

# Addendum

# Naïf

Is this the price we must pay for eternity, this pain and suffering, the happiness of life shattered and molded again, this pestilence called time? Yet it urges us on. As individuals we know that our existence is no more premeditated as it is accident, that chances of this conglomeration of pieces that make up our whole existence are only one time, and no more. How can I not know this? I feel that there is an ineffable passion that urges the artist on; one that in which he is being watched by time, and he has a vague notion of when he developed this passion, a point when his initial expected feedback was not, "You are a genius!" No, at least it was not this way for me. I rose above a naïf in my being to a writer, but an artist? No, not at all. And I lie there dipping into that same blood of my rebirth from being a naïf. Time creates more change than reason. And so it goes with the creation of writing. Nietzsche said that he wanted to say with one sentence what others would say in a book. Well, I have tried to write hundreds of books in the Box.

There are larger themes that run through the Box, but I believe they are merely the grounding of it in time and place, cultural ambivalence. There is as I have said, a birth and rebirth, symbolic of Christian mythology that pervades my society. But also there is an essence of Buddhism, Eastern thought so they call it. There are multiple levels of interpretations that are to be conveyed –and perhaps my interpretation of my own work is the only way that you can fully experience all that was to be conveyed through this medium, as metonymy would say, through the pen.

But there are multiple levels of interpretations. The effect is more of a labor than anything. Art is a process. Creation should not be the problem, but communication. When I write, I consider the problems of communication. Grammar, vocabulary, poetics, -these things are developed through practice, through labor. Aldous Huxley said that Art has its morality, and that this morality is analogous to our own ethics, as beings. And that remorse is felt in the same relation to our bad art as our bad behavior. I feel guilty if have not conveyed my meaning, but the practice comes from not trying fix mistakes you have already made in previous works or performances, -but one must not make that mistake again, and that new work will keep your art alive. Well, my practice has been in putting multiple meanings to different motifs that are parallel to each but under different themes.

If I place an object in a space, but not to be symbolic, -yet it is symbolic just by the very nature that it is a symbol; so then, is it symbolic because yielded it so, or can I dictate what is symbolic and what is just...fluff. The answer is quite simply no because there is no filler, no prologue between books. I believe I understood Nietzsche's madness quite well, that we must be concise, that I must put a book into a story. And it is written to be read this way. There is a socially constructed ethic to the criticism given to a certain work, to the question of the depth of meaning conveyed. As a writer I watch my blood, pilfered through, and I lie awake at night and feel that remorse I spoke of before, but for no reason except that you know that everyone understands this ethic of Art, this ethic of criticism, and I

accept that this what I have to do. But there are a lot of things that I don't want to do, but this, to put myself at the mercy of your knife slicing through my blood. There are far too many starving artists as well for me not to lay awake at night and fret. What pestilence plagues us also keeps us alive.

For me, there is no passive voice; there is no middle ground. I must do what I do, say what I say the cost of my family and friends. There is a solitude that I have tried to touch upon; this is not just an interpretation, it is a naïf striving to be a being. Dostoevsky said in his Notes from Underground, that this is no longer writing but a form of corrective punishment. Perhaps it is. Punishment for our bad art and bad behavior as beings. Life, I find, is innately tragic. Life, all life is a tragedy as it passes, -I believe we can find this in Art. There is a price that one must pay to be an artist. You become quite deviant to society. You become one of Them, an outsider, alienated from the own culture try to express yourself to; and there is a reason, and that is because to create entails that you bring about change, not reinforce old ideas under new labels. Oh, I suppose that some people fall prey to the caricature that fame is a sign of genius, or this mythology in our culture of misunderstood genius -hah, what idiots. It is more of a delusion than a misrepresentation, genius and fame. Does the unknown artist die the same death as the famed? Can we imagine this death? And if so, I believe this is the torture, this punishment through pain that the artist must go through. That each time I produce a new piece of work (and it is a labor), I must die another death.

Macabre. That is what it is, my writing. But I suppose there is a reason for this. People have asked me what I write about, but not why. When I was young, used to read such books as Animal Farm and Lord of the Flies. Either way, the significance of when a book is read, as far as what was going on in one's life that one can relate to that story, this is the blood that gives writing life. It, writing, must speak something of Humanity, or it is just fluff, something to start a fire with. And when I say that it should speak something of Humanity, I mean that its message should strive to convey, in any way, and to be universal in its message. It will be grounded in time and place, culture, but that is how we get culture, through the reciprocal relation of art and time, its interpretation called History. -Macabre. My writing, that is what it is. We are subject to our demons; they are our shadow. I was twelve when I learned what death was. And it led me to that sense of urgency of inspiration, and that feeling that as soon as a thought entered my mind, it must be worked out, then immediately written down; for, just as I know I will only have this life, this lucky lottery ticket, I also know there are thoughts that can be lost, very important thoughts, -and I search for them still.

It is hard to explain how there is comfort in darkness. In a sense, one becomes that shadow, some mockery of the real being behind these socially constructed veils. The Field Guide to Demons suggest a method to identify the basic demon:

An incorporeal spirit: disembodied, ghostly, intangible, spiritual -this is its method; this is sadist play the artist must act upon, his stage. Effect is what matters, it is conveyance. This medium is what the artist subjects himself to; this medium of writing is what I must humble myself to. The artist is no

master, he is subjected, he is at the mercy and limitations of a physical medium. It is easy though to hide behind obscurity, and it is hard sometimes to determine whether an artist expresses himself through the medium, or if the medium expresses the artist. The demon can do this, he can shadow himself in the guise of a story, through fiction.

