

Home

Home

Poems and Short Stories
by Mitchell Gunn



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Original edition released April 2016.

Revised and expanded edition released November 2016.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to express my thanks to the J.E.A. Crake Foundation, whose financial contributions were instrumental in bringing this project to life.

I would also like to thank Geordie Miller for his guidance and advice through every step of this immensely enriching and rather nerve-wracking process.

Finally, I would like to offer my most sincere gratitude to all the friends and acquaintances who supported me throughout this endeavour – by reading pieces, providing feedback, and even just by putting up with my perpetual state of distraction. I truly could not have done this without them.

Preface

I never thought about what home meant while I was growing up, because I never had to. Home was intuitive, self-evident, and didn't need any explanation. If I felt at home while reading my favourite book, going to school, or spending time with my friends, that was enough for me.

The feeling wasn't always there, of course. My family moved a few times while I was a kid, and each resettlement took away all the familiar and comfortable elements of my life. Eventually, I would make new friends, explore my new surroundings, and find new ways to fit in. I would feel at home again.

It happened in Yorkton, in Saskatoon, in London, and I started to believe that it would happen anywhere. Despite a lack of any definitive criteria, I became convinced that home would always find me if I was patient.

In the fall of 2013, I started my first year at Mount Allison University, way out on the southeastern edge of New Brunswick. Once more I was faced with a new landscape and a new set of strangers to populate it. I told myself that I just had to wait, that I would feel at home eventually. In the meantime, I still had a home in London that I could turn to for support.

I returned to Ontario at the end of April. It had been a stressful year, and I was looking forward to four months away from due dates, exams, and the occasional faculty strike.

Everything in London seemed so close to the way I had left it. My bedroom and all of its contents were unchanged aside from a layer of dust. My neighbourhood had a few cosmetic differences, but nothing too severe. My high school friends had returned from their own first years at university and were eager to catch up on lost time.

I should have felt more at home than ever, but I didn't. There was something uncanny about it all, like this was a flawed impersonation of the home I knew. I waited for it to get better as the weeks went by, for the feeling to come back to me. It never did.

At the end of the summer, I went back to New Brunswick, dejected and confused. My only consolation was the chance that I would feel at home at university, but I quickly realized this wasn't the case.

I felt cheated. By this point, I had hoped – expected, even – to have two homes, and I was left with none. For the first time, I realized that I needed a definition for home. I needed to know what had changed in London. I needed to know what I had lost and what I wanted to find.

I started asking people about their definitions of home. I read poetry and prose on the subject and even research articles about the psychological need to belong. I began to explore my own feelings of home through creative writing, which seemed like the most fitting medium for something at once so personal and universal.

I split my work into three categories: things, places, and people. These labels comprised everything that I had ever thought of as home – my childhood possessions, the old haunts of my adolescence, my closest friends and family. In each piece I wrote, I wanted to explore a different aspect of one of these

categories, how it contributed to a feeling of home or a lack thereof.

After a while, I realized that my threefold taxonomy of home was missing something important. The things, places, and people are all significant, but home only really exists when the three come together in the form of our stories.

My possessions, my neighbourhood, and my friends were not inherently meaningful. They didn't instantly make me feel at home the first time I saw them. That feeling had to be earned by all the stories in which they played a part, all the memories I made with them.

Crucially, home is also the feeling that there are more stories yet to be written. It's not just a past or a present, but a future. If there's nothing new to write, no more memories to be made, home ceases to be home.

That's what happened to me in London. The things, places, and people didn't change, but my story had moved on. That chapter of my life was over, and I had to leave it behind.

My parents have since moved to Edmonton, a city to which I have no real connection aside from their presence. I've visited London on a few more occasions, and while it's nice to see old friends again, it's clear that I don't belong there anymore. University still feels like a transient, unstable experience. It's hard to feel at home when there's an expiration date hanging over my head, even one as exciting as graduation.

I'm still searching for home, and I don't know how long it will take me to find it, but at least now I have a better idea of what I'm looking for.

