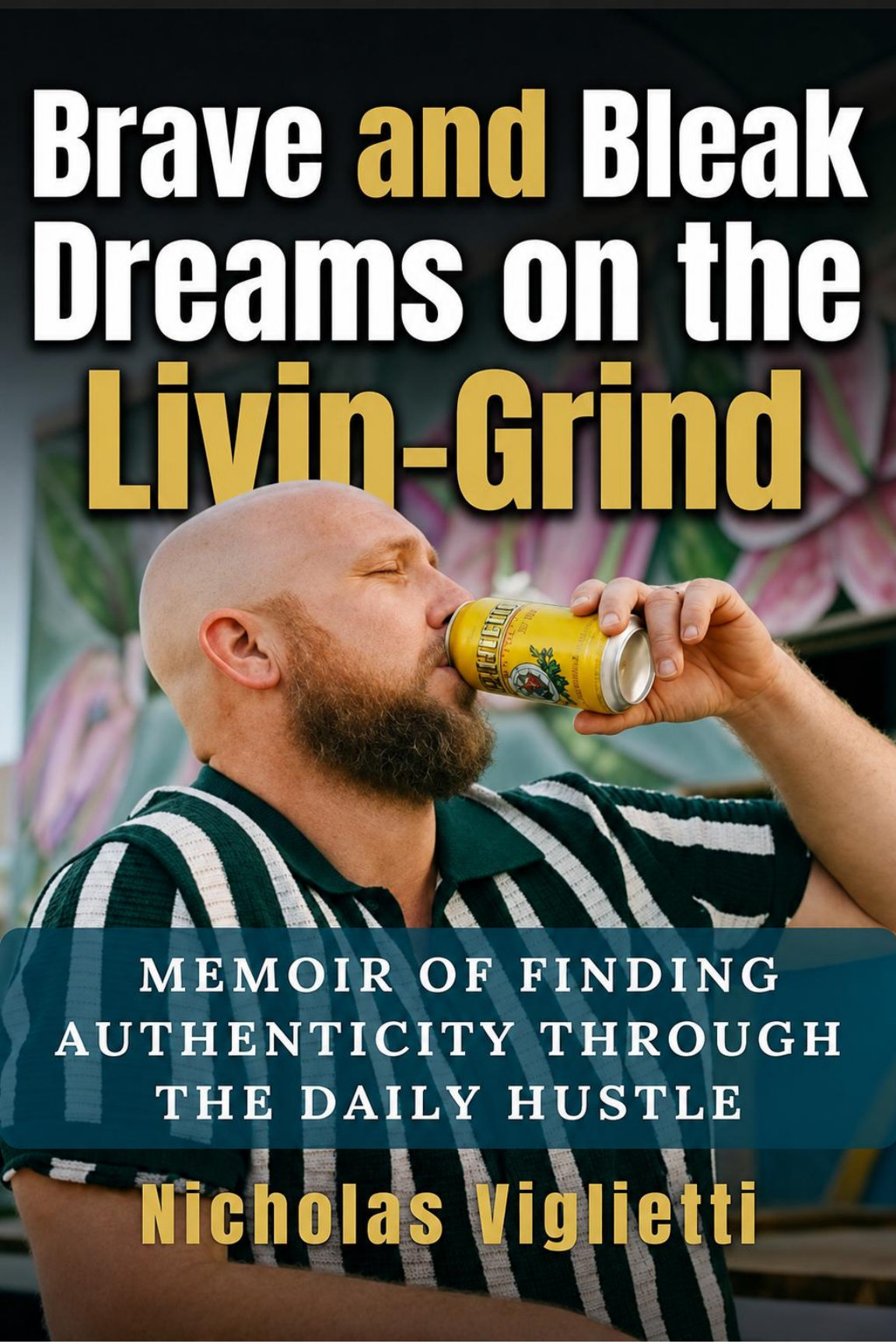
Brave and Bleak Dreams on the Livin-Grind



MEMOIR OF FINDING AUTHENTICITY THROUGH THE DAILY HUSTLE

Nicholas Viglietti

Brave and Bleak Dreams on the Livin-Grind:

Memoir of Finding Authenticity Through the Daily Hustle

By Nicholas Viglietti



Copyright © 2026 by Nicholas Viglietti

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

Second Shore Publishing

Acknowledgements: Thanks to all and any journals, media platforms, and magazines, literary or dicey dealers of wild narratives, that published these stories and poems. Some are old yarns too strong to ignore, and some are brave babbles that a broke writer goin' for broke will always bet his bottom dollar on. Thanks for the belief in true lines because you dared to believe.

I haven't found a drug yet that can get you anywhere near as high as a sitting at a desk writing, trying to imagine a story no matter how bizarre it is, [or] going out and getting into the weirdness of reality and doing a little time on the Proud Highway. – Hunter S. Thompson

Dedicated to Mom & Pops.
Thanks for it all, especially dreams and long shots.

Short Shrift on the Livin-Grind

(2014—North Coast, Humboldt County, Arcata, California)

Behind the redwood curtain, up on the North Coast—the rugged edges of the Golden State—I used to buck hay to pay my way through college. I was enrolled at Humboldt State University, HSU as it was known at the time.

An even better name for the college was Hills and Stairs University, and you didn't rush when you were late. You simply admired the view of that blue ocean, the long blue that seemed to drift into the abyss as it melded with the sky to become the horizon line. You'd still get to class, chest puffin' and sweaty.

I was a frat-migo, and a sorority chica that I knew hooked me up with a job at the hay and feed store called 3 C's Hay & Grain. It was on the outskirts of town, right where the 299, paved westward blaze for the Pacific, merged with the 101 south.

Barry Cranzella had owned the property since the 60's, and as a matter of fact, I think he purchased it not long after he had graduated from HSU. He operated a logging business there for years. Then, somewhere at the end of the 80's, he decided to make the ole switcherroo and sell livestock feed – can't stop working type-of breed.

He was gruff, sharp as broken glass, had a vicious temper, and the slightest error would summon his wrath. Ya learned fast, and if you survived the first week, that sign on the wall at the apex of the barn made sense: the right way, the wrong way, and the Barry C way.

His management style was chill, all the way up until the slightest deviation from his expectations that weren't

explained to ya, and even the lousiest chud could figure out ya just had to ride out a verbal thrashing from a hard, who learned in a harder day.

A better credo for the feed joint was the hard way, the harsh way, and you learn to do it that way, because it sucks to move 140-pound bales of alfalfa grass twice. Suffice to say, ole Barry C was coarse as steel wool, albeit underneath that grizzly bear hide of an old loggerhead was a sweet heart and a kind man. He took care of his people.

I learned a lot on the fly, catchin' a drift, and didn't let it affect the strict adherence to my party schedule. The unparalleled aspect of college is the raunchy, wild fun. It bubbles right below the surface of possibility, like a Nile crocodile ready to strike any prey of revelry that drinks the night's rollicking fun. Pick a day: Twisted Tuesday, Wasted Wednesday, Thirsty Thursday, the list goes on….

Up there, among those towering, ancient redwoods, it's known as the Emerald Triangle, and the weed was almost as native and plentiful as foliage endemic to the area. No shortage of rowdy rage-heads to get after it with, and the cold jagged coastline meant there would always be a plump babe-a-cita, requiring a snuggle. So what if you're her sixth back-up plan? You play like a pro when you get a chance to jam.

I slayed babes and carved waves, partied on, and maintained the passing grade. I earned regular status at all of Arcata's shittiest dives. As itineraries went, it was only rough on those early mornings, opening the shop.

In the haze of the shine-side of a rising sun, a hay truck waited to get unloaded – 6 AM is cruel on wastrel shoulders.

Moe, our warehouse manager (we called him M) was at the gate, unlocking it, and yelled at me, “Why didn’t you let this fucker in?!”

“You’re the manager. I don’t even have a key!” I yelled back from my champagne Cavalier.

“Good point, and good morning. Now, get your ass to work!” he blustered, and hocked a wad of chew-spit. M just loved fuckin’ with everybody, every day.

I removed the tarp from the hay load, and M did his thing on the hay-squeeze, essentially, a huge forklift that could move truckload stacks of hay.

Some customers arrived to get urgent loads of twenty hay bales, and two feeble ladies that always came early to get the freshest bird feed. It would have been the same if they got it later in the day, but senescence affixes people in their ways.

Barry arrived. “You got it handled?”

“Like a six-pack of C-lattes! (Coors Light),” I fired back, and he chuckled on the head-shaking end of my peculiarities. It was always fun to rip weird lines like that at Barry.

The morning rush stalled out. I decided to inspect the brooder—a heated, refrigerator-size contraption with levels to separate the different species of baby chicks and turkeys. People would buy ‘em to raise and lay eggs or eventually eat.

I figured the shit trays could use a clean out, and the food and water could be refilled. We’d take the thing down in a few days.

I grabbed the wheelbarrow, food, and water, and headed to the brooder. I flung open the doors like an ole-west gunslinger entering a saloon.

There were five levels of frantic, curious, chirping birds, catching a glimpse of a world they hadn't seen and didn't know.

Everything was as it should be. I refilled the food, the water, and then grabbed the dead baby birds. I counted 8 chicks, 2 turkeys, and tossed them in the wheelbarrow. Then I dumped in the shit trays and cleaned up the death-pecked parts of the dead runts that were left behind. They were short shrift on the livin-grind.

I closed the brooder and wheeled the remains to the far edge of the property and dumped the contents down the slope that ran into that Mad River. It rolled out to sea, the surf, and eternity, and later, I'd snag waves there, in the vibrant fade of the sun, and roar off to a party by virtue of being alive.

Delta King & the Hair of the Hallucinating Dog

(2014—Cap-City, Sacramento, CA)

I woke up to the valley pulse. Thumps of the skull. A standard morning after a Festivus night. Here in this town, a city, really, it always seemed like small town noise. But that was before I knew a lick of shit.

I'd returned to my hometown of Sacramento with aged features, but maturity hadn't caught up. Once the livin-grind kicks the hell out of you, the city limit stretch of grid-crossin' pavement over midtown, in comparison to other sprawls of the Golden State, ride your blistering hangover quite nicely.

Out the window of a sliding glass door hung the dismally gray sky over the vast flatland. I could barely see across the river with my bleary booze-battered eyes, but I could make out the structure of the Capitol. At least the brain still functioned.

On the hardwood floor, my buddy, Shaz-dawg snarled snores of unconscious mental misery. We'd grown up together, and were roommates back then on a beach that rode borderlines.

Music played rapturously, but not in euphoric motion. It was mechanical, an ear-grind in the kind of way that compels you to start smashing machinery or whatever's in hand's distance. Destroy anything to make the awful sounds stop.

Get drunk & get a grip, I thought. It was all I wanted, so I staggered to my feet, shoeless on one side, the style of good nights and bad mornings.

I felt inclined to get ruthless after cracking a fresh & icy C-latte (Coors Light). I centered myself in a suit that looked

better last night. At least it was still intact and was on my body, albeit fragmented around the living room. The tie was twisted around the flesh that encapsulated my skull.