## Hick Stickman

I was born on a Sunday and the Day of the Dead at 3 am, which is the Devil's Hour or the Witching Hour. Hick Stickman is my name. Papa Stickman, my grandfather, or just Papa, I called him. This is an autobiography, an interpretation of my life. And my nickname as a child was Trickenman. I was called this growing up because I couldn't pronounce the word chicken and pronounced it "tricken" instead of "chicken." And then it was shortened to "Tricks" by my grandmother, whom I called Granny. How we speak, then, must affect how we are treated. My family owned and operated Stickman Lumber & Timber Company. My Papa was the head honcho. But I remember my Granny telling me that one time Papa and his cousin went out and drank some moonshine. Now, Papa came in drunk, and Granny warned him that the bottom would fall out of shape if he kept up his shenanigans, and so, he stopped. I wish it were that simple in my own life. I cannot just "put it down," as Papa said of it, the act of habit. Or perhaps I am obstinate? And not wanting to be responsible, I am determined to soil my riches and spoil the fun. But are we not wired to self-destruct? I would think so in my case, but Papa was able to refrain, so might I then abstain from what I have termed the elixir: Angst. I don't know, but there is more to life than just getting fucked up, isn't there?

I was intoxicated with fear in my youth, though. I read and I learned from experience. Somehow, my outer self wasn't aligned with my inner self. Discipline. What is it? Well, even as a child, I knew this wasn't something that was beaten into you, or beaten out of you, as in to "beat the devil out of them." But on one hand, there is justice, on the other hand, there is understanding. I felt as a child that I received neither. Rather, that was the reason now for my stubborn defiance. I was accused of being a "rebel without a cause" when I was a teenager, and I thought that this may be the case, but it wasn't so. My fears were abundant, and corporal punishment was the culprit. And what harm could a little spanking or paddling do to a child, anyway? I say simply this: Corporal punishment, or paddling, is a trauma of my past; it was pure torture, and I relate it with God and religion, as God is that disciplinarian of my youth. And I relate my old science teacher, Rod Stricter, to God. Therefore, I see Mr. Stricter as the authoritarian, and as such relate him to God as a father figure and a persecutor. Being such, I have found that any memory of him, any trigger that is... anything related to physical discipline, as it may be called, (perhaps it is physical abuse?) anything related to these triggers of childhood memories I have tried to suppress with the elixir. And in the past, I tried to suppress my traumatic childhood memories with a variety of drugs and alcohol. "Break your jaw to say yes sir?" That's the phrase old Mr. Stricter uttered many times. That's how people treat a child in the South.

I met a lady once, whom I was supposedly getting into a business deal with to open a Christian bookstore. I was speaking to her about something that had to do with growing up and the idea that we

can't help how we were raised; that even though we are rational adults, our behaviors are often dictated by how we were raised. And upon telling her that I did something because I was taught that way as an atheist and she said I was an adult now and was free to choose differently. Well, for one thing I wasn't raised to be an atheist: I was raised to believe how I wanted to believe. I was free to choose differently, but this lady was merely saying: Why don't I choose to believe the way I do? I was raised to think for myself and that is what I intend to do here. Papa was on the threshold of the dark and deep of poverty and the emotional pain of loss of control. He saw that he couldn't continue down a particular path and chose another direction. What did he have that I didn't? He had his mental health. And that is a grand thing, to have one's mental capacities

But the thing is, I believe I was made to need the elixir. I was subjugated by the likes of tyrants like Mr. Rod Stricter, and the murderous idea of being a humiliated and degraded human being that is dependent on elixir to socialize and grow began to appeal to me at a young age. I was traumatized at the age of 6, though. And I will briefly discuss this and then delve into my childhood to account for some of the madness that plagues me as an adult.

My uncle, Stark Stickman, was young enough that when I and my older brother, Havoc Stickman, began school he was still in high school when I started first grade. Stark was a senior and told tales of electric paddle machines with paddles that had holes in them to make them more efficient, so to speak. These tales were told often enough that I began to believe in the horror of them. By the time I was out to recess one day and got in trouble over having brought my protractor and pencils and such outside and handed them out in a mock battle with a schoolmate. I was called out, and a friend and I were made to stand at the door and wait to see the principal after lunch was over. I was so terrified of the imminent abuse that loomed ahead of me that I decided it was better that I should run away to my great-grandmother's. I didn't make it to Grandma Allwell's, though; I merely was caught trying to cross a main intersection in the center of our small hometown of Backwards. I was picked up and taken back to the principal's office, but I had no memory of the events. Instead, in terror that I would be beaten, I "blacked-out" as they say. I felt like a coward. At least that's how I feel now. All the other kids were brave enough to take their licks, but not me: I was irreconcilable. And I remain irreconcilable. I refuse to accept that we must use corporal punishment to discipline our youth. Whip a child and they learn one thing: It's the adult's way or else! "Do it, don't do it, or face my wrath..." that's what a child hears in his mind.

I was molded that day into my pitiful and pathetic state of reluctance. That was my first-grade year. I began, or rather, did not begin my second-grade year until after the first two weeks had already passed. My fears had grown. And during second grade I was subjected to several of my peers being marched out into the hall and paddled just because the bell had rung, and they weren't all in their seats. If one could be beaten for such a small infraction, I thought, what would become of us who do something much more severe. To be certain, even though we said the pledge of allegiance and a prayer every morning before class began, God was nowhere to be found. And this paddling was common and frequent. I remember a boy paddled one time for not doing his arithmetic. And another infraction was when a boy was tardy; he was sent to the principal's office and judiciously paddled and sent back crying.

