a Great White shark. He'd gone completely pale. "How am I going to pay them?"

"You can mow lawns. You know what they say. You play, you pay."

"He wasn't doing anything." I wiped a trace of blood from my thumbnail. "He fell over on his bike going down their driveway."

"He shouldn't have been on their driveway."

"You can't even see the scratch," Michelle said.

My dad considered Michelle's studded dog-collar bracelet and squinted at the flaming car wreck on the front of her t-shirt. "What the hell's that shirt you're wearing?"

“The Dead Kennedys. A band. Can’t believe you haven’t heard of them.”

“No-talent hacks trying to get a rise out of people. It’s a disgrace.”

Michelle shrugged. “If everyone liked the Dead Kennedys, something would be wrong with them.”

My dad crossed the room and turned off the television. Without a word, we abandoned my brother and retreated to the attic, a cramped half-finished space that, with posters and candles and incense burners, we’d turned into a shrine to The Doors, Led Zeppelin, Metallica and the Sex Pistols. It was the perfect place to get high. It was badly vented, so unless we opened the window, the smell of skunk weed rarely drifted from the room. I sat down on the floor beside the window, studied a Jim Morrison poster taped to two roof beams and imagined running my fingers across the soft black leather of the Lizard King’s second skin.

“What a hypocrite.” Michelle drew a fresh pack of Marlboros from her bag and handed me a cigarette. “He just said that shit about being liked because no one likes him.”

“Maybe he’s right.” I twisted around and cracked open the window.

“He’s an asshole. Totally testicular. He’s the one who needs to move on.”

Michelle lay down on the floor, and for several minutes, we stared at strips of exposed insulation and listened to Metallica’s *Anaesthesia*. When my dad’s voice drifted up from the Byrd’s driveway, we struggled to our knees and peered over the windowsill. Below, my dad was crouched before the front panel of a gleaming white Monte Carlo SS. My brother stood behind him, picking his nose.

“Your dad might not give a rat’s ass whether or not everyone likes him, but he sure gives a steaming heap of shit about Mrs. Byrd and her car,” Michelle said.

“She doesn’t deserve a Monte Carlo.” I opened the window another few inches and leaned against the screen. “Penny-loafing turd. My mom said she actually polishes the pennies in her shoes every week.”

“Never seen her drive the thing. Bet she doesn’t even know how. When she finally tries, she’ll probably push it down the street, jump on the trunk and roll like she’s on the back of a fucking Big Wheel.”

I nodded silently, as my father backed away from the car and led my brother to the Byrd’s house. With his hand on my brother’s bent shoulder, my father stood beneath a hard plastic awning, rapping on a warped screen door until Mrs. Byrd appeared, wearing khaki pants and holding what looked like lemonade. Michelle pulled away from the sill to fish a brittle roach from an incense burner, and we leaned back against the wall. Jim Morrison pouted at us. Johnny Rotten snarled at us. Robert Plant beckoned us, with upturned palm and a raised finger, to go to California.

Michelle drew a wisp of smoke from a tiny twist of paper pinched in my mom’s tweezers. “Your brother got a raw deal,” she said, exhaling. “And your dad blows chunks.”

“No shit. Mrs. Byrd blows, too.” I took the tweezers from Michelle. “My mom thinks my dad’s fucking her.”

“Your mom’s just drunk.”

“Doesn’t mean she’s not right.”

“Not even your dad could get it up for Mrs. Byrd.” Michelle took back the tweezers and extinguished the remains of our roach between her thumb and forefinger. “Let’s go to Wag’s. I’m jonesing for some pie.”

Leaving the house, we met my dad and brother in the alleyway.

“Your brother screwed up, but he did the right thing.” My dad stepped around the Byrd’s Monte Carlo. “At least he has his self-respect.”

“Mr. Byrd’s still really mad,” my brother said.

My dad lowered his voice. “To hell with that bastard and his lectures.” He turned to me. “It’s just another case in point. Not everyone’s going to like you all the time.” He studied my charm bracelet, a repurposed chain taken from a toilet tank at school and strung with fishing lures, and the Suicidal Tendencies pin on Michelle’s bag. “Sometimes, no one might like you.”

“Even if nothing’s wrong with you,” Michelle said, and we started down the driveway. “Your dad’s an asshole,” she added when we reached the curb.