Sips from the blue mountain aluminum settled my brain. I was the only creature awake. I hated the sounds, rage boiled, action loomed, and luckily, Lazer chimed in from the second floor hallway of his loft that we were apparently in.

“Hey! WTF dude! Don’t do that; I’ll turn the shit off!” blared his holler. I didn’t care, I just wanted the nuisance handled, though my methods would’ve handled things with quicker efficiency.

I sipped and stared out the window. It's an admirable ole farm-to-mouth government center. I reflected on last night’s Delta King Festivus that many of us who consumed party powder couldn’t really remember. I saw a pile of leftover fun powder on the table and decided to rip skull splitters till I equalized, like Denzel.

Shaz-dawg garbled awake. Alright, I’ll be honest, I tried to front load a beer bottle into his mouth, but that was only because Xmas eve was gettin’ away. We had cheer to drink and family experiences to survive with mind shattering hangovers.

Our buddy, Rugo, built like a slab of granite, and enough forehead to split a rock of the same matter in half, emerged from whatever corner cave he claimed. He was buffed-up, bleary-eyed, and wrecked from last night’s atrocities.

“Doods…chill night…one for the books…should we start drinking?” he proposed.

“Way ahead of you,” raising my open beer-can, and his crazed smirk approved.

Shaz-dawg snarled a hack of a hoarse, buttery lung cough, and sprung awake like a vicious beast roused out of its precious slumber. We sipped commercialized frozen cans to numb our swollen mental matter, like icepacks that soothe a twisted ankle. Exterior aches require cold compression, and interior aches require the liquid ice of Rocky Mountain cans.

Cap-city slowly buzzed a pulse of life. It felt nice in relation to our SoCal frenzy of a big city with its tubed seaside mindsets—always a rush and never a chance to register.

"Ahhhh, shit. I got to get out of here and away, especially from you animals," Shaz-dawg declared.

"Then let's get-a-move-on," I said. "I can only achieve worse here." I slugged my beer like Stone Cold and demolished two rippers. I felt like manic paradise.

We said groggy farewells to Lazer and Rugo, and shot east where cannibalistic mountains, out on the horizon, braced for the storm surge. We gorged on quick breakfast burritos, talked about aspirations, anything to distract us from the notion that if we couldn't be happy here, then out there held no hope. He dropped me off on the G-Bay end of things, where foothills rose to mountains.

"Hell of night, bro-migo," I said from behind shades of gold rims that Ric Flair would give a "Wooooo!" of approval. "I guess we'll black-out again soon,"

"Whatever. Sure. I hate all my decisions, right now," his words popped fast like a shotgun. He sounded like a man with grievances that only he could answer.

"Don't we all, amigo, don't we all," I reflected, because that was it, and there was nowhere to go with what can only be felt and never explained.

I eased open the parent's front door. Our tiny, furious black-and-white terrier, Ripsi, greeted me. Her eyes swirled like a galactic nucleus, which was bizarre. Her normal eyes were like a hunting shark's rage.

My buzz dwindled. I needed a shower and a nap to set me right. Energetic party drugs require fresh application or the vessel dies like a flower deprived of sunlight, but we ain't flowers and you suck shit up for the people you love.

I greeted the family. My lovely mother spun into an expostulated torrent about the dog's erratic behavior. They had almost put her down, because the dog was loopy with love, and I couldn't blame them. I'm not used to that, and never quite know how to take it.

"Nico," my momma said, "I tell ya, her eyeballs were as big as saucers, and she was entranced by the ceiling. I figured she ate rat poison or something, and was hallucinating before she died."

I chuckled, thinking the pooch was brave, going out like the author of her own world. She was a strange, mean bitch of a creature most of the time. So, my momma's unnatural description was difficult to grasp, considering my own fuzzy mental faculties.

I cracked a kitchen beer—a *steady buzz for a person to remain steady*, *I thought*—and listened to my mother. She hammered out the details that had spiraled into a midnight run to the veterinary ER.

Ripsi was doomed. They didn't know what was wrong, and we all pull early cords when frantic. Luckily, the Doc on duty said, "Give it a day. See if this diminishes and she returns to normal."

The behavior had been going on since 6 p.m. the precious evening, right after I left for the Festivus celebration on the Delta King, and by their accounts, it finally subsided. It was a heavy, wild, and outlandish story.

I thought, *what weird shit could the pooch have eaten in the backyard? I mean she has the glazy-eyed happiness of a whopping hallucinogenic trip, but damn, what's she munching on in that backyard, gotta scavenge some, myself.*

I was depleted, smelled of deviance, and I needed hot water and a quick 30-minute power nap.

"Well, that's unusual," I said. "However, she seems giddy enough, now." Then, Ripsi exhibited her regularly vicious nature with a hell-fang chomp on my brother's pant-leg. He had tried to fuck with her and learned the hard way about her veracity of "don't fuck with me."

He screamed, "Oh fuck! I think she's back to normal!"

I snickered. We all come back to our baseline beast. "Waddayaknow," said my mom. "It's a regular Festivus miracle. The bitch lives!"

I snorted a laugh of ejected beer out of my nostrils. We hugged because it's easier to laugh and love through uncertainty than to get mad and grieve it. I went to shower, and in my childhood bedroom, I saw the shredded baggie and crumbs of a pot-brownie that, if cut properly, could wreck three adult men.

Ripsi had devoured the whole thing.

I began to sweat and didn't know who I wanted to be.

Exhausted Legs & Churned Crazed

(2015—Where Stars are Buried, Golden State, California)

Glitz, glamour and ruffled madness…it all gets congested and detested under the smog laced cloak that drowns the starlight over L.A. The days don't look much better. Scorched haze while the sidewalks get stalked with the grimmest grins on the West Coast side of the livin-grind.

Tawdry and sprawling wide, these city limits slow the traffic in a metropolis built for speed. Days run long and deep; feet beg for sleep, while fleeting scenes fuel brave hearts, stoke the merit in their meat and help them outrun the failure of the low-down beat. It takes guts to scrap on in the face of utter defeat.

Ultimately, in the end, when we finally break, the grit in our years is evidence that our perseverance was tougher than the blunders determined to snap our spines.

Down gritty blocks, the zombie-hearts scatter and get crinkled, confused, and burned, while insanity rattles the minds across the city of angels with an axe to grind. Human brains don't react well to incongruities: the rise of hell-speed clout trapped in the turtle pace of heavy traffic.

After you rip a first run through L.A., you learn that you don't need to venture far from the area of the city you visit. It's one of those things you won't get until you learn it the hard way: the parties start too late and the bars close too early.

The frenzy reverberates like tsunami swells on the beach of the central nervous system, molecules pump lunacy, and everybody is trying to get nowhere in a hot rush of a hurry. Always busy, always grid-locked, and the gritty blight hardens souls like statues, which become relics of the plight. It's one of

those rarely true, seaside cities, where you can barely see the beach.

It’s one of them places that thrives on contradictions. All cities have a cadence, and L.A. ain’t no different. It's a dart-game city, portrayed as bulls-eye precision, like the boasted skills of a bar-edge burn-out who omits the caveat of better days. He'll talk slick, overly confident, and he’ll wager beers on accuracy, but the shakes from his dry booze crazed bones can’t hold his dick straight enough to nail the water in the bowl.

You’ll notice the sheen, its vapid dazzle on the streets. Somehow, for reasons only the universe can manifest, there’s still the ability in that rubber-neck city to twinkle pretty. It shines bright; it shimmers from a balcony view, like radiant paloma straw in a drink where every sip is a loaded slurp of mirage-flavored glitz.

I’ve been on rooftops in Hollywood; cute cocktails leaned on the dangle of a tall railing. I’ve drained beer bottles, all the way to last call, at the Frolic Room, a cave style hole of neon grime, a stool fight against the weight of humanity.

If you couldn’t tell, I’m haunted by that major motion city. One particular year, when I was more beast than bro-migo, the November snows came cold to the deep north state, and my chill-stricken bones evolved from iguana skin. I need warm, sunny air or I get nasty like wakin’ up from a hungry hibernation. You don’t fuck around with grizzlies for fun; it's a short-term sport for old or bold pros.

I had just spent 6 months breakin’ my back out in the wildlands, employed by the Forest Service, where I learned how to live like a bear who carried tools and a house on his back.

When I arrived at a solution to peel off my furry hide and get back to flesh that stands upright, I swung up on a steel-frame bicycle and cruised the golden lanes going south.

I was teratosis man meat, downhill slidin' my twenties, and the only logical move was to pedal a velocipede out of Sacramento's flatland valley, over East Bay Hills, and make the finish line. Which was at some point—after pedal heavy madness, exhausted legs, and a churned craze—would land me on a border town beach in San Diego*, America's Finest City*.

You guessed it: it was a tough.

I thought gettin' to the coast, just south of Santa Cruz, would be an easy two-day roll, which turned into a rough lesson in navigational judgment. It took a week and a half, short declines, lots of inclines, roadside release of rage, and lots of tire tubes.

Then, one glorious day, I hit Highway 1 South, and the view off the handlebars looked like the warped beauty you see after ingesting a heavy dose of mush-sprouted magic that makes still trees dance. The jagged cliffs of the Golden State, shrouded by ancient, red bark trees like organic skyscrapers.

Hot damn! It's sublime and makes the transition from wild, trail-freak to urbane stud, suitable to fit the function of society's mold.

I was gettin' cave-man trim on the sweat fueled ramble. Sleeping bags are good for the soul. I was suckin' on beer-bottles and chompin' on gas-station burritos, and anybody that caught a glimpse of me would have mistaken me for a man from a different time-period (a la *Encino Man*), sportin' a damn fine, drive your eyes blind, Hawaiian shirt.

While I was curbside chillin' in Guadalupe, CA, a trio of bro-migos from Oregon crossed my path. They invited me to ride with them, but they'd be done in L.A.

"Let's cruise," I said, rippin' a shaka hand signal.

The road rolled, as roads are designed to move, and you eventually get to where your sights are aimed. We hit the slither of a sidewalk, like a concrete snake across the sand. It was the shine-side of a sunny day. Our flock of two wheels floated the pathway over Venice beach.

We stopped to have a boardwalk beer and celebrated miles that chapped our rears. A woman mesmerized by the ocean's hypnotic beauty, drove straight on a turn, and to this day, she still eats sand.

We sat on the wall of the boardwalk and basked in wistful sips of brewskis that inevitably follow the end of any crew's journey.

"Alright, Nico," said Kyle, the leader of the Oregonian pack. "Enjoy the rest of the miles on your way to San Diego. We're off!"

We exchanged hugs, numbers, and we've never communicated since, and I think some moments are best left where they were, reflective fragments in frozen time.

So, on those dead days in your lost mind, when the sky is gray and the sun won't shine, and everything seems like it's fallin' behind, and you find yourself confused on the losin' end of the livin-grind, you know you had *(and probably still do)* the guts to go nuts, cut the cord loose, and free fall on the wild-side of the abyss. Brave face and the mania on a freak-loose roam, gleans the secret truths for surviving the eternal routes.