But despite all these floggings, I made a friend. His name was Hunter Black. And Hunter wasn't afraid of the paddle. He was paddled once for merely defending himself during a tetherball game. And I was growing angry despite the corporal punishment. Regardless, Hunter and I began to hunt songbirds with BB guns, and I made another friend, a dog, Rascal was his name. Rascal and I stayed busy prowling the woods and catching crawdads and trapping small animals. I had begun to hunt with a .410 shotgun, too. I hunted squirrels. I trapped, at first, opossums. Later I was to trap raccoons and mink and even gray fox, beavers, and once nutria. Rascal and I combed the woods daily. Nature held a serene and peaceful beauty that reconciled me as a child.

Rascal and I were fishing one day. I lay there in the warm spring sun, taking a break, laying my head back on the moss of a large rock. And it was peaceful: the stream gurgled and flowed into a still pool of water, the leaves of last year's autumn still lay on the ground, and that warm sunshine gleamed down on my face. And then I heard a familiar voice calling my name: it was Dad, calling for me. I suddenly felt as if my privacy had been violated, but quickly gathered myself and hollered back at Dad and my uncles and Papa Stickman who came through the woods. Someone had murdered two men in another town and had fled, then drove to nearby where I was at and ditched their vehicle. Being protective, my family came immediately searching for me. As to what the murderer would have done to a 12-year-old boy I don't know, but such are our fears to imagine the worst-case scenario. But the man who murdered the two men had killed three people; the third was a boy I knew: poor Lacks, that young lad who was paddled for simply not doing his arithmetic.

I witnessed Lacks get his paddling another time, and for what infraction I do not know. Lacks was in another class at the time, being that our grade was divided up into four classrooms each hour, and on this occasion, I was in a different room. Regardless, I watched as Ms. Clover with her board brought him out into the hall. The fear instantly surged within me. Young Lacks stood there as Ms. Clover went and got Ms. White to "witness" the paddling, as it was called.

I cannot think of anything more humiliating than to not only be made to bend over and told to touch your toes, and then be patted a couple of times with the board on the buttocks to “warm you up,” and then to be struck and swatted and hit as hard as possible by uncaring hands, as young Lacks flinched and raised up each time he was hit, but he was told to stay still so that he could be properly beaten. This is what was meant by education in Amerika: Land of the free, home of the brave, amen. Despite the horror and terror of school, I still thrived and learned. Science is the truth and the light, and such it was for a boy in these circumstances. Surrounded with fear for every action I make to where things were never understood, whether or not to chew gum in class or whether or not to sit in someone else’s chair –should I do what I was told, or should I know to say “Yes sir!” These are the things faced by the youth of militant teachers with an agenda to maintain discipline.

Good old Mr. Stricter, he should be dragged into the street and flogged. Violence serves no purpose here. In fact, it is violence, the physical violence of abuse that we need to escape and eradicate in Amerika society. No child ever learned anything from the hickory stick except fear and that to get what they want in life; they can use physical force and violence to attain it. In a way, I’m not even here to argue that corporal punishment is either effective or ineffective: I know that it is nothing but harmful any case, and so why should it be any different to any other child. There is one factor that makes it certainly detrimental to a person such as I, and that is that I had and still have mental illness. But what role did corporal punishment play in my own atheism?

I say that the crux of Christianity is that God is that absolute judge and punisher. He waits in hell to cast us all into eternal damnation for having wronged him and others. What more could he be but this fearful vision of judgment. I have heard “God is love.” Well, God and the Church are only people of this world. God is fallible for He is unjust. He has no right to judge me or anybody. We are His equals. He is as damned as we are. This is the anger that I have for God and idiots like Rod Stricter. I sat the other day in the parking lot of an All-Mart store, which I was banned from being on the property. I was sitting in the parking lot, fearing that I would be arrested for trespassing and subject to the hells of incarceration, when I thought to myself: who or what do I pray to... no one and nothing! But is that so bad? Can’t I just search inward and say to myself: I have the strength to endure this and persevere.



Mr. Stricter was a godly man, religious or superstitious at least. He taught that science says that the universe was created with the Big Bang and that humans came to exist through evolution while at the same time adding that some people believe that God created the world in six days and rested on a seventh. That was science to him, and if you didn't like it and didn't reply to his curt and coarse expressions of "You understand?" and "Break your jaw to say yes, sir!" -well if a student didn't reply "Yes, sir," you were made to walk out into the hall, told to wait there while he got a witness, and while you're waiting the door to the classroom was left open, and all the other children waited and watched and then when Mr. Stricter and the witness came back, chuckling often, you were instructed to bend over and touch your toes, and he tapped your bottom a little to "warm it up" as I have said; and then he came swung the paddle back, held it there for a moment and with all the force he could muster he swung the board, which was about an inch and a half thick, six inches wide and about three feet long, -he came down with the force and violence of his imagined God that he was dealing out right justice for our wrongs; and then after the smack and whack of the first lick he waited and again tapped and warm up his paddle in a sexual manner on the child's buttocks; he waited in order to let the pain sink in so that you felt the severe punishment even more severe than if he swatted and hit you quickly and the pain of the first swat numbed the blows of the next two, for you were struck three times with the paddle; as if this pain instilled any learning other than sheer fear into a child.

I was occupied with investigating nature as a child. Nature is my first love. I was obsessed with Her. I walked through the woods and fields daily. In the summer I fished and caught crawdads and explored the woods behind our house and trapped nearby creeks in the winter. The year I spent with Rascal was most memorable in my youth. I remember very little though, now thanks to aging and the elixir. I do remember that day when young Lacks was shot, and Rascal and I were asleep on the creek bank. I remember the day that Rascal died. I had awoken late on a Sunday and Mom had made "slummy." I was eating when I heard Dad whisper something to Havoc, my older brother, and then he said he had to tell me something, that Rascal was dead, he had been hit by a vehicle and killed.