Michelle wasn’t exactly disposed to give my dad a charitable read, but the fact remains: he was an asshole. A petty tyrant and a complete douche. When he was home, which wasn’t often, he spent practically every minute polishing his ’78 Oldsmobile Cutlass, arguing with my mother, yelling at Duke, ragging me about my appearance, or pushing my brother to make weekly payments to Mrs. Byrd. He didn’t seem to care that Mirabelle Byrd and her scabby twelve-year-old friends, preppy little shits who liked to crank Duran Duran from their ghetto blasters, had started taunting my brother. Every time he pushed our mower down the sidewalk, they’d throw rocks at him and talk shit about his scrawny arms and my dad’s dented Olds. My dad never said a word to Mrs. Byrd. I might have stepped in, but at sixteen, I was far too old to kick Mirabelle Byrd’s bony ass, and my brother might have been even more humiliated if I’d intervened. Anyway, Michelle and I had other things to keep us busy.

Most importantly, we had Michelle’s fourth-hand Corolla, a powder-blue beast plagued with gaping rust holes, creaking struts, and worn brakes that made every encounter with an intersection a terrifying ordeal. We spent our evenings driving around with the windows open, cranking the Violent Femmes and reveling in our newfound mobility. At intersections, we’d pull up alongside seniors from the local college prep school and score half-consumed cans of Budweiser and lit cigarettes, and if we followed them to Shorewood Park, a crude knowledge of anatomy. At the end of the night, some overeager guy from “the Academy” would end up with the promise of another meeting and the phone number of our beleaguered algebra teacher.

Sometimes, we got our kicks in more wholesome ways, by cruising the strip mall on 95th Street to harass random middle-aged couples. In the parking lot, we’d wind around the corner of White Castle, cruise past the discount outlet that sold defective greeting cards (“Let Your Heart Sore This Valentine’s Day” and “Awake to Each New Mourning”), and then shift into

higher gear as we bore down on some unsuspecting couple – usually a pair of forty-something year-olds nuzzling in front of Radio Shack or brushing shoulders over a shared sundae from Baskin Robbins. I’d hang out the passenger window, and in my most plaintive voice, scream some variation of “Hey Dad, you can come home, now. Mom said it’s OK,” or “Hey Dad, can you send Mom this month’s check? We need groceries.”

The expressions on their faces usually told us everything we wanted to know about the nature of their relationship. Most of the time, we simply baffled our victims, but there were still those great moments when florid men would chase our car, waving their fists in deadly combinations of shame and rage. Sometimes, both members of the couple would hang their heads or turn their backs on the street and feign concentration on a window display. We had a lot of fun, that is, until the afternoon we stepped up our game and cruised Weber’s Inn, a seedy establishment known for layover hook-ups originating out of O’Hare. I lit a cigarette and pointed to a couple standing on the littered sidewalk in front of a first-floor room.

“Slow down. These two are perfect,” I said.

I struggled into position in the passenger window, and a rush of warm air blew my hair back. “Hey Dad,” I yelled, “We all want to you to come home. Mom’s not mad anymore.”

I slid back into the car and collapsed into my seat, laughing until I glanced into the rear-view mirror. In its vibrating glass, I saw my father, leaning against a doorframe and staring at the ground, and Mrs. Byrd with her hand over her mouth.

“Your dad’s such an asshole,” Michelle said.

I took a long draw off Michelle’s one-hitter and leaned back in my seat. I didn’t open my eyes until we reached my house. We found my mother slumped at the kitchen table, finishing the last can of beer from a six-pack and smoking.

“I need to talk to you,” she said. “About your father.”

Something in her posture sickened me. “We already know.”

“That he’s a complete asshole,” Michelle muttered, and we went up to the attic to listen to Metallica’s *Fade to Black*.

Nine days later, my father moved out of the house. My mother found a divorce lawyer, switched from Virginia Slims to Lucky Strikes and traded Bud Lights for vodka-Tabs. Michelle, my brother and I went a little feral. We ate dinner at odd times, feasting on burned microwave popcorn and bologna sandwiches. My brother discovered Black Sabbath and started stealing cassettes from Blue Skies Records. For days, he listened to nothing but *Into the Void* and *Fairies Wear Boots*. One week, he went without shoes. Michelle and I graduated from toothpick joints and one-hitters to bowls and two-foot bongos. I stopped washing my hair. Michelle littered with criminal intent, breaking glass bottles against curbs, tossing smoking cigarettes into park trashcans and stuffing candy wrappers and soda cans into public mailboxes.