1: Things

Home, Revisited

I open my closet door to reveal
the toys I left behind: stuffed animals
with given names and well-worn seams,
plastic dinosaurs mixed in with army men,
building blocks, foam footballs, remote control cars,
batteries and better days sometimes included.
I pick them up the way I used to, but something
slips between my overreaching fingers.

My drawers are full of clothes too small,
too grass-stained, too torn.
Scoffing at the idea that shirts
were not designed to be ripped,
I refused to part with the cloth scars
while they could still cover my fresh wounds.
My skinned knees and bruised elbows healed
years ago, and all the blood has lost its colour.

A stack of picture books stands sentinel
in a dusty corner. It seems like a waste that
they're here and so am I and nothing more,
no conversation left in the pages that
once spoke softly or spun silent rapture to a boy
sitting indoors on a rainy day. I remember listening
as my mother brought the characters to life,
and yet I've lost the voices.

All of these things belonged to me.
I suppose they still do, but the parts don't fit together
as neatly anymore, puzzle pieces of a whole
that has since gone missing. I rearrange them,
try to reconstruct their former shapes,
but the patterns escape me.
Despite my best efforts, they persist
as stolen artifacts, fragments of forced possession.

Constance

My teacup sits in pieces on the floor
A gentle solace, tender place to hide
Now by some false movement cast aside
Never to contain me anymore
Companionship that warmed me to the core
Defined by more than what was held inside
My comforter – my dearest friend! – has died
And leaves me so much colder than before
Our moments shared can never be replaced
A handle worn, a rim so chipped and scarred
The reparations I can never make
The times I held it close all gone to waste
A truth to see within the smallest shard
The ones I love, I always seem to break

Connection

I don't answer my phone anymore.

...

The problem with being tethered is that someone can always reach me, unthinkingly, whether I want them to or not.

...

When all we share is seven digits and enough proximity to observe the weather, there is no urgency in our communication, no drive to cast a line across the void, let alone to catch one when it falls flat at my feet.

...

Please don't be offended if I let your call go to a voicemail I still haven't set up, or if your *hilarious* email goes unopened and unanswered for months on end.

...

When I hear a buzz from the far edge of the table, the screen will not light up my face.

...

I will know that someone is thinking of me, and that will be enough.

In Memory

A wax form
made frigid by these winter grounds
shielded from wind and consequence
by an upturned glass.

Its whispered flame
fragile, hesitant, demure
sits a quiet vigil in the night
all but unnoticed.

Some passing soul
or peregrine visitor must have
paused here as a small
solemn gesture.

In a few hours
the light will go out –
a darkened prison of glass
waiting to be retrieved.

A Household Truth

It is a known fact that every dwelling or domicile must contain within its walls at least one missing sock.

Its location will vary, of course, based on where we have already looked, but like many other well-meaning practicalities, precisely where the sock is isn't nearly as important as where it isn't.

Namely, it is not in plain sight, in the top drawer or hiding on someone's foot.

No.

Rather, it is locked in some between-space that seems to exist around laundry rooms and hampers and, really, my goodness, when there are so many of the things, it's hardly a surprise that every once in a while one of them is just going to end up missing.

That's just how these things work in terms of domestic probability. We can only keep track of so many scraps of cloth at any given time.

We'll look for it, of course. We always do.
Half-heartedly, perhaps, but after all, it's
only a sock.

We might find it, but in the meantime
another one has always gone missing.
Always.
It has to.

We don't know what we'd do if it didn't.

Bandages

Skin tears like errant paper
Red pen corrections, ink spilling
Stained pages fall away
Bright cascade, accidental
Catastrophic laceration

Bones crack along fault lines
Snap backwards
Collapse under force
Applied indiscriminate
Incontrovertible failure
Uncontrolled demolition

Woven strands of muscle
Come undone, frayed ropes
Threadbare exertion
Weary filaments writhing
Tugging on loose frames
Ill-fitting, helpless
Violent separation

Stay still for a moment
Do not scream or moan
Or rue circumstance

Stitch the gaps
Repair the infrastructure
Mend the mistakes

It can all be undone
With patience and care
No damage is permanent.