I straggled the difficult maze of the jam-packed streets in L.A., avoiding becoming a man-meat pancake that the

coroner must give a clean scrape. On the roll to destiny, you lose the fear that plagues the average grade of humanity, and the risk-it-all mentality becomes that natural way to handle reality.

The bike lanes were slim, or non-existent. Nails, spikes, and hunks of debris. I felt like I was riding through a landfill. I slid into Long Beach and POP! Imploded spokes and another fuckin' flat. I hadn't had one since the first day, when I had 9, consecutively.

I hunted down a bike shop near Long Beach State University. It took three hours, and the sun was about to tip its hat, like a desperado rides into the dusk, and descend into the fade.

I made a hasty call to Sheezer, down in Daygo. "Hola, chill-migo," he said to me, "when ya cruisin' into town?"

"Well, I'm delayed, another flat. Do we know anybody in the upper recesses of the So-Cal zone? Somebody, hell any chud will do, that could lend me a floor to snooze on? I'm so close I'm almost at the homestretch."

"Yeah, bro" said Sheezer. "Here's Rugo's number. Give him a call. He should be able to help ya out. He's in the O.C." Then he hung up.

I hit the buttons and the phone started to ring.

"Hola, Skuzz-migo," Rugo barked like beef-cake breath and we chatted, and I explained my predicament.

"Sure thing," he said. "You can crash with me at Grandma's house."

"I'm on the roll," I said, and blasted into the bike shop to inspect the repairs. The fire-apple red Fuji looked as if she could roll into Mexico and maneuver the Baja lanes, all the way to Cabo San Lucas.

“Thanks,” I said to the repair man. “Also, how far is Huntington Beach?”

“Ehhh,” his cranium cranked calculations, “probably like an hour, or like 45 minutes if ya pedal fast.”

“Copy that,” I said. “Full speed and let God handle the rest of what I need,”

I ripped off into the blast of the fluorescent pink haze of another day’s dying sun. The wind wasn’t on my side, but I wasn’t letting that stop my glide. I cruised into Surf City, straight-shootin' to the location that Rugo had sent me. It was a bar in a strip mall, across from the pier, where men slid the tubes that changed with the tidal drag of the on.

I walked in with my bike, saddle bags attached, and a week of stink like a cowboy on a cattle drive. Rugo sat in the patio section with a group of SoCal brutes & babes, surrounded by seven empty bottles of champagne. The tepid boil of a blackout night became clear, illuminated by streetlights, and the way a crazed smile ignites.

“El-Rugo!” I hollered and hit a chill skid of a break stop which, admittedly, would’ve been cooler if I was twelve on BMX wheels. The saddlebags are heavy, and mistakes made on cement can contort ankles bloody, bent the wrong way.

He beamed a solid jaw-bone grin, like Gaston if he surfed. His shoulders were as big as my head, and I think he subsisted off creatine burritos.

“Oh, Skuzz-a-rito!” he said in that way that immediately amped my wild-hair voltage like a fiend that finds a fresh gram-bag. “You made it brah! Welcome to the beachside mayhem. Do we gotta night for you!”

We crushed some drinks, disassembled my bike, and crammed it into his SUV like a storage locker. We lightened

our plight with rips from a few jazz-cigarettes, and the whole scene sparkled like neon dreams.

I got loose as a goose and walked on the ceiling of the Goat-Tavern, and we ran through three days, and I still don't remember what happened, because it took me another week to make it to San Diego.

That's the best part about cruising this life—the people you meet, the time you make spin away beautifully, and all the memories that you can't really recall if they happened. But you know they did because you were *there*, and so were they, and it's all in your skull, no matter how short or far you are, ripping the roll in the eternal fade.

Think Outside the Breakers

(2016—"America's Finest City", San Diego, CA)

Harsh breakers smashed the shallows. Up the street, where the concrete edge of the boardwalk meets the sand, there was a vantage point to evaluate the waves. A group of trunks hung over dismal toes, itchin' to paddle-out.

The crusty faces of a group of sullen longboard barnacles told it all – *the shoulder effort to paddle out wasn't even worth the gas money it took to get here.*

My boots scuffed against the uneven pavement of the alley that I walked up to peep a glance at the prospective waves. I was sore from another lumber-huckin-workday, out in the yard, one of those laborious riptides of a paycheck that wore out the soles under my feet, and yard-hogg soul gets no relief.

One of those back-breakin' jobs that barely covered the bills, but at least I had a spot in an apartment, crammed with too-many dudes, right on the sand. Beach purgatory—dudes tryin' to become men, or men tryin' not to lose the stoke of being dudes.

May Gray or was it June Gloom? Hard to say in retrospect. Hell, there still might be some sand affecting my brainwaves, petty details that hardly seem to matter. The clouds seemed to hang around heavier and longer, like a foul mood on those transitional summer months.

Old toes, ashed out and cracked desperation for a lather of lotion—like rings on a tree conveying long years, altered to examine salt-soaked toes and dry chicken-skin, stretchy elbows, and wetsuits, peeled at the hip like orange

skin gets the rip. The ocean condition pumped hard, and a board-snap was guaranteed.

They'd be firin' up those lifted trucks soon, bound for East County. A wasted afternoon, no waves and the grim prospect of being stuck in one of those "America's Finest City" traffic jams. You'd think it wouldn't matter, but I guess your perspective of time changes when you retire.

"How's it looking, bro?" I asked one of the mangy, desert-rat-beards, and swiped away leftover sawdust from my shoulder. The others garbled slurs in their golden-year frustration.

"Shitty," the desert rat said. "Like the price-tag on these gaudy beach-front porches, they popping up everywhere. Shit was better before the wealth ruined things 'round here.' "

I gauged the worth of his insight by the tinge of his skin, and couldn't dispute with a barnacle bro-migo, who was a year or two away from a melanoma diagnosis. He shuffled off, his angry arms struggling to hoist up his single-fin log (long board).

The remainder of the frustrated, elderly men filed out after him. Sheezer pulled up, fresh off a day's labor in the cubicle mines, located in the Gaslamp district downtown. He looked depleted, and the artificial light seared his third eye.

We evaluated the stupidity of the paddles it would take to get out to the lineup. The swell was 8 to 10 feet, comin' in hot, and goin' out on a board would slam sand into your teeth, permanently lodging your jaw in your neck vertebrae. The waves crashed out in the fresh sea air, which was better to inhale compared to my muggy, fly-buzzing apartment that was more like a storage unit where we would also sleep.

“Water’s prolly warm ‘nough for just a top suit,” Sheezer said, catching the lip of a bright idea. “What you think ‘bout tossing fins on and body sliding these nasty breakers?” “Green room action is better than no action at all.”

We rushed back and slid into faded trunks which displayed our commitment to barrel hours. The millimeters shirt tops were just thick enough to keep ya comfortable out in the salty thrash. SoCal is a desert, and that water ain’t hot, by any means, and those invasive palm trees are purely for appearance, breeding a false tropical vibration.

Shanders arrived and no update was needed to get in the flow. We sprinted to the whitewash, rubber flippers in hand. I nearly tore my groin tryin’ to get ‘em on, and we swam like shark bait out to the action—straight belly-surfing bad boys, making the most of a situation that older eyes couldn’t see the value in.

Our heads bobbed like bouyouy markers for the floating snare of crab-pots, Submerged and readily to ill relief. of kickin’ hard to snag free range barrels. The red shorts (lifeguards), back on dry sand, shook nervously on rustic perches dressed up with a fresh coat of paint for a new surf season.

“I bet they wished they had caught us before we made it out to these weighty breaker sets!” I hollered, and we ducked under a set of rollers.

“Hell yeah, they think we’ll drown out here,” Sheezer said, short of breath. “Plus, they don’t wanna get wet.”

The power of the ocean is an optical illusion. It looks inviting from the shoreline, but out in the churn it can be a regretful swim of a miscalculation. We might’ve been pushin’

our luck, because every year a tourist, or two gets swiftly sent to the depths of Davey Jones locker.

It wasn't our first, wave-slidin' rodeo. We were good swimmers and navigators of rip-tide-relief—using the ocean's energy to remove the lung busting effort of shoulder strokes. The constant tread of water can tire a man out quickly, and by the time you get proper take off position on a wave, your too zapped to catch it. It's a lot like life; keep pushing through rough water.

"Some days, it just ain't perfect," said during an odd stall in the breakers. "You gotta be fluid with what the day's given ya." .

"Alter your mode and manipulate your approach for anything life serves up," Shanders added. "Let the other mouths drown in complaints and frustrations."

I snaked the next wave.

Later that night at the Coastal Limbo—our local dive bar—the neon lights complimented the glow in our teeth, and we heard old-timers, who sat on packed wallets, spew complaints about crappy waves, still unable to shift their perceptions.

Sheezer wore a neon orange tank-top; his shoulders popping like boulders, and he interjected their conversation. He never much cared for gray hair that complained instead of shooting praise in the temporary air. "Why don't you fellas' belly-glide out there? We did and didn't miss a wave."

The irritable old-timers brushed off the remark that opposed their conventional approach to surfable standards. We let them be and drank with bikinis that didn't care about sunlight. The bartender dropped off fresh margaritas with a touch of mango, and the old-timers looked sour. Their

grimaces sipped beers that had only changed labels in recent years.

Brave Dreams & Dive Bar Stew

(2016—The Birthplace of California, Garnet Ave., San Diego, CA)

Bar edge brutality in the depths of last night's werewolf transformation melded into a new, ugly morning. I usually slow sip it, but not all the time, you know, although tonight felt smoother than all those other ones that I can barely remember.

Reggie and Julio had slippin' fingers and were losin' to gravity on the stool cushions. I knew tomorrow was goin' to feel rougher than it should. But gripin' over bad decisions never serves the present mind any good.

"How 'bouts we call it, tonight, dudes?" Trey proposed. "I'm tryin' to make the line-up in the AM. Whaddaya say?' Trey's a goofy-footer; not like surf style stance, but rather like he spent more time swimmin' after his board than slidin' the cruise-side of a wave face. But hey, just gettin' out in the water, all gloss and glisten, beats the long stare from the surface of the sand, where the beach-bottoms are sittin' and wishin' they'd made tubular decisions.

Julio yucked a few hiccups, shades on, and his moral compass ran true, so I sent him out and pinned an arrival time note to the collar of his flamboyant shirt. He always makes it home to an angry and frantic girlfriend, but he swears she's sweet. I bet, he's got a Zen masters' control on the long side of bar edge hours, and all the yappin' he's missin'.

I swung back into the deserted barroom like a Wednesday after a 3-day and 3-stage DJ and beats festival. I was completely devoid of a purpose to drink, but Reggie's always thirstier than the amount of booze on hand.

Reggie was mutterin' more drool than eloquence, and Trey started to pop knuckles trained to smash men with brave dreams.