My spirits dropped, or rather they were emptied. I felt hollow and didn't eat for several days and refused to go to school. Dad told me I needed to get back into the swing of things before I got depressed, but I was already depressed: a mentally ill boy, traumatized by a tyrant teacher who had just lost his best and only friend. But there was relief. Dad told me that it would be okay because Rascal was in Heaven. And I was happy again. I was ecstatic. I was manic. And I spoke to God under an old bull pine tree in Granny and Papa's front yard. Their yard adjoined our yard in the back. And I came out of my parent's house and walked over to the front yard of my grandparents'. I looked up and everything was brilliant, the light of the sun radiated off the bull pine and I looked and understood my purpose in life. I would be a thinker, but not just a scholar, an intellectual, but a freethinker.

I walked away that day with my vision from God to be a freethinker, and to write the story of Rascal and how he was okay and in heaven. But then I came back across the yard and my Aunt Dixie, my Uncle Stark's wife, showed up in the driveway of our home. She asked why I felt better, and I told her that I felt better because I knew Rascal went to Heaven. She paused, and said:

"Animals don't go to Heaven... animals don't have a soul."

And I became irreconcilable.

Then and there I denounced God!

I don't blame my Aunt Dixie for my absolute defiance. She believed as many people did in the south did that Heaven was for people only. And later I learned that this belief came from the Bible. And that planted the seed of atheism in me. Papa Stickman had led me to believe otherwise. On the eve of a fishing trip, he encouraged me to pray that we catch fish the next day. Papa Stickman was an outdoorsman and said that a little prayer wouldn't hurt. But I wonder: did he truly believe in a God. Well, I believe he did; at least in a moral God, because Papa was a man of great integrity. He always did what he felt was right and just, and that was what I believe his God was to the world. And I have heard tales of my Papa using a belt on my dad and uncles, but he never whipped me. I know Papa and Granny loved me. His physical discipline for my dad and my Dad's physical discipline on me was an attempt to instill fear against me to the things I had done. Mr. Rod Stricter, on the other hand, was out to execute pious justice and physical and mental abuse upon an innocent and mentally ill child in my case. And so many other teachers exerted their will onto a child. But did this discipline instill doubt? Yes, it did, indeed! It presented a logical fallacy to my infantile mind:

Children were to be cherished, while at the same time abused, and an educator can physically hit a child with a piece of lumber!

I became more aggressive in a sense after Rascal died. I remember during my 6th grade year, before class began in Mrs. Black's class, I was pushing and shoving and playing with a classmate Dick Haggie. The bell rang and Mrs. Black came in and saw us and ordered us out in the hall. She went and got Ms. White to witness the beating. She instructed Dick to touch his toes and quickly gave him two swats of the paddle. Then she told him to go back into the room, and then she told me to touch my toes, and I did. The paddle came down hard against my buttocks two times and I don't think I've ever felt more humiliated and degraded by another human being. I was told to go back into the classroom, and she stayed out in the hall and spoke with Mrs. White. I told myself that I would never be paddled again. And I never was.

There was a girl, Gabby Babble, who told me I was a rebel without a cause when I reacted with anger to what my Social Studies teacher Mr. Sludge had done. A friend of mine, Jack Retch, one time made a remark that "life's a bitch," and he was marched out into the hall and judiciously paddled. Jack took his beating without incident, and I commented to Gabby that he should have put up a fight... I thought Jack should have resisted. I was angered and flushed red. And she said:  
"You're a rebel without a cause."

I didn't know to tell her that I did have a cause: a just reckoning. But justice is an elusive ideal. I have never found it in this world, and I doubt that it exists in the next or any other world; both of which I don't believe exist anyhow. And good old Mr. Stricter, he gave me the "Break your jaw to say, Yes, sir," spiel and I folded like a coward. I mumbled:

"Yes, sir."

And he asked me again, so I said it loudly:

"Yes, sir!" I said with a slight contempt.

I know now that I wasn't a coward. I was just a scared boy, but I'm grown now. And there will be a reckoning. I am here to tell you that old Mr. Stricter was a coward. And that he didn't beat the devil out of any of his schoolchildren. No. He instilled the Devil into them: He instilled fear into them. Though, now I believe that there is no God out of reason and logic, not just out of rebellion. But all my life I was scorn. Will I ever reconcile God with reason? I don't know. I doubt it. I would like to think it is like my Mom told me, that she thinks God is your conscience. And I think she is right. The idea of God is either so grand to be infeasible or the idea of God is so simple to be futile. God is what is good and right. And that leaves everything else and Mr. Rod Stricter and his bureaucratic and militant educators to the Devil. There must have been something that Rod Stricter had seen in science that he couldn't reconcile with his religion.

The idea of a “God of my own understanding,” came into my life during 10th grade. And I encountered another ego-driven teacher, Mr. Bleak. He was my 10th grade Geometry teacher, and he was good at teaching Geometry. He wasn’t known for being as much a dictator as Mr. Stricter, but he did put emphasis on his own physical prowess. He would demonstrate an L-stand from gymnastics in front of class on his desk. It was said that his “licks” from paddling were as painful and bad as Mr. Stricter’s, but I was never a victim of his discipline. But he was the teacher who put the idea into my Dad’s mind that I was on drugs. This idea came about because I quit doing my Geometry lessons and fell behind in class. In fact, I went from making A’s to F’s all in one semester. I was not on drugs, though. I was just in absolute defiance. I simply refused to do my schoolwork. But I was sent off to rehab at the age of 16. And I was forced to sit through AA and NA meetings and was told that I needed a Higher Power, or a “God of my own understanding” to reconcile me. Garbage. What I needed were educators who would instill love and understanding in me and not beat me like an animal. I became disruptive and refused to do any of the treatment. I passed the drug test going into the treatment program, but I was told that my attitude and behavior made it likely that I would be addicted to drugs later in life. I guess the institution knew that much about me. Regardless, I refused to participate in the treatment, and I was sent to Shadowlands Psychiatric Hospital. I did not understand why I was at a mental facility, but I wasn’t as resistant to the treatment there as I was in the rehab. I was still defiant, though.