Michelle and I spent more and more time in the attic, memorizing the lyrics to *Pretty Vacant*, communing with the Lizard King, and creating collages with Krazy Glue and photos from *Creem Magazine*. One fateful night, we wrote all over our arms and legs with a black Sharpie marker.

We'd been talking about knee-capping Mrs. Byrd and speculating on the pain of self-inflicting prison tattoos when Michelle pulled the Sharpie from her bag.

"Fuck pins. You'd get AIDS or some shit. But it would look cool."

She stripped off her shirt and started drawing on her arms, all the way up to her bra straps. She drew the Dead Kennedy's logo on her wrist, first, and then worked her way up to her shoulders with pot leaves, Ozzy lyrics, a snake and something resembling testicles. Then she slid out of her jeans and covered her legs with scrawled swear words and lines approximating her skeletal structure. When she finished, she sprawled across the floor and extended the marker to me. I undressed quickly and considered the freckled canvas of my skin. In large letters, I wrote the names of ten guys in our high school on my calves, drew arrows upward along each of my inner thighs and scrawled "Into the Void" along each arrow. Finally, I wrote "Pig" on the back of my thighs, beside our gym teacher's name, and the crude names of improbable sexual positions on my inner arms.

"It's too fucked-up." Michelle opened a jar of bubble solution and forced a stream of cigarette smoke through the loop at the end of a small plastic wand. Smoke-filled bubbles drifted to the floor and, one by one, exploded in tiny mushroom clouds.

I studied the sudsy fallout covering wooden planks. "Too fucked-up for what? Prison tattoos?"

Michelle crawled to my side and took the marker from my hand. For several minutes, she drew flowers and polka-dotted mushrooms on my shoulders. "Now, it's like Robert Plant's shirt in the *Song Remains the Same*." I twisted around and traced the outline of a flower with my fingertips until Michelle gently pushed my hand away. "Let it dry."

The writing, in terms of passing gym class, was on the wall. By the time we came down, we were too tired to scrub away swathes of graffiti and utterly indifferent to the fact that we had to be in gym class for the start of a swimming unit in nine hours. Just before midnight, we fell asleep on either end of the living-room couch, in the television's flickering light.

The next morning, we surveyed the damage and did some quick math. We were already failing gym due to several unexcused absences, intentional high-sticking, vandalized tennis racquets and grossly sub-standard performances in aerobic routines inspired by our gym teacher's love of Jane Fonda and leg warmers. Then, circumstance conspired against us. I felt the first cramp fifteen minutes before the start of gym class, in the parking lot of the Park District Rec & Ed (Wreck & Head) facility across the street from our high school. I suppose I should have read the signs earlier, but I'd been feeling ugly and adrift for so long I hadn't noticed anything unusual about my mood or the fact that my pants had grown tight over the last two days.

"I got my period." I bent over and examined the crotch of my slashed jeans. "It's way early."

"Better than way late," Michelle said, tracing a glorious silver lining, at least, around my miserable mess.

We entered the locker room five minutes after class started. If things had been different, we might have stepped out onto the pool deck in our threadbare swimsuits and braved ridicule for the scrawl covering our

limbs. We might have flailed our way through forty minutes of cannonballs, wedgies and clumsy front-crawling. We might have avoided the whole mess of gym summer school. But fate, or at least the Park District's negligent custodial staff, had not favored us. When Michelle emerged from a bathroom stall in her swimsuit, I was kicking the side of a tampon wall dispenser and cursing.

"It ate my quarter."

Michelle came to my side and pounded the dispenser with her palm. "Fucking thing's always empty. You should get some toilet paper, dude."

When I came from the bathroom, we sat down on a narrow bench between two rows of steel lockers. I held my abdomen and rocked back and forth.

"Maybe you can get a plug from someone," Michelle said.

"They'll know, then, and everyone'll be skeeved out when I get in the water. They'll freak out about AIDS or some shit."

"Seriously? You haven't fucked around that much."

"Compared to who? You?"

Michelle gripped the edge of the bench, flexed her toes and hummed quietly to herself.

"Maybe I should just go out there," I finally said. "Get in quickly. If you hand me a towel when I get out, I might not drip on the tiles."

Michelle rubbed a smudge on her knee and shook her head. "Don't chum the water for those assholes. It'll be a shark frenzy. They'll never let you live it down."