After four hours and a few extra minutes of snooze, I'd be carvin' waves like Thanksgiving Americans do. However, at this instant, I could barely see one chair, and it was a table for two, and set for nine. I Heimliched my gut, lost my air, and burps are better than the accommodations of cut-rate neon dives for an unsuspected #2. Our stupidity keeps the world from coming unglued.

I popped, surf-style, to my feet, and they babbled loudly. Reggie's heels staggered, and Trey laid in tersely. I sidestepped everything that wasn't there and collided with every stationary thing that was holding its original ground, trying to figure out how I got so turned around.

Finally, I got to where they were and heard the point of their jabbering, their boil, the place and time where truth meets gumption: dive bar stew.

'You don't know nothin,' Reggie slathered, X's over his eyes. "Let me tell ya, that ain't good. The color is glum, just like you're dumb. Give me a drink. C'mon, be cooler than that painting behind ya.'

Trey had the look of a man deciding the importance between dive-bar friendships, and the inconvenience of splintering Reggie's teeth with his fist.

'Hey, hey, bro-migos," I said. "What are we talkin' about? Let's not get all twisted and constricted like a man-eating jungle snake. Trey, hey, look at me. Ole Reg-dawg is a live, drunken-wire just rambling. And Reggie, anybody can judge the quality of good in anything. Take *class* for instance. I' ma drunk who got's-it, and you the kind that ain't.'

They had perplexed stares, and I stumbled on a heavy piece of neon glare. ‘Shut the fuck up, Nico,’ Trey spat. I put my hands up, promptly tripped into a chair, and did a better job at lending an ear, beause they had vibrations of acrimony, concealed by who could keep going on phoney…even though, you gotta talk for the short term that won’t leave ya lonely, and the the long-term, which can never be promised, so it kinda presents poorly.

‘Reggie!’ Trey shouted, perking eyes straight open. ‘I suggest you move to the door, because if I come around this bar, your head will have a dent.’

Ole Reg-dawg stood, unfazed. He had spectacular balance for a boogieboarding, dick-draggin’ son-of-a-gun, holdin’ his feet. I kept thinking: *these seedy nights are gettin’ bleak.*

I knew I needed to get up and do something, but my legs were curled and bent, and, well, it was Reggie’s face that would get a dent. So, I sat and watched the show. Trey made moves, and Reggie was braver than the moment required him to be. ‘Stop!’ Reggie blurted like a loud fart that gets away from clenched cheeks.

We all froze. Then Reggie said, ‘The freest painting is the literary word, because one sentence can elucidate a million images that are beautifully different.’

My brain barely worked. However, Reggie was poignant, for what I thought was, at least, worth one more beer and a shot. Maybe the cool side of humanity would prevail.

Trey got loose because any drunk talkin’ like that must have has his conscience pretty close to intact. I figured the same and got up on top of my goopy feet. I took my hands and

banged on my cheeks, got equilibrium steady, and slid like shaky ice-skates to the door. I'd probably wait at least a week to return.

Trey assumed Reggie would do the same, as did I, so I turned and said, 'Reggie…where we goin'?'

He stared at Trey and sputtered. "Too bad ya only think 'bout stupid things. Stupider than your mother.'

I cringed in the light flap of the saloon's seedy door. Reggie wore an eye-patch for a week, he's got vertigo, and his wife tells me his left nostril whistles when he snores.

He doesn't like the beach-side dive scene anymore.

Fleeting Grind of Forklift Time

(2017—Tuna Capital of the World, San Diego, CA)

His face hung low and down like the gloom of clouds that only produce cold and no rain. He was immobile, more by thoughts than his back, which, like mine, was already stuck in the curvature of the grind's rut.

There was no spark of stoke in his soul, which made me think, *hold up! Did you catch that 20-foot log that I just crushed with a double boulder-shoulder blast of a buff-huck like a true hotshot lumber-hogg?*

I asked, "What's the deal, dude? Where's your mental mettle on the wander at?"

He looked glum, totally removed from the *now,* no impressive spark in his eyes.

The silence got weird, and then he asked, "How do you handle the pointless pressure when you begin to realize the fleeting nature of your prospects in the awkwardly close creep of time in the future and it's actuality of years?"

I knew that my response would carry the weight of the moment.

His face hung like desperation that needs a bullet, or a coffin that needs a hearse. I didn't want his trigger finger on my skull for eternity.

So, I said, "I'm a perfunctory wash of a livin' smile. I bust my ass to enjoy it from a reclined view—usually barefooted and kicked back with beer bottles and Zyn pouches, not too far out of reach. Preferably poolside, but any patio bar will do just fine. A place where my bald head can breathe and unwind, where I can reduce the pressures of life down to a devourable ounce."

Salty Cans & Rusty Sunglasses

(2019 – Daygo, Mission Beach, San Diego, CA)

It was the law of the beach: all men turn to rust. No warning for when it hits. Reasons are vague in a transactional existence. All you can do is spend time and take it as a memory. The page flipping hours harden you and break you down like decorative furniture not far from the waves.

At least the view ain't bad. The sunlight in the alley looks better than other cities I've lived in. Out on the boardwalk, different brands of swimwear move, North & South, like migrating birds confused about which exhilarating direction to go.

I was barreling through my third year in San Diego and stiffly set, like yesterday's poured concrete, in the smooth rhythms of a salty tune. Good waves rolled in, and more beer was the only reason to leave the pleasure on the porch. Our hideout in plain sight, and endless smiles were an easy stroll away.

Elder Steve was our neighbor – E.S. as we called him – and across the narrow street from our porch, he resided. We were 3 bro-migos in our mid-twenties, and E.S. was maybe 35 to 40 years our senior. A relic in the area like a rust covered beach cruiser, locked up and forgotten.

He would go to the bar with us, but his liver didn't have our stamina. The right combination of chemicals could keep him up late, functioning at our pace, telling stories on the porch as the ocean's power pulsated a short distance away.

His youthful charisma reminded me of a boat that accumulates barnacles quickly, and yet still makes passes on the bay. I could never tell whether it was age or money that

supplied his confidence to chat up ladies that were decades his junior.

After another year, our routine was as consistent as summer fun tourists that flood Mission Beach when the warm, seasonal change hits. I had a much-needed day off, so I went surfing with my roommate bro-migos. Between wave sets, I mentioned, "Haven't seen E.S. last few days?"

"He's probably visiting Hong Kong, or down in Mexico, and decided to extend the trip," Shanders hollered, taking off on a curling lip.

We rode through dead hours on Mother Earth's rolling energy and sent smiling praises to the big-braddah upstairs. After several swell servings, we returned to the sun-soaked porch to sip a few south-of-the-border recovery beers.

My wide frame shades blocked the nuclear radiation from the sun as my skin rusted from the rays. The ambulance arrived as groups of beach towels and coolers lumbered up our street to bake in the afternoon oven on the sand.

We watched with curious, street-cat peculiarity as a police car arrived. Moms would approve of our use of sun protection, but under it we were nonetheless perplexed.

The cop went inside E.S.'s beach shack castle, and we leaned against the brick wall barrier of our porch to better assess the situation, riding high on hopes that E.S. was alright.

Suddenly, with our stomachs in our throats, the medical workers came through the front door with a metal stretcher. On top was a full black sack, like a bag of unopened potato chips.

Our stomachs made a hard return to our belly regions, and Shanders dropped his ¾ full can-of-beer. It made a loud, dense thud, and the liquid dribbled out on the cement porch.

The air in our lungs did the same into the beachside atmosphere.

"Excuse me, sir?" said Sheezer, my roommate who was usually barefoot, his soles tough as shoes.

"What's up, man?" the medical worker said.

"Uhh, what's going on? Where's Steve?" Sheezer asked.

"He's gone. The rust got him. The beach will do that, ya know," the medical worker said, and they loaded the stretcher, locked it in place, and drove off because that's what ambulances do.

We were shocked. E.S. was gone, and that's what happens on the beach when you live there long enough. Another casualty of the sandy-toed-life, so we sipped beers and felt stiff in the sun.

Sans Souci
(Without Care)

(2020—Sac-Town, Sacramento, CA)

Hope feels to be in short supply, especially on these days where hours drain and death is a close slide.

Lime green lighters savor the sparks of final tokes. That frigid river floats, and there are hearts that struggle to beat out on the rotten parts of flatland streets. I eased into the icy pump of Momma Earth's deep artery; my balls shriveled—the boats won't split my skull—I got neon shaded eyes. We are like rivers, running out to eternity. Sometimes it's best to mind the full scope of your biz, keep out of the brutality of whatever this society is. Stay roach-smoked red in the grand dilation of pupils. Gotta smile because we all float through trials, and in the end, it all changes, and we equal out in the nothing of our cosmic style.

Lumps & the Lack of Pay Bumps

(2021—Cow Town, Sacramento, CA)

Furnace heat billows up from the summertime streets of the vicious valley. The doom-light of the impending dawn unleashes the earth's phantom frenzy that buzzes before the shine of the sun sears our souls. I splash my face with sink water, and simultaneously slurp hydration, straight out of the faucet—my facial reflection was haggard and hungover.

The day's suck gets accepted without debate. I'm behind time, my blurry eyes see trios of things in the house that should only be one. I grab light essentials and go.

My shambles, leftover from last night, bumble out the door (might be walkin' over the limit?). I manage to lock the front door, and instantly my system goes wrong—I rip a hard projectile vomit off the porch.

Never felt worse. If lucks on my side, my truck will explode. Then I won't endure the workday's suicide.

Inside the truck, behind the steering wheel, I get a damn grip, because that was a seriously heinous notion that rolled my brainwaves. Probably an indication that I should have the frequency of my noggin' examined.

The heavy thought ramrods my basic motor functions, and self-appraisal pauses my robotic, get-up-and-go functions that allow desperate souls to survive the work-day toil.

Shit. Guess I separate till sundown. If I open this acknowledged door of horror, there's no tellin' how many more I gotta enter. That'd split the frailty of my psyche the way an auger bit smoothly pierces soft dirt. To hell with that. At least boozed-out bravery feels grand and gratifies

instantly. The last thing I need is to know all my fuckin' problems.

"Eh," I mutter. Can't solve that long-term shit right now, and I'd still have to go to work. I turn the key in the ignition of the dilapidated truck of this depraved desperado. It sputters well enough to get me down the highway, the grim prospects in the windshield.

Quick thoughts, moments ignored, and I've always been inclined to put off the suffering of my own decisions for a brutal hagride later. I got work to get too, and when you dwell on existential plights for too long, you begin to clarify things that aren't healthy for commerce.

Third-eye nourishment, eternity, and the preparation of the soul for the flat-line existence would seem like perfectly reasonable things to address, but they don't make money, and neither will I, especially if I begin to get to the real truths in this dawn to dusk, and no chance lifestyle.

I mean, there's a fuckin' business that needs to be run. Goods have been sold; there's a stack that requires the break of my back and the dexterity of my fingers after my ass is seated in the forklift. It's got terrible lumbar support that exacerbates the pain in my lower spine – give it two more years, and I'll be a hunched back that lost his mind.