I was released from Shadowlands after a couple of months due to insurance and financial reasons. The head psychiatrist said they had to let me go but that he could not understand why I was so defiant. I guess paddling a child was acceptable to mental health during this time, they couldn’t connect the pieces of the logic puzzle. And so, I was set free, but I didn’t return to high school, instead I went to work for Papa Stickman. He put me to work drilling: 180 a day for \$200 a week. I thought it was a good deal for a guy at that age, and it was. Papa Stickman was worried about me, and he knew that putting me to work was the best thing for me, and indeed it was. I worked and got enough money to buy some drums and cymbals. Dad taught me percussion: rudimental snare drum, marimba, and timpani. I dreamed of becoming a professional musician, a Heavy Metal drummer.

One day that summer when I was working for my Papa, an engine came back to us; something went wrong with the work we had done to it, supposedly. What really went wrong with it I don't recall, but I know that Granny Stickman placed blame on Papa Stickman letting me drill poles at the young age of 16. My Papa said that it wasn't my fault, and even if it was, mistakes happen. Either way, I was told that I was back home to my parents. Granny and Papa had moved and opened a second branch of Stickman Lumber & Timber Company to the north of our hometown, in the small town of Plateau. The next morning, the morning after I was told I was to go home, I awoke to my Granny throwing shoes at my bedroom wall through the living room where she sat on the couch. She was raising a fuss over me not getting up and mowing the lawn that morning before I went home.

I had agreed to mow the lawn and do chores like cut hog wire to make tomato growing cages to pay for my room and board, as Papa Stickman put it. It was to teach me responsibility and to carry my own weight as I know now. I had been doing this as I was supposed to until that morning, and I felt that I shouldn't have to mow the yard, since I was basically fired for something that I hadn't even done. I was just blamed, I felt, because I was the youngest and most inexperienced hired hand at the Lumber and Timber yard. Well, I went home without mowing the lawn, so my Granny kept and withheld the cymbals I had ordered and had delivered to their house in Plateau. Papa brought them, though, after a month and knocked at the front door of my home in Backwards. He held out the cymbals, gave them to me, and shook his head. He couldn't understand...

I got a girlfriend when I got back home. Her name was Trixie. She was a Mormon. She told me about the North where she was from. It was different there: the schools she was from didn't use corporal punishment, and she was from the North. This was both good news and alarming news. A place where they didn't paddle students for anything or any reason! It was a miracle. I don't know if it was a miracle, but it was critical news to me. I mean, this was before the time of the Internet. And knowledge was not wholesale. This put into my mind that somewhere there was a land that had mercy on youth and didn't believe in torturing children. But Trixie tried to get me converted to be a Mormon. It was at the end of our relationship that she sought to elicit a confession from me, a confession that I am atheist. In her world, we could only be together by getting married and having a family, having children together and dying, she believed that only a marriage between two Mormons was eternal.

I requite. My time with her was unbearably quick. She told me she would only be my girlfriend if I would be converted to Mormonism. I refused, and said I didn't believe in a God, and she broke down in tears. This would affect me later when I was to meet my wife, Faith Steward. Trixie told me she couldn't marry me if I wasn't a Mormon because we would be wed for eternity if I accepted her faith; whereas if I didn't accept her faith, I was damned! I chose neither. I am not damned because I won't convert to be a Mormon. I was okay. But that was the end of our relationship. I doubt that I could have become involved with the Mormon Church after I was accosted by Trixie for my atheism. I got another girlfriend quickly: Page. She lived with her mom. Page's dad had gone away. I fraternized with her and learned about sex. And that's how a two-year relationship began. I had already dropped out of school and went to work at Pizza Parlor, though; and I wouldn't return to school because of its use of corporal punishment.

I bought a convertible, a Dwarf. I began to smoke marijuana at age 17, and I made friends with the Cash family. I became good friends with Rob Cash, and I met and befriended his friend Gusto Wylie, or just Gus. It was a hard time in my life. I relaxed with Page and got high most of the time. But I worked full-time at Pizza Parlor. And I bought weed, as we called it, regularly. I reached agonizing states of consciousness in the woods north of our town.

I had taken refuge at the Cash home after I had been expelled from school for a fight I was involved in with Hunter Black, my best friend from childhood. Hunter and I and another friend Noxious or Nox, -we all three took on a gang of rednecks. And there were a couple of black guys with the rednecks: Hunter and Nox were quite racist, but I didn't consider myself to be racist, so I was stuck in the middle of hate. Hunter was my friend, though, and Hunter and Nox asked if I'd go size up the rednecks.

Nox took on the head bully and he was pummeling him good when another one of them stepped in and took a shot at Nox, then Hunter hit the second guy, and then another guy, Mars, a black guy, stepped in and hit Hunter. So, I went in after Mars, whom I was half the size of, but I never even made it to him. Instead, I was hit from behind on the head, I turned and ended up somehow at the feet of a boy who was hitting me on the head with a class ring on their hand. I wasn't a fighter, and I don't know how I ended up in a gang of misfits, but I was expelled, and I went home. I got into an argument with my Dad, and he and I had another fight. I got loose and headed to a neighbor's, where I called Rob Cash to come and get me. I went to the Cash's where I hid out for the next six months.