I studied a Dead Kennedys logo on her wrist, and our reflections in the spotted mirrors facing either end of the bench. Michelle and I looked pale, almost sickly, under the fluorescent lights. Goose bumps had appeared on our arms. For the next few minutes, we sat in silence, hemmed in by an infinity of reflections, listening to the drip of a leaking faucet and trailing our toes along moldy grout.

We should have left then, but my legs had cramped. "Everything hurts."

Michelle stood up and pulled her bag from an open locker. She rummaged through its contents, spilling pens and a pair of tweezers on the floor, and handed me a plastic Pepsi bottle filled with rum and Coke. "Maybe it'll help. Can't hurt."

I took a long swig, and for the rest of first-period, while our classmates modelled bikinis or slouched over rolls of fat, we passed the bottle back and forth, until the hum of fluorescent lights merged with the guitar reverb in our heads.

"We're fucked, now," I said, a half hour into class. My toes, by then, had gone numb.

"It's fucking gym. What the fuck are they going to do?"

What they did was suspend us from gym altogether, one hour after Ms. Stolzbauer came into the locker room and found us drinking, and fifty-nine minutes after Michelle lifted her middle finger and spit on the tampon dispenser. On the basis of our priors, we received failing grades in phys ed and orders to attend an intensive eight-week summer course, "Remedial Fitness Review," a.k.a. gym summer school.

Very few people actually manage to fail gym, and our school district met enrolment by opening "Remedial Fitness" to freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors from five adjoining suburbs. Our cohort, as a result, contained some of the worst elements distilled from nine different schools – exceptionally unmotivated and anti-social types, the sort of people incapable of feigning sobriety or forcing themselves to participate in scripted group activities. In gym summer school, Michelle and I met punks with dozens of piercings and real 'prison tattoos.' Girls with much older boyfriends who bought them vodka. Led Heads, Motorheads, Dead Heads and all sorts of acidheads, along with the only two guys in Chicago's western suburbs who drove low riders. Drug dealers instead of casual pot smokers. Lots of guys with long hair, weathered leather jackets and wallets secured to back pockets with chains. And, inexplicably, a total prep from "the Academy" wearing a mint-green shirt and reeking of Drakkar.

"This rocks," Michelle said on our first morning of class. We'd just finished watching a short film about fungal infections, little knowing our

instructor Mr. Cox, in turning off the projector, had effectively finished teaching for the summer.

“Seriously, check that shit out.” I rolled my eyes towards a guy in a denim Pink Floyd jacket. “He looks like David Gilmore in *Live at Pompeii*.”

“Pink Floyd sucks. But go for it. He’s a dealer at South. I know this girl who went down on—”

Before Michelle finished her sentence, Mr. Cox scraped his fingernails on a chalkboard to get everyone’s attention. He was kind of hot, and so we gave him half a chance.

“I’m not your parents—” he began.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Michelle muttered.

“—And I’m not going to babysit any of you—”

“—Don’t take the brown acid—”

Mr. Cox paused. The guy who looked like David Gilmore checked us out.

“But I expect you to show up on time every morning and follow the instructions I hand out. When you’ve completed the required activities—”

“We can blow you—”

“—You can do whatever the hell you want,” Mr. Cox said, blushing.

“I bet he took this shitty gig to support a drug habit,” Michelle whispered. “Or make alimony payments.”

Mr. Cox raised his voice. “But I don’t want to see anyone wandering off the property until I dismiss class.” With that, he passed around an outline of a four-hour workout regimen consisting of a half-mile jog and vaguely specified exercises involving shotputs.

From that morning on, Mr. Cox took attendance at the start of class and then disappeared for long stretches to talk on a pay phone across the street from Westmont High. We – members of the general pop – were left to our own devices, to sort shit out and get in shape on our own.

During our first week, we drank Jack Daniels and meandered around the track, singing *We’re Off to See the Wizard* and stumbling into guys just to get their names. We sipped “McMartinis” out of fast food cups and played volleyball with burners and freaks. As the dog days of summer

unfolded, we graduated to bong hits beneath the bleachers and acid tabs on tennis courts with crooked lines and sagging nets. We leapt over painted lines floating above green pavement and imagined flat tennis balls leaving perfect holes in the sky. Birds perched on the batting cage spoke a long-lost language that Michelle and I could almost understand. My fingers seemed alive to every fiber of a leather baseball mitt, and I communed with the spirits of cows slaughtered for America’s pastime. We swallowed prescription pills stolen from someone’s mom, and I puked in some bushes while Michelle did Whip-its and laughed at her hands. We developed chronic vertigo and avoided heights above three feet, opting for the shade beneath wooden slats and steel risers when we made out with bleacher leeches, as we called the guys from Downers Grove North.