Cleaning House

In the second between
the push of the lever
and the spiral tide
that will drag his tissue island under
I imagine the spider
crying out
“I lived here too.”

I imagine a family
waiting for him
to bring back a fly for dinner
wondering
what’s keeping him.

I pause

but it’s too late.
I have to settle
for sweeping
the dust and cobwebs
out of the corners
of my bathroom.

Philology

What are these lines inscribed on my forehead,
etched around my mouth and beyond
the corners of my eyes? Is there some message
writ large on my face for everyone but me to read?
I look in a mirror and the symbols are reversed,
their meaning transposed and indistinguishable.

They say the notches mean I'm getting old, but
I need no reminder. I feel the weight
in my bones like a dull longing for the earth.
Each morning it seems that the sunrise is slower,
and the stars in the night sky appear to shy
away from my gaze. I miss them.

Years ago, I could have read these lines. After each
new sign was engraved, my young eyes would see
a fairy's footsteps tracking paths on my cheek.
I would imagine a story of timeless wonder,
penned on living pages. Now I've forgotten
the words as my skin begins to write its tale.

2: Places

Home, Revisited

I stare down at the GPS screen.
The streets that once latticed my childhood
are still here, and their signs
bear the same names,
but summers of reconstruction
have distorted the angles and corners.
My mental map is a biographical snapshot
that no longer fits the landscape,
so I grasp for other means of navigation.

My eyes find the greying landmarks,
the beacons with which I orient myself.
There's the place where I took guitar lessons,
the mall where I spent my weekends,
the restaurant I drove to for a small celebration
when I got my license. I count the businesses
that have closed their doors
since I last gazed in their windows.
I stop when I run out of fingers.

I pass pushpin points of interest,
seen mainly in the rear-view
as objects and settings,
further away than they appear.
I don't know why I'm surprised
that they're still here.
A school, left to its own devices,
will tend to remain a school.
Parks can only decompose at a certain rate.

I pause at crossroads, red lights,
stop signs, and take a second
to get my bearings,
but traffic keeps moving around me.
I look at the adjusted avenues,
the shifting scenes of the city,
all these places that never needed me
to validate their existence.

Reservations

One night stay, that's all.

No more and no less.

Deposit paid in full.

Tomorrow's a new day.

Rinse, repeat, relax,
instructions from a bottle
of shampoo left for assumed use.

Towels and a card
explaining the policy
for their daily replacement.

Housekeeping observed,
hopefully convenient
for all those involved.

A remote control,
left atop the minibar,
with a pair of dead batteries.

A bible, a phone book,
a notepad, a pen:
courtesies extended
as long as you leave them behind.

There is a note
left on the pillow
with a melted chocolate
that reads:

Please recognize
that you are not, in
fact, meant to have
a good night's sleep.

Street Corner

after the movie
or play
or concert
finishes,
Everyone
gathers in the cold
night
air
and for a second
there's a sense
of electric
community
and then some asshole
says
"that was garbage"
and the moment's gone
and every one scatters to their
warm
hollow
homes
and wonders why they didn't
just
go to bed
early
instead

Recourse

*If I thought it would help, I would drive this car into the sea
If the fire and the smoke and explosions could speak for me
If the words that I used to try to explain
How something inside of me started to break
Ah, but one by one my words just got in the way*
—The Gaslight Anthem, “Dark Places”

I can feel the muscles in my neck tighten and contort
as my jaw calcifies, my teeth press against each other,
and my knuckles brace and whiten on the steering wheel.
I stare past their bloodless grasp and watch the lines,
the yellow and white curls careening around the cliff’s edge.
These precipitous turns have always unsettled me.
My eyes move to the shadows beyond the headlights,
the dark places that hide a fall, a crash, a catastrophe,
closure, resolution, a sense of decisive certainty.
If I thought it would help, I would drive this car into the sea.