I got bleak hours ahead of me, nimbly fidgeting with just the *right-touch,* utilizing the forklift handle functions to place an endless stream of loads on 18-Wheeler Mack-Trucks. So, the guy making the money makes the guy happy that will yell at him if it's not more money than last time, and if that scenario happens, then the first guy yells at me.

It seems critical that he gets paid, so I can get my comparatively scantier sum. It's a five-day (usually, with a

sixth) grind. I'm tired, and I drink to forget that I'm overworked, worn-out, and a blown opportunity of a heartbeat. But hey, there's bills to be paid, and breathing ain't free, and human's like to earn the bitchin' they do each day.

I don't want to get on the highway. It all feels wrong. The sun's comin' up, and the shine side of it ain't workin' like it should. We're enemies for the next ten hours. Yeah, sure, I get ya. There's a paycheck in it for me. But I'm pretty sure I'll die on this fork-lift, and booze kills thoughts. I always thought my existence was enough, but life demands more. If you want to matter, well, I don't know. Get more money. It always seems to be the answer.

When your interests are more present-focused, savor the joy now because later isn't promised, becomes relegation to cog-work in some industrious wheel, and you become a machine, pace set to fury of the insane.

The sun's already higher than it ought to be for my ritual cruise down Biz-80 outta Sac-Town. I bark obscenities at every slow-moving vehicle in front of me. Hell, they're all idiots, mostly because they're just like me. We're all out here when even God's still asleep, driving to places we don't want to be, just so complain about our temproal strain.

We swear things must change or we're walking out, but to chang things takes work, and work's what we're already trying to escape. So, we settle for curse words behind the wheel, 20MPHs over the speed limit, and hope the extra air moving through our lungs counts as exercise.

Rationality's quadrant of my lobes kicks in. I flood it with 2 Lime-Green Red Bulls, straight electric juice, and cut through my groggy displeasure.

Maybe, if we all didn't have to wake-up so early, on time like fuckin' robots that start at the press of a button, we wouldn't be so bitchy in our decay.

Fuck it. Fuck worry, and fuck punctuality. I'm habitually late. The boss and manager treat it like a character flaw. I see it as a lovable quirk wrapped up in my own twisted version of a work ethic. They know I'll show up, bust my ass, and get the job done. They gripe, I nod, and we all get on with it.

All those suspensions in high school learned-me-up the wrong way. There are no free days off when you make a mistake!

In fact, they want you to stay longer or come in on a day off to fix some fuck-up you did or didn't cause. Hell, they know they got a trump card and wield validated anger like the only guy with a gun in an unarmed tribe.

I ain't slept in two days, with thoughts like: *shit, let it go, bro, I only had three beers at lunch, and I work in yard, operatin' a fork-lift, no cop is gonna pull me over. Pussies.*

The old woman next to my vehicle nearly runs head-first into the cement divider. I recklessly change lanes, of course, all for the sake of being *on-time*. I rip queasy loose, and affirm my tardiness, with orange Gatorade streaks down my truck door.

"You fuckin' idiot! Why don't you watch where you're going!?!!" I imagine that's what the old broad yells at me. I watch her pull a mean drag on a Virgina Slim and her indignant eyes scream at me.

It reminds me of a crazy chica I used to know. Say what you will about the disrespect that comes with chaotic,

unhinged behavior. Those chicas will knock every orgasm outta your ball-sack with a single bang.

"Onery, ole hag!" I holler, but there's no way her dumb earpiece can pick up my barf bag frequency.

More sun is up, and I'm less punched-in than I should be. I ramp up speed, it won't help or matter now, so I pull into the Am Pm Arco and nuke the finest breakfast sandwich in the joint. The waves of microscopic heat make me wait, so, I scroll Apps for ladies to love.

I'm a single hogg on the midtown slog. I'm at the high point of the species, the apex-wreck, and I find a joint in my center console. After a few minutes, the hazy fray of pressure and the heinously uncontrollable problems evaporate from the chill gleam in my third eye.

I'm a proponent of the inhalation of smoke that fades what you can't fight.

I hit my punch code so that the computer knows my number is here. Productive systems care about operational efficient data, not operational employee wellbeing. Just like I expected, I get chewed out like a bone picked clean, and the rant finishes on another expected note: "Get out there and get to work!"

Ain't nothin' these corporate turds hate more than finding new people to do shit jobs. Most chudz with sense end up behind computers to pay rent.

The boss-man unwraps his second sausage egg-McMuffin and his fangs of goblin teeth chew rapidly, so the grave can arrive faster than the realization of lost time. He's always churning out a better performance because he was smart enough to be born at a time when companies didn't hire based on resumes and drug checks. We gotta work faster, like

the yard-hoggs back in his day, but he insists: “Don’t break your backs.”

He looks like a swelled bag of sourdough bread, and he’s not dyin’ for a while, so upward mobility's dead in the water and prices keep goin' up. God, the Universe, or the Great Spirit must get a kick out of watching me ruin my joints, killing hours down the oblivion grind.

My mind's about ready to snap, the itch to quit won't leave me alone, and I'm startin' to think I was just a flicker that never caught fire.

I crawl on my forklift and find a corner in the big yard to lounge and burn another joint or three. Honestly, I’ll puff as much weed as I can smoke to perform these hurried tasks and not wake up to the fact that the walls of the rut have gotten taller than the ladder I was given to get to my ambitions.

I’m tucked out of sight, on the back forty of the company’s yard, behind a huge stack of lumber. When out of the blue sky and my psychedelic brain haze, I get a buzz on my phone. Some sign from the universe that I genuinely matter to somebody out there.

Whoa! Sup, single mom babe-a-cita!

Like I mentioned earlier, I’ve been on a hot swipe of a dating streak. All I do is swipe right and let the likes sort it out. Finally, this gorgeous, zaftig mama-cita, equipped with shapely curves that jolt lust through a man's nerves, responded to my introductory text.

The burned-out blue-collar mentality: abandoned dreams that seek promiscuity to make up for all the let downs on the livin-grind.

She was of the *did-her-best and still got scorched* variety. We shot texts back and forth, pressing the long shot of lust and limits.

She was tough, getting through harsh days that let her down, love lost and heartbreak, and she couldn't figure out where the fracture began. I was sympathetic to her type of dissatisfaction that easily slips into carnal passion.

Hot damn! It was my lucky day. She hits me with a face-time jangle, and she's wearin'next-to-nothin' (trust me, that camera catches every angle). Her pretty face could still smile despite her pain, and that buxom body had me stiff with the salaciousness that stokes our sin. All she got on is skin, kitten heels, and a thong.

I take an early lunch, put an end to my day that didn't care about me anyway. What's the point of humanity's plight, unless you're gettin' laid?

I gotta hunch, though, that I wouldn't skate out of work without somebody gettin' wise to my escape. Even Cool Hand Luke got caught in the end, and they ended him. My fate wouldn't be that grim. I'd just wouldn't have to clock in tomorrow, but that was just the kind of fallout I could live with. Unemployment checks and riverbanks that shine would be a dope line of work.

Sure as hell, on my drive to easy thighs—she tossed out an invite on facetime, dropped her towel, and I be a fool to keep working— I get interrupted with a furious call.

Just answer, stay focus and don't absorb the shit-fit the boss-man is about to give. I'm enroute to a carnal romp, that wouldn't cure my madness, but would briefly heal the pain under the burden of temporality.

The ole boss-man blabbered on about unfinished shit and the sacred importance of honoring our commitments. Load orders were already backbreakers, and the damn things changed by the minute. Salesman wrote down the wrong material. Customer changed his mind. Pull it, stack it, load it, then tear the whole fuckin' thing apart and start over. I was becoming a crushed cog in somebody else's money machine. He kept layin' it on thick, tryin' to wreck my horny little escape plan, but I wasn't about to let his tirade alter the direction of my pipe. Sure enough, he finally ran outta steam.

He understands, but that's just because he doesn't want to lose a hardworking man, and now he backpedals but doesn't apologize. I get it. He's gotta maintain some air-of-importance, but he knows he can't wield it like a foreman in a sweatshop because I'm liable to not drive back tomorrow if I don't like the tone of his talk.

He just wants to get a point across and lets me know that everything has been worked out, so tomorrow should flow smoothly if everything goes according to plan.

"Yup, sounds good. Later," I mutter, my obliterated cares strewn across the highway in the wake of my high-speed to handle my sexual needs, like hitting a racoon at 90 mph.

I know nothing will go according to plan. I'll get there when I can. Right now, I'm entering the doorway of a single-mom, babe-a-cita's casa. She's tucked behind the door, and when I get inside, I see why–fishnet stockings, kitten heels and a lace top piece, like you'd see in pornography.

She offers me a drink and we chat at the countertop in her kitchen, The flirtatious nature of our words has got me firmly committed to examine the bend in her curves.

“Why don’t you follow me,” she says, like seduction that I’m ready to slam.

I rip my shirt off, buff-guns. Her eyes perk up, pleased and stunned. This dirty romp of fun won’t heal our existential woes, but with the length of lust pumped sexual action that culminates in orgasmic satisfaction, we can relieve our souls from the burdens of reality.

I cut a crooked, raffish grin, and say, “Yes, m’am.”

God's Got a Good Backstroke

(2021—Camellia City, Sacramento, CA)

Booze brained, foggy mornings. Life starts each day when the bliss fades from your dreams and you open your eyes.

Sleep is good, freedom from all the scrapes you take just gettin' by, all this beat down you get after your alarm goes off. That's the first thing that wrecks us, then we stagger out of whatever bed we reclined in last night.

Some are comfy, and others peel themselves off the street. We gotta get to rushing, and that familiar feeling of defeat.

I prepared for the day. She was already gone in more than one type of way. She was most certainly still mad, and oddly, that was OK. Love is like a dream. Weird emotional scenes, fragments of nonsense, snap awake and separate, sometimes, you can't recall the nightmare, the cold sweats, because the details of truth would make you sleepless.

Then I got hope.

The sun shined, and I thought, *fuck that company, I'm sure those assholes would fill my slot as fast as I dropped, and that back-breakin' day would put a strain on my battered heart.*

The phone was on its fourth ring, and bless that secretary's heart tryin' to answer it through her computer screen.

Finally, she said "Hello."

"Hey," I grumbled, "it's Nico. I ain't feeling well. Not coming in today."

She wanted specific information, reasons, judgements to shred a man at the end of his wits. I hung up because too much of the soul gets hacked off each day.

These suck-you-dry vampires, like dehydrated kids slurping down cold capri-suns on a hot day, takin' advantage of the lack of pocket change instilled in my breed of prey. The grind will kill me before the golden years get a chance to spray.

If she wanted those details, she could figure 'em out the hard way. I was barren, had stopped carin' and my tomorrows weren't promised. wasn't about to start ruinin' my precious moments today.