And it was during that Winter that I was dating Page. I had been living with the Cash's still during that time. I became good friends with Rob, who was four years younger than me. He and I shared a passion for video games. We also both wrote macabre poetry. Rob Cash and I shared a room, but he was still a child of 12 and he stayed in his father's room in a king-size bed. Mr. Cash, or Captain as we called him, taught me how to cook steamed white rice and venison stir fry. I stayed up all night and played a certain video game that I could almost win. I took a shot of whiskey for the first time, and I felt grown up. After about six months of living underground, Captain finally told my Dad that I was staying with them, and he made arrangements for me to move back in with my parents.

I met another friend, Fix. I knew Fix from school, and he said I could stay at his duplex. I'm not sure how I ended up living with him, but Fix's mom stayed with her boyfriends. She and Fix's dad were divorced. She was rarely ever home... Once a month she stopped by and gave Fix some food stamps. It was a different life than I grew up with, but I adapted. I started attending school again, but my life was subversive. I continued dating Page and congregating at the Cash house. I started smoking cigarettes. Fix and I would go to the Piggly Wiggly and buy groceries with food stamps. That's where Fix introduced me to shoplifting. Fix shoplifted cartons of cigarettes. Before long, Fix was shoplifting CDs from All-Mart and selling them to the pawn shop. He would steal ten at a time and open them and take them to the pawn shop and sell them. We used the money to buy marijuana and went up in the woods north of Backwards and got high after school every day. I sold Page my Dwarf car, and she gave me an old clunker for the rest of the money she owed me on the convertible; a car that Fix and I sprayed painted flat black and tinted the windows. It was our Weed Wagon, so we called it. Fix, I, and Page would take it for a drive on back roads of the woods around Backwards.

I went with Page to church one time. I had let my hair grow long. The preacher had a sermon that said something to the effect of the fact that Jesus didn't have long hair and that our youth was deceived by the idea that Jesus was a long-haired man, that paintings and pictures did not accurately portray Jesus. I'm not sure what his point was but I derived pleasure in making him uncomfortable. I went to school one day and I was in Geography class with Mr. Sludge. We were going over chapter 4 and the secretary called him over the intercom to come to the principal's office. He told us to keep reading chapter 4 and we would discuss it when he got back. Fix sat behind me in the class and he and I talked a little; all the kids in the class spoke amongst themselves by the time Mr. Sludge returned. Mr. Sludge wouldn't tolerate the disorder and said that there would be a pop quiz over chapter 4 since no one had read it. I didn't understand and asked why we were going to have a pop quiz over something no one had read.

Mr. Sludge was angered and told me to step out into the hall. I said no and refused. He reached down and opened his desk drawer and put his hand on the paddle. Again, he told me to step into the hall. I merely laughed, and he turned red and walked out of the room. He didn't come back. The bell rang and class dismissed itself. The next morning, I was called to the Principal's office and was dismissed permanently from school. I felt relieved. It seemed the madness was over. But the fear was instilled within me.

I ended my relationship with Page after she asked when I was going to ask her to marry me.

Commitment was an issue for me. I had just turned 18 years old. And then I reached a milestone: Papa Stickman was killed. I got the news while I was at work at Pizza Parlor one morning. The driver of an 18-wheeler semi-truck was wired up on meth, and he flipped his rig over on the road and was going so fast that it slid off the road, through a parking lot, through the front door of the machine shop and hit my Papa who was standing behind the front counter and broke his neck. It was devastating news too; I had thought that I would move back to Plateau with them and go back to work. But that wouldn't happen now that Papa had been killed that December day. After the funeral, I spoke with Dad and Uncle Dent. They encouraged me to move in with Granny and return to school at Potato, Ok. And so, I did. I didn't last but a couple of weeks, though. I didn't hear any students being hit, but I knew it was only a matter of time. I left Granny's in Plateau and went back to Backwards. I then went to Abstract, Amerika.

My brother Havoc had joined the Army and was just discharged, so he and I got an apartment for a couple of months and got my GED. But I was there only a few months and I returned to Backwards. I got back and Granny gave me Papa's old Ford van and I moved into her old house in my parent's backyard. My dad bought me a new drum set, and a friend and I would play Heavy Metal for friends on the weekend. We didn't have a vocalist or a bassist, but our friends didn't seem to mind. I enjoyed heavy metal music; the staff at Shadowlands Psychiatric Hospital wouldn't let me keep my albums, much less listen to them. I was thankful, then, I guess I was thankful for my freedom to listen and play the music of my choice, and not be forced to listen to country music. Gusto Wylie would come over. Gus was 16 and could drive now. He and I would go to his parents' plot of land in the woods with him and smoke weed.



I began to drink beer and work at another lumber and timber yard. My long-time childhood friend Hunter Black had begun to inject meth. It wasn't long until he and I drifted apart. It wasn't him shooting up meth that scared me, but someone had given him a hot dose. I don't know if they were trying to kill him, or if they just gave him some bad dope, but I was afraid to be around it. I dabbled around with some other drugs like PCP and acid and still used marijuana, as well as vodka and beer... and Angst, a drug containing an opioid that wouldn't make you drowsy, but I could relax and recline in chair and listen to ambient electronic music: an over-the-counter drug with a little "kick," as I've heard it said. I spent many nights listening to music and reading. I put a pull-up bar in my living room. I started doing push-ups and sit-ups and pull-ups. I was young and exercise was still easy for me. And I was having fun living at Granny Stickman's old house.