I’ve considered it before, pictured the guardrails parting,
shards of glass suspended in air like crystal snowflakes,
the inquisitive wind caressing an unexplored form.
I’ve wondered if I would close my eyes or if I would stare,
acknowledge the weight that was pulling me downward,
and admit that I had made this decision deliberately.
I’ve thought about what would be found in the wreckage,
if the message of descent would somehow read clearly
when written in the shattered bones and scattered debris,
if the fire and the smoke and explosions could speak for me.

My fingernails dig crescents into my palms
as I open and close my mouth in vain.
One movement could be enough to show
what no speech could hope to contain.
If the words that I used to try to explain
my disjointed motions could find better
expression in the destruction and the wake,
maybe they could say what I never could:
how I was worn down by the persistent ache,
how something inside of me started to break.

I have made my attempts at explanation,
unsatisfactory half-truths and best guesses,
grasping for handholds in the sheer face of disarray.
I have spoken of disappointment and vague dissonance
as I stumbled, swerved along a painted road,
and failed to name the forces pulling me astray.
I have chased language around the shaded corners
of my mind, racing desperately to elucidate
the edges of the hairpin turns that I needed to convey,
ah, but one by one my words just got in the way.

A Winter Stroll

It's cold outside.
Not bitterly so –

the sun embraces
its grey cloud-robe,

the snow lounges
in slopes and curves,

and the wind
moves through
unclothed branches.

This is Nature
celebrating herself,

telling me
to go inside,
close the curtains,

respect her privacy
for a change.

Local

We can point to it on a map and say, yes,
that's Us. That's where We're from.

A set of digits and decimals seems so
distant from the feeling of dirt beneath
Our feet. Between those greens and blues
and dotted lines of designation, lifetimes are
contained, held constant for a few years or a dozen –
then lost to other locales.

We carry Our cartography with us on Our travels,
consciously or otherwise, marking boundaries
in Our surroundings. Every place becomes a
here or elsewhere,
compared to Our radius, Our origin.

There is little that denotes
Our particular
geography
as remarkable,
but We belong to the separations drawn
between counties and countrysides.
We have earned
the privilege of discernment,
but so have They.

Our circle is better than Your circle, They say.
The nicest place in the world, They say.
You just don't get it, They say.
You aren't from here.

Awake

I can hear them laugh quietly to themselves after they hand me my order – medium coffee, milk, no sugar, a dollar sixty tax included – and a part of me feels like laughing with them.

But I don't. I smile politely and take my cup back to the table in the front corner of the restaurant. From there, the windows can see out past the parking lot and the glowing sign to the roads where the occasional passerby cuts through the still night. Every set of taillights is a reminder of people that always have places to be.

I don't spend too much time looking outside, though. Usually I bring a novel, or a notebook in which to scribble something to read on the next night. Once I thought about starting a conversation with the people behind the counter, but I thought better of it.

We have a perfectly functional relationship, after all. I give them something to talk about in these muted hours of the night, and they give me a place to be awake. The exchange requires less than a dozen words from both parties. It is simple, efficient, even elegant.

Sometimes I imagine what they're saying about me, one of them leaning against the coffee machine and the other running a stained rag back and forth across the counter. I can hear them talking but can't distinguish the words. It's one of the reasons I choose this seat.

Why do they think I come here, I wonder? Surely I could get coffee elsewhere, and read whatever book holds my interest in the comfort of a familiar armchair instead of these metal-backed

strangers. Plenty of bars are still open at this time, though perhaps some have begun to turn out their lights.

There's just as much reason to question why anyone comes here this late. I've only seen a handful of others, and none of them ever stay. They come in and order something to carry them through and leave, without exception. Always somewhere to be. Another set of taillights to watch.

It makes me sad that nobody stays and sits in some other corner. There are plenty of seats available, plenty of tables, even plenty of windows. This is a nice place; it is clean and well-lit. The people behind the counter are pleasant. The walls and floor are sturdy and stable. It is enough.

I lift the cup to my lips and find it empty. A glance at the clock above the coffee machine reveals that I've already been here for close to an hour.