Neither one of us was cut out for hard drugs. My face broke out. I said incomprehensible things to strangers. Once, reeking of pot and gin, I asked the cashier at Qwik Mart for a pack of Marlboros in front of a cop and spent the rest of the day battling paranoia. In Michelle’s case, acid fostered speculation about the afterlife. That might have been fine, but some of the prescription pills pooled by the Gym Summer School Class of ’86 turned Michelle’s speculation into deep rumination on her father’s final misadventures. She always pulled out of it, usually with the right Violent Femmes tune, until the morning the guy from “the Academy” got a swirlie.

That morning, he showed up in an Izod tracksuit and walked into the guy’s locker room wearing more cologne than usual. We later heard he’d been wafting Drakkar around and bragging about his dad’s Corvette when three guys in spandex shoved his head into a toilet and flushed five times to shut him up and purge the stench. Michelle and I had been sitting in the football stands for an hour, de-stringing tennis racquets and nibbling on shrooms, when he stumbled onto the track with his hair plastered across his face, coughing up toilet water and gasping for breath.

“Wonder who he pissed off,” Michelle said.

“Everyone.”

Michelle shook her head. “I almost feel sorry for him.”

I pulled another dried mushroom from my pocket. "I wonder if you can catch HIV from toilets. You know, if you have a cut or something."

"Probably depends on what people are flushing."

"You got to wonder why he's here. Probably failed lacrosse or golf."

Michelle watched him peel his polo shirt from his back and wipe a streak of snot from his cheek. When he bent over and retched, she rested her elbows on her knees and studied his bluish-white skin and the red flush beneath his nose.

"I wonder if that's what my dad looked like when he drowned. His hair plastered. Fucking red nose. Cokehead nose."

I slipped the mushroom between my lips, and a bitter taste flooded my mouth.

Michelle turned to me. "They said it was a whirlpool. One of those Jacuzzis."

I closed my eyes for what seemed a long time. When I opened them, the guy was gone, and Michelle was staring at a dark watermark on the track. We sat in silence, watching its edges shrink until nothing of the mark remained.

"I never saw his body. It was closed casket. You know?"

I nodded and looked up at the sun. Its warmth joined with my own, connected me to everything and the open sky and then faded. The birds were talking again, and I became distracted until Michelle tapped my foot with the bottom of her shoe.

"They should have let me see him. Say good-bye. He just went out one night and never came back. Checked into that shithole." Michelle dropped a burning cigarette between two bleachers. "I never even saw the place."

"Just some shitty motel. Same as all the rest."

"I want to go see it." I shook my head, but Michelle dropped her cigarettes into her purse and rose unsteadily to her feet.

That morning, we pulled away from Westmont High two hours before class ended. Michelle drove distractedly and chain-smoked. I

rummaged through the battered cassettes in her glove compartment and settled finally on Husker Du's *Zen Arcade*. The B-side. Something serious, because we weren't going to the Starlight Motel for our usual dip-shitted kicks. Michelle needed to know something about her dad's last days. To feel close to him. I didn't fully understand. I'd always thought he was an asshole. And I was shrooming hard. But I went along for the ride. For Michelle.

A half-hour later, we rolled up to the Starlight and parked beneath a scuffed marquee advertising Jacuzzis, cable TV and weekly rates.

"It was room 37." Michelle pointed to a door marred by a long scratch. "I saw the number in a newspaper picture. Behind police tape. When they thought it had something to do with him owing money."

We spent several minutes smoking and staring at the litter surrounding our car. Styrofoam takeout containers and rusting beer cans. Tattered, windblown magazines. A plastic whiskey bottle caught in the wind, rolling back and forth between two curbs. Used condoms flattened on the pavement. Neither one of us spoke until Michelle pointed to a maintenance guy pushing a cart along the sidewalk fronting the rooms.

"Maybe he'll let us in. I'll tell him my dad and I checked out this morning and I forgot something." Michelle ground out a cigarette in the ashtray and opened the driver's door.

"You shouldn't go in." I trailed off and watched her walk across the parking lot. Then, with difficulty, I crawled from her car.