There was that cool reprieve at the Sacramento River, the landing on 28th Street, shine fried and it's lazy bends were waitin,' the flow of that river always felt invigoratin' and just like dreams that don't need an explanation, I didn't feel the need to deconstruct deatilas that were as clear as the pain of a broken limb. I didn't feel ike missin' out on backstrokes with God today.

The Slurpee Monster on S. Street

(2023—City of Trees, Sacramento, CA)

The scorch was on, heatwave style, in Sac-Town, beneath the blaze of torrid sunbeams, and I oozed sweat like the sludge out of a treatment plant. I wheeled up shirtless in my truck. The AC unit malfunctioned, windows dropped, and the breeze wasn't cuttin' it.

I had just finished a workout. Doctor recommended, wife approved, and if you learn anything in marriage, stay healthy and bone-able; it's crucial for longevity and love. I needed the basics: beer, energy drinks, boner pills, ice and a point in this nasty universe.

Everything, aside from the latter, could be purchased at the liquor store off S Street. Just snag the items that briefly heal the cracks in your spirit and zoom off to the refreshingly frigid flow of the river. It ain't much, but it goes the distance needed to liberate the soul from the bleak intervals on the livin-grind.

The dude running the cash register was cool enough—he might've had a touch of autism—but he was a friendly jokester, and that goes a long way in the hot doldrums of summer. I hauled my purchases like a pack mule back to my truck, tossed the plastic bag of fun in the bed, then got down to the hard business of cooler organization.

I rapidly arranged the puzzle of rectangularly limited insulation space like a mad scientist who finely tunes a freaky creation. It looked pretty enough to present on Instagram, and I was about to top the thing off with ice when my surgical focus was aggressively interrupted by eerily hoarse tones uttered behind me.

I turned and it, or rather, she—a rough monster of a hunch-back woman--fought with her own body to move. Her breath struggled to breathe, evan as she made osvoice demanded, “You got enough money to get me a Slurpee?”

She seemed to be in a vicious rush and she had no time for pleasantries. So, I said, “Yeah, I got some money. Probably not enough for a Slurpee, but you can have it.”

My response stretched her grimace uglier, but she opened her grubby claw. I flayed a smile and gave her my entire fistful of meager change—a little over a buck—and she almost tripped as she opened her two claws like a bowl.

She growled lowly, displeased by the short amount of change that she instinctively knew wouldn’t make the Slurpee grade, even though I had warned her. On top of that, I had beer cans to chill, and those cubes wouldn’t last long under the fury of that valley sun.

I resumed my laborious task in the icebox, when I heard the odd clang of trickled coins. Each note of circular metal bounced a dreadful tune. I swung around fast; I had a bad sense that she had slipped, pitched forward, and taken a hideous spill which required assistance.

Nope. Not the case. She didn’t much appreciate my brand of kindness. She had hurled the change on the ground, then haggardly slunk off, bitching about my poverty. “Buying beer and boner pills, but no money for Slurpees! Losers! Just losers, everywhere these days!”

All I could do was laugh. Anger is pointless when people are senseless. She was burnt by the sun, by the world, and hung up on the confused notion that her demands for change were equal to the action that changes anything.

*S*he was rigid in every way, even her impatience. Just another slipshod humanoid, strict and hasty, when it came to her immediate desire to procure a Slurpee.

Anyway, I knelt-down, not above pocket change, and the woman badgered a terrified young lady for Slurpee money. Things weren't going my way, but I had some cents, and one day the sum of my total would change.

River Ran Streets and the Blazing Sky

(2024—Almond Capital of the World, Sacramento, CA)

It's the warm sunsets in the hot months that captivate our souls. It all seems brighter in that year of our moment, from the angle of our planetary spin, especially on the edge of riverbanks, gettin' baked, or on the run down golden valley streets.

You could've been poolside all day, cruisin' a sunshine bender of a blackout, or you might've just punched out, gnarled from the overworked load that little by little devours your soul. Somewhere, hangin' on the in-between, devoured by the apocalypse of trivialities. But those sunsets, vibrant like the neon glow of a martini glass, spark desire even in the most "seen-it-all" eyes.

Slap a fresh face on, tweak that perspective, adjust the twinkin' eye to devious delight. Tomorrow's effects are for the turds, so just blend with the imagery and music so that you don't eat bullets and end insignificant misery.

Sunsets seen from the freakish gleam of flatland eyes cause you to chase the elation of riches dug from the cosmic grind. It's that damn spark, and it propels you into action. Don't get swallowed by the darkness. Finding value in our haggardly noble souls is the ability to squeeze the bliss out of now and damn later's toll.

Ya gotta just keep movin'. Dilapidated desperados know the gut of our worth is in chasin' those dreams so big that, people expect you to be losin'. There's a bold glow in the howl of yellow fire. It burns tree-tops and every bureaucratic structure in Mid-Town feels the singe. A crispy lookin' man,

outcast in the heat, grins and rambles on. It's a slow burn, but you'll get it in the end.

New plans manifest, opportunities open that never would have survived like city-slickers out in the wilderness. Ravenous fangs, flash hunger.

Soak it in, every time. Retain some of that first-timer flare. It's always a new day glare.

Fight that feeling, that belief that you won't catch a glimpse, again. The sun descends, the fading light and God, or the universe, or Budda, forgives our sacred sins. Wild spirits, spit-shine clean, calibrate to the radiant tune of fleeting possibilities we usually ignore.

Life no longer eats us alive, and we dare to dream.

It Might Just Be Wednesday

(2023—River City, Sacramento, CA)

We ain't so important. Hopefully, that eases our flow, because the torrid blasts of the vainglorious Sun-God always show up, brashly proving its status as boss. The scorch can leave us haggard. No reprieve for the mess of soul-scrapin' stress in the capital city, but there's a spot to alleviate the rot. All the baked brains in town know where to stop and let it roll off in full relaxation mode.

It ain't far, nothin' but the rip of a few blocks east, out on the fringe of grid-laced streets. Over where the water erodes the land under your feet. Ferocious flame sprays that coerce temporary sweat to take a cool dip in the frosty hunk of a flow—the great Sacramento River.

The aqua in the wide trench of our nation's most patriotic river (true title, and I'm sure it's been printed in some publication and confirmed by many wise winos) gets referred to as the *sweet water*.

It runs fresh, straight off infamous slopes of cannibalistic mountains. It rolls like the slow prominence of a Pacific-Union cargo train on the move, totally correct in its swift run. So watch out!

"There ain't no harm intended, you see, but it'll swallow you if need be," advised the Mayor of Goose Town, a valley vagabond, a real river rover, and a sage from older days.

I stood at the rippling shoreline. Then, engulfed by joy, I leapt into the icy drift of uncertainty, that soulful cleanse on earth. A seemingly insignificant action, but a direct move taken on all the things I couldn't escape.

I swam with the slide, and against the pull downstream. I was deep, and a seal's rubbery coated skull popped out of the water. It shot me a smile and headed against the current, upstream. I smiled back. We were nothing but passing parallel entities in the groove of intertwined infinity.

Huge hits of sizzling sunlight blasted the boulders of my shoulders. It's a languid current, aimed at the ocean, spitting out next to that City by the Bay. It's a long float, but we all meander off into eternity.

On the slim margin of sand along the river, engraved on the contour of the water's glitzy slither, I feel like I'm at the smoke end of a psychedelic pipe, gazing beyond the view of the sunset, in the dying light of the westward horizon line. Neon shades, over my bleary boozed eyes, can see the details in the eternal fade, a clarity of faith more than accuracy, I reckon it might just be a Wednesday, but for whatever reason, it sips like heaven.

Big Sky Showdown at the Little Pond

(2024— Sacramento, CA & Big Sky Country, Montana)

She makes her way out the door. She's got a real, big-time, completely legit career. I wipe wake-up gunk out of the disillusioned crevices of my regretful and desperately bleary eyes.

Our home is silent. I rip-a-curse of rage at the universe – "Damn, my reprobate style! My peculiar brand of wayward chutzpah." The beats of my heart feel like the leaves outside, decaying on the ground. Fall always makes us realize how far we must go to get back up.

The numbers on the clock read *running behind*. Change never comes from the maniacal rush. Faster never saved any souls. I stagger out the door, frowzy and draggin' my spirit. Crisp air hits my nostrils, and the trees breathe purity.

My dilapidated truck always takes a few attempts, but it ain't missed a horizon line yet. Five turns, and benedictions, and the engine rumbles. Stopping at a red-light, the cadence of an electric-cowboy tune, combined with the putrid scent of pristine death – a squashed cat, all nine lives spent – shoots me to an old scene, like a shotgun to the memory glands.

I was gettin' out of an effaced rig of neon green, yanking on my house-of-a-pack, too heavy for my neophyte back. I was gone, there was trail to tromp, the inclines that take you out and into the infinite nowhere…the Mont-ucky wilderness, and the exigencies of lower status on the food-chain.

I wanted to puke from the high elevation and thin oxygen. The view made the title-worthy grade: Big-Sky Country! Every morning was raw with big adventure – hell, you were just happy to zip your skull in the comfort of a sleeping-bag at night, and the body always ached, but it beat the gnaw of predatory jaws.

That's when I almost met my fate in those hallowed woods – damn near shook the maker's hand, whoopin' it up over spectacular wildlands.

We had left two axes behind from our misery-whipping of logs that blocked the path of the trail. I was alone, retrieved the tools, and U-turned my steps, going back to camp – two hours till sunset. In the deep miles of the Bitterroot backcountry, I descended steep dirt, and the trail swooped left, skirting a pond, where jagged peaks took bites like teeth out of the sky.

And there, up to its chest in the pond, was a massive moose cooling itself off, dunking in the glacial water. I stopped and marveled in a way that city-slickers don't consider.

The quiet hung eerily, the moose splashed carelessly, and I recollected the hunter's advice. "I ain't scared of anything out in dese darn woods – except, of course, for a moose, that is."

The escape route hooked into a thicket of trees. It was time to make a furtive exit. I glanced back to sear a memory. The moose, twenty feet away, glowered intentions of territorial menace into my soul.

It was a big sky showdown at the little pond.

The Fear & the Frenzy

(2024—The 916, Sacramento, CA)

Forearm veins looked pumped, and a seasoned junkie would kill to have this fresh canvas of flowin' blood to clog up. I had just buffed up, loaded the guns with rounds of bulk over at Rosevelt Park. Fierce heat combined with super sets of 20 pushups and 20 pullups, will hang your tongue out of your skull like a run hard dog.

The blaze of the sun began its explosive fade, but the heat wouldn't dissipate, even though the final month of summer would die soon. It was kinda like taking a brutal beating but somehow you get up and keep on swinging.

I used one of the seven beach towels I had on deck in my pick-up truck, alleviating the sweat that leaked out of my pores like a busted, main-line water pipe at a senior citizen retirement home.

The AC in the truck was fucked, so the windows were wide open as I cruised to Sutter's Landing where daring maniacs from all over the world, of a different era, had scavenged this flatland soil for golden dreams.