I pull a handful of coins out of my pocket and bring them up to the counter, where one of the servers comes to meet me. This time no words are needed as I slide a few of the coins across to her. She takes them silently, counts them into the register, and walks away as I return the remainder to my pocket.

While she lifts the coffee pot, the other girl just looks at me, making no attempt to hide her stare. For a second I meet her eyes, but it's too much. I look down at the countertop.

The first girl returns with my second coffee, and I smile again as she hands it to me. There is no laughing this time as I walk back to my seat. I wish there was.

I know that I can't stay forever. I always run out of coffee, and then I run out of coins. If not, the pages of my book can only last so long, and I can never just sit there.

Once, I sat and read long enough to see the first shades of dawn brightening the horizon out beyond the parking lot and

the sign and even the road. I knew then that it was past time for me to go, so I stood up, nodded to the people behind the counter, and stepped through the door into what was left of the night.

I still have some time tonight and some pages left in my book. The coins in my pocket are enough for one more coffee if I want it.

I close my eyes and lean back in the metal chair. I can distantly hear them talking in voices that are almost whispers. The hushed tones provide a sense of tentative connection that no real conversation ever could, particularly as a note of anticipation creeps in. They know that I'll be leaving soon enough.

I open my eyes, take another sip of coffee, and turn to the next page. Outside, on the road, the cars are like little drops of light moving across the sleeping void. For now, I am not like them. I have a place to be awake.

Vacation

I sit by the pool with a good book,
bent-cornered, half-read,
and glad to see me again.
The smile below my sunglasses
is plainly visible, a badge
proclaiming my contentment.
I am anchored in place by a drink
and a dry towel, all-inclusive,
waiting for me when I arrived.

I stroll through shaded paths
and tiptoe into the ocean,
letting my legs match pace with the
gentle waves. I see my feet
through water like liquid glass,
feel the white sand's shifting touch.
I walk alongside the beach
without urgency, the seashells
my only mile markers.
Twilight slowly paints the shoreline.
I have nowhere else to be.

I lean against the outdoor bar,
embracing the offer of
late nights and passing time.
Laughter and photographs
surround me. I'm more
than happy to let the banter
echo through the background.
All I want is to watch
the stars play across the sky
while the moon looks on.

3: People

Home, Revisited

We were storytellers,
rewriting the playground
as a setting for our recess epics,
imagining adventures far beyond
the tiled halls awaiting our return,
bouncing tall tales off the brick walls
to see what would stick,
what the future would hold,
picturing the infinite possibility.

We joined our voices in unbroken oratory,
secrets whispered behind a teacher's back,
midafternoon grand machinations,
innocent plans for the weekend.
We rehearsed and performed
speeches of praise and consolation,
our happy-birthdays,
our see-you-tomorrows.

We staged productions,
played our roles with care.
We improvised sitcom scenes,
riffed with side characters,
shared dramatic monologues.
We acted out petty conflicts,
tense in the moment,
seen as overblown in
the next day's hindsight.

Now the silence stretches
as I stare across the table
and search for something to say.
The words haven't changed,
the syntax and grammar
are still the same, but I stumble
through the constructions,
forced to listen as all our conversations
quietly draw to a close.

Explorers

Midnight,
I am awake,
and you are
here.

I trace your outline in the blankets,
 a shifting profile,
 a shared frontier.

The surface of your skin is a topography
of earnest lines, beauty in truthful
angles and elevations. Your form
is a wilderness of unmapped latitudes
and stirring landscapes.

I am lost beside you,
wandering without bearing,
staring into the darkness,
waiting for morning.

When dawn breaks over
the horizon of your hipbone,
your eyes will be my compass rose
and we will find our way together.

Parenthood

Shining bright, young for a while
Growing older every day
Lost within your fleeting smile
Here and now is where I'll stay

Growing older every day
While I have you by my side
Here and now is where I'll stay
In your gentle arms I'll hide

While I have you by my side
I promise I will hold you dear
In your gentle arms I'll hide
Time will never find me here

I promise I will hold you dear
Shining bright, young for a while
Time will never find me here
Lost within your fleeting smile

Contact

I am touched
by the tender, absolving kiss
of your knuckles on my cheekbone.