But the fun had to end. Restless, I moved to Plateau. I moved back in with my Granny. I worked clearing brush and barbed-wire fences. I discovered Buddha and Insight Meditation. All was well. I started working on a collection of poems. "The Ant & The Bee..." that is what I titled the collection. The title was supposed to convey the life of a busy body. I remember my Granny Stickman telling me that the Bible was a good story. I also remember the day that she spoke with me about starting college. She said:

"If you don't start now, Tricks, you'll never go."

And it was as simple as that, I began academia...

Life as a college student was difficult for me psychologically my first semester. Though, that was partly because I didn't finish high school, not because I feared for my own wellbeing and would be beaten for being late to class as I had in Backwards High School. No, I was treated like an adult for once in my life and it felt good. But now I had an urge to be perfect in the classroom, even without the fearful presence of corporal punishment. I guess it is a good thing, though, to excel at being a student. I began college in the Spring. I was at a junior college to begin with, and that made it easier... being that there was not as much pressure. I went to the Evangel Student Union with a friend and heard them speak about how they had scars, but I could not identify with them for some reason; their scars seemed like they were from trivial wounds. Perhaps I just lacked compassion, and perhaps compassion had been beaten out of me, at least beaten out of some poor child at Backwards High School. Anyhow, the curriculum at Plateau Junior College was enlightening.

But Granny Stickman started throwing shoes at my bedroom wall again while I was trying to work on my assignments. She didn't really understand bookwork, I suppose. She thought I should be outside working. And I moved again.

The University of Academia was an interesting place. I found a café called The Arts. It was in the town of Dung, and even though it wasn't as backwoods as Backwards, it was still in need of deliverance from the shackles of ignorance. But as for the town of Dung, it wasn't a hole in the wall, but it was small; as for the campus of University of Academia, it was more liberal. I was still required to take remedial English and Math, and it was just my second semester. I feel I excelled in the courses, especially in English, where I wrote a creative short story. And it was my first short story: "The Cosmic Crusader." It was just a ridiculous piece over how someone had stolen the World's Largest Potato, and the town was proud of this potato, indeed! That was one of the town's attractions, the World's Largest Potato. I had handwritten the story. I was the one behind the times. And that would change in the next couple of semesters as I had to write several papers, and I got a program for the computer that taught typing. That brings up our next subject: the Internet. I was introduced to it one night at a friend's place. The extent of my computer-internet literacy was to type in: "I'm a frog." I would type this over and over in a chat room.

I completed several short-short stories in English Composition One. They were short pseudo-fictitious stories: accounts based on truth with the names slightly altered. I was introduced to the College of Arts and Sciences at University of Academia and assigned to the department I was to occupy myself with. I learned one thing: the repetition of patterns is what makes you successful.

That was 20 years ago and to this date I still have force of habit... At least when it comes to writing. I no longer smoke. But how can I say this? Smoking is a bad habit, of course, but repetition of any pattern can be hard to break. I just wanted to mention smoking here, though, because Professor Masters had smoked and he suffered emphysema, got treatment for it, recovered, started to smoke again, and then died shortly thereafter. Granny Stickman suffered from emphysema, too, after quitting smoking. I didn't want to die from smoking cigarettes, though... so I quit smoking when I was 36. Anyway, now back to our story.

The patterns I've followed that have made me successful were exercise and writing. Listening to music helps, too; it helps my mental health. And playing music helped, as well. I joined the University of Academia percussion ensemble, and it was a great boost to my self-esteem and to my social aptitude. But reading and writing made me feel productive. I remember a Latin phrase that was inscribed on the University of Academia library, it was Sapere Aude, "dare to learn." This made a lot of sense to me: an individual who had dared to learn, to be brave enough to accept that he didn't know, and to be willing to assimilate new and better ideas as had those people who came before me. This is not discrediting things that can be handed down from one generation to the next, such as carpentry or masonry skills, or a rudimental drumming tradition as in my immediate family. It is saying that we should not hold onto those ideas that are detrimental to us and society, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia: all religions, or at least the Evangelicals here in Amerika are responsible and have at the root of bigotry.

I've heard arguments on the radio that evangelical Christians are not basing their beliefs on today's standards, that they're basing it on a 2,000-year-old text. Well, an idea that hasn't been changed in 2 millennia is dead and one that is blindly held. It has not withstood the test of time, but rather it shows how hard it is for a culture to overcome its fears of infancy.

I wrote several short-short stories, as I've said, in Comp. One. And in Comp. Two, I would learn to write longer essays. I wrote a paper over Slavery for my term paper. It was titled "Black Gold." A pun on black gold as black lives instead of oil. And I took a sociology course: Social Institutions; Religion. It was eye-opening. I had an assignment to find the meaning of the inscriptions in the university library, and that's where I learned *sapere aude*. But I also learned another key concept: The Thomas Theorem, which states simply that: What is perceived as real, is real in its consequences. And that applies to many things besides religion, such as if I believe I'm a genius, I will excel; or if I believe I'm a mad genius, I will excel and then fold under the weight of my own psychosis. I know I didn't suffer from madness, rather from mental illness. Where madness may infer insanity, or not knowing right from wrong, mental illness was a kind of knowing right from wrong, but not caring to know the difference or understand the consequences.

I was to learn valuable skills working the reference desk nights at the Dung Library, though; and what I learned was simply the ability to do research on the internet and other databases and to look up information in journals. I became dissatisfied with courses for my degree I sought at University of Academia, and I decided to transfer to the University of Ponder. I was majoring in Sociology, and English, at University of Academia, but I wanted to major in Anthropology at Ponder University. Before I went to Ponder, I went to Idea for a semester. I got a job working at the Idea Writing Center, but only went one day before I dropped out of college for the rest of the semester. I then moved to Ponder, where during the summer before school began, I wrote *The Silver Curtain*, as I first titled the short story. *The Silver Curtain* was a tragedy about a guy who got high on weed and murdered a policeman. It was my way at striking back at Mr. Stricter from my past. I had become very depressed, partly due to my failing relationship with Ms. Cross. It is important to keep things in context.