Under the sun, my shoulders baked, and the callous parts of my soul dissolved into the atmosphere. My feet got tougher, scrub oak trees and root rutted trails ruin pretty toenails, and I suspect that's why God made momma-earth with canals. They give us the cy chill to the bone, an aloe-vera green gel for when your skin is red as fire from gettin' baked alive on remarkable riverbanks.

The sandy edge of the slitherin' river had expanded. Gotta conserve aqua, and the dam controllers knew that the cold, dry season was up next, so they adhered to conservative

precaution like dogma. The fast flow had receded to a smooth trickle.

I dropped my towel on my cooler. It was red but you could barely tell because the damn thing was slapped with stickers like a teenager's skateboard. I had to get my beer laps in before winter's grip strangled out all the river fun in the vast valley sun.

I had a thick coat of sunscreen like an engorged bear before hibernation, and the wifey appreciates my flesh protection. I know it won't save me in the end. You don't get off that easy when your shirtless for five months straight. I'll be an ole-timer, hole-ridden and haggard, cancerous splotches removed and leavin' empty gaps in my skin. But we'll all be dead soon. Decay is just our way and time flies, and I'm a good-timer soul who despises long and absurd arguments over anything trivial. So, I layered on the 100-proof sunscreen that's probably filled with chemicals that'll kill me anyway.

I plunged into the greenish-blue patriotic channel of long runnin' mountain water. I probably was a seal or a great white shark in my past life. The way I dive and slide through the water, it's like a sushi master with a knife.

I made smooth, deliberate strokes like a dolphin kickin' its flippers to get out to the center of the deep water. It's the dangerous part of the river and fools the untrained because the top-water is flat, but below that the current drags death.

I swung my legs up, splayed out on my back, like a starfish floatin' the slow cruise of the icy luge. I stared at the vast blue sky and I felt like driftwood.

The days weren't goin' my way lately, and I was barely doin' my best to not drown, even though it would alleviate something I couldn't satisfy.

I contemplated. *Figure out what makes you happy in this weird, senseless universe. Simple is sublime, like warm days, and we are like rivers that run out to eternity.*

Downstream, I swam into shore and hoped a speed boat didn't zip my skull to brainless pieces. I surreptitiously paddled in like a gator, hungry for beer in the cooler up the beach. I felt the lactic seizure in the perched boulders of my worn-out shoulders, which if I was deeper would have sunk me like a stone. *It's all good, I'm sure there's something valiant in goin' out alone*, I thought, and I had made the shoreline. Followed by, *not this time, you carnivorous river.*

I strutted out of the water like a swamp monster and plopped my keester in the sand. I cracked and crushed a fresh can of a silver bullet like a werewolf suicide. I laid on my back in the sun, and waved at every God of every religion that was grillin' me like a burger.

I had a multitude mortal mishaps that were messin' with my scope of chill: the bills were due, the money was gone, my attempts wouldn't evolve, and I had gotten chewed out at work for being five minutes late. I was draggin' my wife down. Turmoil is a trickle until the avalanche drowns you insane.

I roasted a bone, J.O.B twisted brand of cosmic smoke that relieved the pressure the universe put on my joints. Captain Planet would approve of my actions. I had survived the age of 40.

Along the riverbank were scattered souls—burnouts and better people, the top and the low, the lost hearts and the

bleary brains, givin' all they got. Good and evil, who I was, who I couldn't become and the parts of me that would die.

Some river-wrecks whooped it up and yelped brash hollers from the cover of bushes like famished baby birds that feasted on Budweiser's.

A caveman gave me a handful of psychedelic matter. I chewed it promptly, and half and hour later the vibe was like a Jackson Pollack paint splatter.

Every trip tolerates the world. You gotta get out of place to survive the human race, I suppose, and it's probably always been that way.

There was a Sac-Town scum-hog. If you don't know the type, I'll fill you in. A flat bill hat flipped back, electric tar shades, wakeboard guns, and empty teeth cut clear by methamphetamine.

He was a real hardcore, river-rat breed, and his dog was an excitable Rottweiler, both vicious in bark and bite, and it ran amuck, inspecting every damn thing on the bank and in the shallow waters.

The puissant brute howled, on the hunt for geese that were kickin' by. But those devilish birds of silent prey were slick, and the owner didn't notice it because he was talkin' about wakeboard championships and lifted trucks to younger chicks.

I plunged back into the drift of the river, and it was cool and calm for a brief slide on the temporal ride. Then a commotion thrashed downstream. I blew river water out of my nose like when a good joke hits the mid-sip of a beer-can, and I turned to my right where the water floated on to the San Francisco Bay, out behind the flames of diablo hills.

The pooch was in the water, only its head exposed, barking and paddling after the pack of geese. But the birds were better equipped, and like speed boats, they zipped into deep water. The pooch wore itself out, barking and swimming. It wheezed and gasped, but kept up after what it wanted.

I swam slow and didn't strain about what was out of my lane. Everything goes down river. But the scum-hogg freaked out, dropped his fresh better into the water. He sprinted down to the river's edge, screaming at the pooch to return to shore.

His voice splintered like puberty plagues a boy in junior high.

The pooch ignored the commands and pursued the geese.

They got in a V-Formation and hatched plans. One goose veered off, and the pooch went after it. The woofs from the pooch were losin' power.

On the sand, the scurvy scum-hogg didn't even attempt to swim after his dog. Too many beers and days since the wakes of his glory.

I exited the water and coiled in my cocoon of a towel like a ruthless rattlesnake On my way to my truck, I heard the dog splashing and thrashing through its fear and frenzy.

"Stupid dog! I'd whoop his ass, and those damn geese!" His consternation made him bold enough to consider a salvation mission, but somebody talked him out of it.

Most people knew better and kept their dogs leashed. There was not future in going after those odd walking, scurrilous geese with menace in their beady eyes. They can cruise with or against the current, V-shaped, with their sleek paddles of webbed feet.

It made me wonder how many dead dog bones were at the bottom of that old, rollin' river.

I exhaled the galaxy and reached a conclusion. Never swim with geese. It's always the elusive, silent things that lead us to the slaughter.

I'm Brian McConaughey & I'm Comin' Back

(2024—The P, Sacramento, CA)

You get to feelin' alone. Two hours haven't moved and the universe despises my shape. I twist off the cap on a Bud, the only resolution to storm-outs, arguments, and any other absurdity between ring-cuffed individuals who agree to the eternal insanity of love and marriage.

It's silent, and that's good in this gruesomely loud world. On the bookshelf, none of the titles of long legacy stimulate my interest, so I crack open and read my own scribbles in a scraggily old notebook.

The date of my last entry is damn near a month more than a year old. It reads: *stoned, zoned out to the bone, these rusty hips don't strut no clout, and the blare of the TV is loud.*

The water filter in our apartment is clogged, and it slowly drips. Plop! One after another. Aqua accumulates, slowly, and movin' slow is alright. I rushed through most of my heartbeats, so these days I try to savor the minutes.

Plus, they got chemicals in the water that'll make ya dumber than Lloyd Christmas. I'm sure that filter barely works. It's all a sales gimmick to make us suckers believe we're turning aqua out the faucet, glacially pure, and the 70% sloshin' around inside us is replenished with the damn best.

I had a crew leader back in the years when there was more hair on my head than on my chin. (Side note: *there's still some old cougs down south of the border that still believe I'm Brian McConaughey and I'm comin' back. Different tales from a weird time on my grind).*

At any rate, when we cleared the hump of another wilderness peak, the team leader used to say, “liquid lubrication keeps you mobile.”

He was right, because we hiked long miles up far peaks, and sometimes we puked. Greasy town burgers taste delicious, but the gut can be finicky after it’s been starved for a couple weeks.

You can see the universe from the top of 14,000 foot peaks and smoke joints with God. There’s peril all around, and the vastly rugged terrain can be as silent as a graveyard.

On those nights, with no showers except for dippin’ in a lake, river or creek, we would chat around a campfire, never feeling lost under the North Star. The wilds of Mon-tucky can be cruel, but under the galactic milky-way it felt like home.

Now, I sit at the counter, in a supposed golden valley after we slithered by each other like snakes, wary of the damage that the other can do. I can’t recollect the exact qualification for the reason in our stiff lips or our attitudes of brutality.

I guess marriages and guts have similarities. Sometimes, they work in unison, filled with the full flavor of a beautiful moment, and, at other times, the projectile of a word, or perceived slight, can cause a sour uproar.

The human condition is finicky.

Aftermath

(2025—The Big Tomato, Sacramento, CA)

I drove by that hospital that told us we had been pregnant. There was a lot, like the amount of blood in the toilet that would indicate a horrific stab wound.

She cried for days. I was at her side for the entirety of it, even though I knew that my always-be-there loving support couldn't provide the comfort she needed.

The stoplight turned green, and the troll of flailing road-rage anger in the car behind me honked, vigorously impatient. Out the window, I threw him a chill-migo hand-shaka and eased off the line. I forgave him. He didn't know why my gaze was so distracted.

There's pain that cracks us open, never heals, and we move-on, because that's all you can ever do, and in retrospect, that's all you've ever done, so that's all you'll ever know how to do.

The furious dude behind me took his chance and maneuvered around me like the swift lane change that won the Indy-500.

In the rearview mirror, the hospital got smaller. She got through it, though. She's tough like a turtle and her aura radiates a shine like the sun. People showed her a level of tremendous care and compassion that I'd never experienced before.

It was surreal and I've never discussed it. The burn of a joint, cruisin' the long way, saves my skull from getting destroyed by the inane occurrences of this world.

The longer you make it down the line of the livin-grind, anything that alleviates the pressure of the universe and

diverts any compulsion to drive headfirst into oncoming traffic, benefits the longevity of the soul.

Smoke plumes drift out the window in the clear and crisp rise of the moonlight. There's never really any pure contentment. Only brief highs and the smooth, consistent style on the sublunary downslides.

Night's Too Heavy for Weak Water

(2026—West Sac, Sacramento, CA)

Every minute is a fresh start for everything to fall apart. It's just a matter of perception as to what sets the mayhem in motion—the thrill, the ache, all the pound on the human heart. The worst thing ever given to humanity was a chance.

Being the only creature that knows it has everything to lose, we should admire anybody at any moment that declares the need to change, even if they don't know how to make the move – conclusions are hard enough, dude.

But we get swept away by our emotional currents, out in the temporal tide. We think our opinion matters, freak out, splash verbose points that exacerbate the endurance of life & love. So, I just try to be happy with what I got…sure, I crave more, but I'm happy to smile wide, where I'm at and with who I got.

All we are: fleeting pulses and decayed dreams, bruised egos and broken hearts, the manufactured narratives we cling to, because gettin' it right, terrifies our brains. You got to put your pride on the line, let go, and free fall into the unknown, futuristic abyss, more scars for the rot.

Pretty pride lives long confused, can't admit when it hurts, and we all gotta guess why your frazzled, mental matter, smiles over a soul that's black & blue.