I am captivated
by your love songs
in four letter words,
echoing through
our incognizant hallways.

I am wrapped
in the blanket
of your merest presence
until I never feel alone.

I am bound
under shifted forms of commitment,
forever and for always.

I send greeting cards
composed like police reports
garnished with bleak photography.

I bandage my wounds
with plastic wrap, elastics, and ice packs,
always kept fresh and accessible.

I trace the walls
of this padded prison
with velvet fingertips
as though outlining
printed paper scars.

I stare at the blinking lights
of the microwave clock
as the time counts down
until my all-conquering love
can come back to me.

A Portrait

Jack sets the photograph down on the table. I notice every incidental movement of his fingers, every twitch, every crooked line in the crannies of his face. I sit patiently as seasons pass and he adjusts his glasses, watch as a year shuffles by while he folds his hands in front of him.

His being is an artifact of antecedence, and when he speaks, time lounges in the parlour of his discourse. "This is a nice picture," he says, the corners of his mouth tugging slightly upward.

"Her name's Cathy," I tell him, avoiding the change in tense, "and that's me right there." I point to my beaming, wide-eyed face, reaching only up to her stomach. "The picture's from a while ago."

I watch as he processes and considers this information, his eyebrows furrowing. He seems to know that there is something familiar here, and he wants to find it.

And then his expression clears, the determination replaced by pleasant indifference. "She seems like a nice lady," he slowly responds, articulating each syllable with the rigid clarity of cut glass. "May I keep this?"

Over his shoulder, I see the nurse smiling sympathetically. "Maybe today's just a bad day," she says, and I nod without meeting her gaze.

Jack doesn't understand, so I reach out and place my hand on his. "I have to go now," I tell him, looking into his absent eyes, "but I'll be here to see you again next week. You can keep the photograph."

He grins, and I stand up to leave. As I reach the door, Jack calls out, "It was nice meeting you!"

I turn and give a small, polite smile, then exit, unflinching, in estranged silence.

Exchange

I cannot think
of a more
constant friend

than the man
who delivers
my packages.

I have already
paid my dues

and he always
brings me
something
exciting.

All he ever
asks from me
is my signature.

For Someone, I guess

I tried to write a sonnet filled with love
I never felt, but all the words were so
Imperfect, all the rhymes sounded too rough,
And the iambic feet, though treading close
To where they should be, still managed to stray
From my design. It was not what I meant
To write, the results seeming coarse and plain
When held up to the beauty that I dreamt.
The poem had failed me and my grand object:
To charm a lover I have yet to know.
Now with the flaws of language so beset,
Expression leaves me sitting here alone.
And so I must proclaim the sonnet dead;
Its form was not so lovely in the end.

The Childish Gallery

she sketches stealthily
felt-tip scenes of illumination
unfurling her imagination on the wall

she paints precocious portraiture
in wax crayon studies
and forms her portfolio
from a growing body of creativity

she has found her canvas
one without boundary lines to
define "inside" and "out"
as some critical criterion

every afternoon
she stares up at me
with innocent eyes

quietly daring me
to wash away her latest
greatest work

4: Stories

Homily

A tilt,
 a teeter,
 a crash.

An abundance of reasons to explain away what just took place,
 none of them good.

Grasp at shards of rationality rapidly shattering
under the persistent pressure of panic.

I didn't mean to. I can make it okay. I'll fix it.

Repeat the prayers a thousand times
and hope for credence
at 5pm when the church bell tolls,
 the door opens,
 and this unoriginal sin faces the light
 of the only god the living room knows.

Pace the halls alone
and mutter penitence for the callous
domestic impiety hereby demonstrated.

The minutes slip by like high-strung beads
from failing hands, when suddenly,
the door opens! A hasty confession is
made amidst tears, all artifices and
excuses forgotten beneath the leaden
weight of the lamb's innocent guilt.

Omniscient eyes take a brief survey
of all that lies before, and the truth is clear.