I do remember there was a bar called *The Library*. What a name for a place to get intoxicated while you went over your assignments. A friend of mine, Spike, was at *The Library* at the same time I was one day. Spike went a little over his credit limit on his credit card. He had ran up a \$124 tab. He had them run his credit card several times, and each time it was denied; and then I said I would pay for it. I was there with a professor having a drink. Spike was an old friend from Backwards. I met him through another friend. He was a straggler from Backwards. He introduced me to espresso. He was bisexual. Now this was taboo in Backwards. But at Ponder it was permitted. Spike and I were good friends as a matter of fact. He and I would share an apartment. But for now I had to help him out. And I didn't mind.

The horizons of my life were looking good until mental illness crept back upon me. It was there, and has been here, always. Anxiety. Depression. These were the facets of my life that brought me asunder and dictated my creativeness. I would have to put my career on hold. I withdrew from college and went home to Backwards for the summer. I would return to the University of Academia. I began to do large sketches. The first I titled "Despair." It was an androgynous figure kneeling in water with its hand holding its head. I would do several of these "figure drawings". I put my mind to work. And I soon returned to college with illustrations for my stories. I was to be published in the University of Academia literary journal Green Eggs and Spam. I felt that I had accomplished something. But success eludes me still. I was told by a therapist once that I was afraid to succeed. Well, yes. That sounds good: I am afraid to succeed. That must be why I have failed. I tell myself.

I am thankful that Granny got to see my sketches. She said:

"These are fucking awesome!"

Granny was to die shortly after she saw my sketches. I was devastated but didn't know it. A thing I didn't recognize was that I was dependent on her for so many things regarding my mental well-being. I so miss Granny and Papa Stickman. Now I must move on. I made my way back to Ponder.

Temporarily I lived with a friend. Her and her boyfriend let me stay in a spare room. And by spare, I mean it was a room they planned on using in the future for her growing boy she had. I shifted around and produced another sketch. I titled it, "Catharsis."

I would again return to Backwards, though. I was restless. I had turned to using meth. Stone and I would stay up 10 consecutive nights. As if that was something to be proud of or some kind of record. I took comfort in not sleeping. My dreams were not dreams, but rather nightmares. The drug that was responsible for killing Papa Stickman was now killing me. It was not really killing me, but idea of using the same drug that I felt was responsible for killing Papa Stickman was discouraging. Many times, I reflect negatively only to find the real reason woven into the falsehood. It is not quite a lie that I'm telling myself, just a little distortion of the truth.

I went north to a city in Amerika. Spike was living there, and I went to see him. Spike and I were still drinking coffee, espresso and such. But we added methadone to the mix. Spike by this time was recovering from doing heroin. I liked the methadone, but it was just a holiday for me, not an everyday thing like it was for Spike. The methadone use went on for a couple of days and I told Spike I had to get out of there and go back to Backwards. I told him I was thinking about moving back to Dung and asked him if he wanted to go with me. He said he would ride down and check out. But he spent all his energy that day looking for meth to get a "boost" to make the trip. I found him that evening and tried to wake him as he lay there covered in sweat. But I couldn't wake him, and I couldn't wait. I left for Backwards that night.

I was back in Backwards about a week and one morning I got up and Mom showed me the paper. An obituary for Spike was in the Sunday paper. I called his grandmother, and she explained that he had died from something drug related. Apparently, Spike hadn't been taking his psychiatric meds while he was using the methadone, and all of sudden he took the regular dose again and he went to sleep and didn't wake. His dad came and signed the papers to have him taken off life support. I remember seeing him lying there drenched in sweat and trying to wake him to get him out of that town. That was last time I saw Spike.

Thanksgiving Day, I was listening to music and the phone rang. It was the number Hunter Black was staying. I did not answer. Instead, I went north of Backwards to the hills. My family ate Thanksgiving dinner in the hills every year. I was to see my Uncle Goat one last time. He would tell the story of Jack Straps. He told a story every year at Deer Camp. The whole family would gather in the hills and hunt deer every fall. Uncle Goat told a story of Jack and his bull. The bull would die, and Jack would make three straps out the bulls hide. I don't recall what the straps were, but...

I drove back home and received a call on my cell phone in my truck as I came out of the hills. Hunter Black was dead. His step-sister told me how he had ran head-on into a logging truck, an 18-wheeler like the one that had killed Papa Stickman, and he was on a motorcycle, a dirt bike; she said it didn't kill him, and that the gas tank on the motorcycle had blown up, Hunter was then dragged across the ground and then suffocated from his lungs being burned by the flames of the exploding gas tank. Hunter Black had always been my was once my best friend. He died at age 29. I was then 30 years old. I went to the woods outside BackwardsPodunk and found Gus WylieArcher Stone. I asked him if he had any "shit," and he said "Yes." "he did. Shit" was what addicts referred to meth. Gus and I stayed up a few days until it was time for Hunter Black'sHunter's funeral. I skipped the viewing and got a night's sleep the day before the funeral. It was a closed casket funeral. I remember the last time I saw Hunter. He had "borrowed"stolen my truck, and I had gone to go reclaim it. HunterHe was making a peanut butter and syrup sandwich when I entered the house he was staying at and the residence where I found my vehicle. He told me where the keys were, and I got them, got in my truck, and left. That would be the last time I saw Hunter Black.

I left Backwards and headed North, as I was to attend the University of Academia again....