At some point, we realize we've been eaten alive by those damn decisions that skin our hides, and we recognize that getting over it or letting it take its toll was all in our control. We miss the ecstasy of a glorious shot because it's scary to get what you want. It's even scarier to think you can destroy it.

If this heart wouldn't hurt so much, I'd know what decision to make.

———

Forgive me, big braddah, just a quickly muttered, silent prayer in this grimy liquor store line. *She won't relinquish control, and these days increase the toll, and the weight makes me feel like a dollar bill, and I don't know how many more creases I can take before I fold.*

"Just the water?" the slender Indian bro-migo asked me.

"Nope, this night's too heavy just for water," I said. Manic eyes seared hot behind the blue tint of retro shades; chafed nerves and the frustrated stare of dilated pupils, ring-cuffed neophytes and the dead mouths that keep yapping on high peaks; forever can be a strain of trivialities. "Give me two mini bottles of Makers Mark."

"Uh…we don't have that brand of whiskey in that size. We have Crown Royal, Jack Daniels, or Jameson."

Life's a cut-rate liquor store, and generality has evened the score. "Jameson is fine. never mind the brand, I'll drain 'em faster than a label matters."

I twitched like the strobe lights in the club across the parking lot that bounced like brickhouse butt-cheeks in the deep south. The year had just started and things were already falling apart. Actually, they were rolling fine until one of us spoke our minds.

I had needed air, a chance to relax, so I'd left my wife in that corner she wanted to sit in. She had kept asking questions. She wanted us to have a good night, the inquiry wouldn't relent, and my patience wore thin like a spent

paycheck and more month than money to go. We all snap in the end.

"Total is a flat fourteen," said the liquor store clerk. I tapped the card reader and he nodded a sympathetic farewell, a display of connection between men doing their best and failing to make any progress, a world with wives and unrelenting demands.

The people waiting in line parted like I was on fire, and I sliced through the door like a sharp knife through flesh. The unseasonably warm night air in mid-March had sweat rollin' profusely off my skull, so I removed my shirt, crouched in a corner, and watched the scene in the parking lot.

Brain-boil, my thoughts gurgling like the bubbles of frenzied water in a pot. *I'm fucked, but better to shatter alone.*

Those performances are embarrassing with an audience present. I was easy to spot in that joint across the lot of stylish candy painted cars, and the gleam of radiantly rollin' rims. I twisted the caps loose and dropped the contents down my gullet. I could hear the crowd observe me like a zoo-animal.

I slipped my shirt back on, downed the water bottle, rolled my eyes, as the bearded behemoth bouncer across the lot watched me. He was bald like me, and I thought, *we could be Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny Devito in our own version of Twins*. He could snap my neck as easy as a handshake.

He just shrugged to convey good luck sentiments, I took deep breaths, choked down my cotton-mouth nervousness, and went back to the corner, to my wife.

———

She glowered at me with steel, truculent eyes. She already judged, conferred with the jury, and sentenced me for my crimes. Worst of all, I never got to order a dinner item, and now my beautiful bumble had turned into an inquiry by a man marked for death.

"Should we get some burgers?" I asked "At least our belly's will be full, some ying to the full rage of yang. That's our balance."

She got in and drove the midnight Acura like a journeyman executioner, the kind that staves off middle management because they savor the job too much, from set-up to clean up. The aura felt familiar: exacerbated desperation, like cut-off escape routes, the awareness of demise.

There's that moment where you give into death and denial. You just accelerate at high speed and a blaze of glory, aim set for the wreckage. Go for broke. There's no shame in the miles of your style when you're already a joke. And you'll still be guided to the gallows.

Strained Stale with Madness

(2026—The Delta Breeze, Sacramento, CA)

It's them damn river-city blues. Soppy and drenched, the water swelled wetlands. It's all hangdog miles that have rolled plenty of dead men.

Even the water must wait on fate, nowhere to hide; sun scorched and brutally baked. Long-shot horizon lines make eyes weary because they can see the wasted lengths. The nights are as dark as deep-water channels.

In the daylight, there's nowhere to hid, you get cooked alive by a spiteful sun over our hides.

Broken souls, bare, ramblin' feet, rough riverbanks and the shambles that can float narrowly escape defeat.

Hopeless overgrowth, the *lost* planted seeds where *they* believe.

Indomitable streets, strained stale with madness; crazed dreams, golden grit, the scrappy skulls risk-it-all. Glory gets to live, but l*egends die on the fly*.

He shot the line quick, just like how he pulls from his hip on the draw. He lived a long while on the run, Ole Fierce Floyd, River City renowned outlaw.

He rarely rambles, so I hung an ear on his words like advice that don't want to miss out on:

Stay brave, down to the last minute of temporal decay; we're all destined to be forgotten, style is the distinction that makes names last so long they become magnified tales and rotten.

Fire Red Leaves Ride the Fall's Wind

(2026—The Tenderloin/West End, Sacramento, CA)

Deep night. Worn wood edges and the ambient glow of soft neon light. Outside the saloon door, flapping like swim fins on your feet, the darkness and sorrow wait for me like failure and tomorrow.

I put it off, snicker-a-huff to myself, then order another beer and wash it down with a scoff.

2 AM, it's gettin' tight. The bartender asks, "How we doin'? Ya had some b'fore ya got here, eh? You gonna make it home alright?"

His face is blurry in the bleary haze, and I am slippin' farther down the tube. I feel born to lose, but I can handle these familiar, lone loping streets, full of people with mouths only good for their own chew.

"Totally," I say to the bartender. "Long shots are hard to navigate when you're wobbly, but goals require discipline. That's why perseverance is crucial."

His eyes look confused, just what I aimed for. I keep going. "Of course, blackouts increase difficulty, but here's a little secret between you and me. Gals. The stiffer the rip, the mightier the grit, and the louder the hoots can get. We're alive! So, let's all raise a glass before we die."

The barman's glare indicates he has a concealed tool to inflict brutality "Oh yeah, buddy, ya boozin' through a marathon, huh?"

I kill the beer-bottle and ask for another. "Secrets ain't free," I murmur. He moves slow, reluctant to replace the Bud-heavy bottle, but he does. Drunk wrecks aren't eloquent. I am

loose as a goose, but I think I have control, and it seems to placate my stool-end hassle.

I don't appreciate his pace, so once he sets the bottle down, I pay him and let him have it. "Perseverance. The grit to pursue hopes that you should quit."

He gets ugly. Another blue-collar brain, burned and blundered, stuck in ways that can't learn anymore.

"Whatever, buddy! You got 10 minutes, then you gotta get a move on," spits the mean and stern side of the booze hoarder. He returns to his neon routine and the quizzical regulars at the corner end of the bar. He gesticulates that there's a loon on the other end.

I drink swift with the allotted amount of constricted minutes. I don't like their smug stares at me, like I'm an escaped zoo-creature. "Gutless!" I yell. "None of ya got the guts to go nuts, and that's why your faces are ugly cages of lassoed rage!"

I despise their smugness that judges my brand of bizarre behavior. I swallow the remainder of the bottle, then flip it over, drink-hole down, and hurl it at the liquor brands lined up like a firing line in front of the walled mirror.

It shatters like fire red leaves ride the fall's wind.

I can't say how they reacted. I was out the door in a hot flash of a get-somewhere-else dash. I haven't been back. I wander the darkness on the flatlands of neon, like the invisibility of glass traps the wayward wiggles of a dazzling fish.

Running the Neon Rut

(2026—Indomitable City, Sacramento, CA)

Been everywhere to wind up nowhere, and don't nobody have time to care. I know it, better than God himself.

Guess I gotta eat it. When I was out there on the tromp of trails, I wouldn't have time to step on the miles that would never be mine. Purely to find the firsthand reasons for the burdened spirits, born on the roughshod miles that don't even bother to dream about the shine.

It's a hard perspective on the crevice slide of the neon grind.

"It feels fleeting, these flatlands, lookin' at the glory on the horizon line," I muttered to Rayshawn. But I was just saying it to fill the empty void in this dusty dive's ambient glow of neon.

"Sup dog?" He was too busy not being bothered by the thoughts that tear a person apart like bill reminders, even with the accumulation of emails that overly communicate the delay in your payment. So, the postage stamped formality of environmental waste makes you realize everything is bullshit.

People run companies and people need to get paid so they can pay somebody else, higher up the food chain. There's the tops, the mids, and the bleak bottom.

"Nothing worth the interruption of a good time," I said, and sniped a tequila shot.

He removed his toothpick, motion slick like a too-cool pimp, and cracked his tequila ripper. And then he said, "ain't that the truth? We live in the scrape of the grind. So, you got to work. And as you get older, you really got to work to find that gleam of hope. You got to make yourself smile. You got to

actively ignore the bullshit. Take your good time and bask in the shine—ain't nobody care about us, and that's fine. It cuts both ways. So don't be surprised when I don't give a fuck about you, because when I did, you didn't care about mine."

I didn't feel so lonely, and this vast valley didn't feel like a desolate wasteland.

"You want a beer?" I asked.

"Hell yeah," he responded, tilting his smoke-sparkled lenses and gold-rimmed frames. "Like what squirrel don't wanna get a nut?"

I handed him a werewolf-killer, Silver Bullet.

"Now let's go find some funky fun with these full-size señoritas, Rayshawn said.

"They seem to be lookin' for the good kinda nasty with the best of the worst dudes. It's only natural, this world don't make sense, so don't ask me."

"You know," he added, "I appreciate a woman that's at a six trying to be a ten. It's like, 'fuck what the world thinks. I'm gonna be my bad bitch kind of self.' It's like, 'you go girl. I'm here to help. Shit, on a desert island, I could be a superstar."

Exotic babe-a-citas, dressed like a night out in Vegas—seductive high-heels that you know were killing their feet–earrings dialed to dangle wondrously, and a fresh coat of paint on their claws. They swayed to the beat of T-Pain tunes, and gave us sly eyes that said, *come on over here, handsome*.

In a drab neon dive that felt like a beach day in reality, you scrap the tears and cut straight to the graveyard. The brave-brained know how to survive.

Angularity is a critical matter to perception. Holes get deeper when you've only been looking up, but when you look

down in the existential hole, you gotta take the trap doors, even when they cut your soul.

Make one change. It's something. It's the same lame lanes that drive you nuts. It takes gumption to go for glory, running the rut.

About the Author

Nicholas Viglietti is a writer from Sacramento, CA. After Katrina ravaged the gulf coast, he rebuilt homes there for 2 years. Up in Mon-tucky, he cut trails in the wilderness. He pedaled from Sac-town to S.D. He's a seventh-life party hack, attempting to rip chill lines in the madness. He's got two books of poetry published:

Wastrel Rips & Devil-May-Care Madness
https://bottlecap.press/products/wastnv)

Dilapidated Desperado
(https://boundharepress.com/products/dilapidated-desperado

Rip-more-reads from the view of the bro-migo breed at
www.clipsfromtheclose-out.com

Instagram: @nico_chillietti, X: @nvigliettio