If I'd been more together, I might have dragged Michele away from the Starlight. I hesitated, though, and then tripped on a crack in the asphalt. By the time I caught up with her, she'd already told the maintenance guy some bullshit story about staying in Room 37 with her dad the night before, after the electricity at her house went out. About how her dad had gone to work, and she couldn't find her house keys. I don't know if the maintenance guy actually believed her, but he pulled a master key from his paint-splattered pants.

"Don't look like it's been cleaned yet," he said, following us into the room.

The room looked like it hadn't been cleaned since Michelle's dad had checked out, so to speak. Soiled sheets hung down the side of a king-sized bed. An overflowing ashtray sat on the nightstand, surrounded by empty wine bottles and overturned plastic cups ringed with dark sediment. A shade rested crookedly on the cracked ceramic base of a lamp. A red lipstick smear covered the mirror above the dresser. Used condoms hung over the edge of a small wastebasket. One lay on the carpet, beside a small desk.

Michelle stared at her reflection in the mirror and studied the scrawl on a motel notepad. Then, she stepped onto a tile platform and stood at the edge of a hot tub. She looked down. I stood beside her and looked down with her.

Beneath us, a chalky film floated upon a pool of dark water. The water had receded just enough to reveal a thick ring of soap scum, a clump of long hairs clinging to the tub's finish, and a long red rust stain beneath the faucet. A bloated washrag hovered over a clogged drain.

"What, you left your wallet in the tub?" The maintenance guy came up behind us, looked into the tub and then wandered across the room to look into the garbage can. "Looks like you ladies had a little party last night. Take it you didn't invite your dad. It's cool with me. If you ladies want to keep it going, I'm game."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at us while I pulled Michelle away from the hot tub. While Michelle threw up in the toilet. When we stumbled from the room and peeled out of the parking lot.

We never went back to gym summer school that day. Or any other day. When we got home, we found my brother on the living room couch, curled up in my Dead Kennedy's shirt. Duke was lazing on the floor, staring at the muted television set. Michelle sat down in her MTV chair, and I sat down on the floor and stroked Duke's face and cooed. His whiskers bristled, and his ears turned like finely tuned antennae to my voice. I rubbed my check against his muzzle, pulled myself from the floor and sat down on the couch. I brushed a wisp of hair from my brother's forehead, then, and saw fresh scratches and bruises.

"You OK?"

My brother nodded. Routine humiliation had permanently altered his young features.

"We're going to the park. Wanna' come with us?"

When he stood up, the hem of my t-shirt dropped to his knees, and I wondered how soon he'd grow into the shirt, into everything of mine.

When we left the house, Mrs. Byrd appeared in the window of her side door. I gave her the finger, and she drew away from the glass.

"You shouldn't have done that," my brother said.

"She can't face mom, and she sure as shit isn't going to come after us."

"Guess she didn't have the guts to move in with your dad," Michelle said.

"Who would? The Quail Lake complex is a complete hole."

I paused to let Duke urinate on the front tire of Mrs. Byrd's gleaming Monte Carlo. Michelle took a long drag off a cigarette and ashed on the car's hood while a pool of urine gathered on the driveway. Then, we all walked to Shorewood Park, smoking and cussing and talking shit like real badasses when we passed a stunned Mirabelle Byrd and her terrified friends.

At the park, Michelle and I settled into some rusted swings. My brother stood at the edge of a small pond, throwing stones to send ripples through a layer of algae. Michelle pushed her heels into the dirt and reached into her bag for our one-hitter.

"We shouldn't do it while my brother is around," I said.

"You're right." Michelle pulled her hand from her bag. "I can't deal with gym summer school. It's messing with my head."

"It's a totally bad scene."

"We should blow it off."

"What happens if someone fails gym summer school?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe we'll get expelled. Or maybe we'll just have to repeat gym summer school next year."

"But we'll still have to make up for failing regular gym this year. And then repeat gym summer school. It'll just keep going."

the madison review

Michelle watched my brother gathering rocks. A flock of ducks paddled around the edge of an algae bloom, and he waited for them to pass.

“What can they do?” Michelle shrugged. “It’s fucking gym summer school.”

She pushed back on the swing, let gravity pull her forward in a gentle arc and kicked her feet in the air. I followed her movements, tugging on the chains in my hands to gain momentum, rising more quickly and falling more precipitously with each pass, and hanging suspended for a longer moment each time I reached a new height. Maybe I was just messed up, but when I leaned back and saw my scuffed black boots almost touching the clouds and the soft yellow sun beyond them, I felt like everything was quietly connected, perfectly still and intolerably beautiful.