The father (or mother, pending circumstances)
knows that there is some reverence in the
attitudes and actions surrounding this moment.

Scattered between the porcelain dust
is the realization and admission that

*There are Problems that one is
wholly unable to solve, Mistakes
that one simply cannot correct,
Pieces that one cannot put back
together.*

Moreover,

*One can
unintentionally and unavoidably
create any and all of the above
entirely by oneself.*

This lesson demands sufficient deference
to whatever higher powers exist in the
vicinity, disguised though it may be,
at times, under the shaded cloaks
of bargaining or scapegoatism.

This deference, in turn, demands forgiveness
in its own demure way. To yield otherwise
would paint a picture of an uncaring ruler,
gazing down upon the subjects from on high
without sympathy, kindness, or understanding,

And heaven knows we can't have that.

There's a short sigh from the preacher's pulpit.
a shake of the head, shrug of the shoulders.
The tired sermon of fire and brimstone is
replaced with a more progressive admonition
to take the infernal baseball outside.
The congregation recedes with shouts
of praise and exultation, contented until
next week, when the process is repeated.

Awaiting

Nightfall finds me hidden behind open doors,
a cold silence broken by a grating hum.
I sit, stranded, staring at the black hole
made real as a whitewashed hallway,
though the people come and go. Expectations
trade places with prayer as the days drip by
and I see myself through shaded windows, collapsing,
colliding with the background that I have become
and the blinding foreground that she became.
The resounding uncertainty is kept at bay by
styrofoam cups and small consolation prizes
dispensed for a dollar and the push of a button.
Yet I remain, drifting in a sea of questions,
an ocean of white-capped bottles and well-worn novels
stolen from home to be consumed in secret.
Patience slowly corrupts and every minute
scratches a line in the tile floor
marking ends and odds of an escape route
that never arrives – until I am called on one day
to reconsider the terms of my imprisonment.
A sentence for two ends for one
but leaves none behind. She fades,
and a bittersweet escape is made.
I am left to wonder what it means
as the lines between begin to blur
and I find myself once more
in the glow of a fluorescent night.

Passing Seasons

Child of summer, of warmth and light
Born for fertile earth, for grass between toes
Speckled skies shining through clearest night
Lazy, golden mornings, innocent repose

Swiftly stolen by autumn's cool night
As orange sunsets burn away former light
So listless nature left to wither and repose
Life cast off and crushed as leaves beneath toes

Too soon winter: a frigid, forced repose
While the world lies senseless within moonless night
A pressing, prying chill that freezes tips of toes
Halts any motive spirit, obscures all guiding light

Until spring's return, sensation in toes
A mild agitation ends the numb repose
Frost falls away, eyes reopen to light
As budding nature slowly reawakens out of night

Now when I feel it in my toes, the nip of winter's night
I warmly greet that dark repose that makes me love the light

Kings and Concerts

The hum of a fan and a computer,
a scorching June afternoon
the 25th as I recall,
though those days slip together.
The last week of school burns out
its embers and ascension to a higher plane of education
tugs listlessly on my lucid psyche.

That's a worry for another day, or month,
or state of mind as summer glimmers
bright in my eyes. The artificial breeze
is a cordial pleasantry of time to idle away,
not to kill so much as to let
disappear.

Online greetings and wishes of a pleasant vacation fall
on silicon ears but are exchanged in kind.
None of us know what our grade nine future holds –
stories untold, histories unremembered by tomorrow.
Possibilities bloom, implode like pill bottles at a bedside.

I trade Facebook friends for facts and speculations
on a news site, something more easily swallowed
that doesn't leave a taste of saccharine ether in my throat.

Then I see it in the pixelated headlines:
CNN announcing popular regicide,
extolling the virtues and crooning praises
of entertainment's latest sacrifice.
Details are fleeing the scene of the crash but
more information as the photos develop.

I tell my mother later that day.

Her gaze cascades into the distance
between the demise and myself.
Deluded youth and tabloid cynicism
cloud my vision of her more timely perspective,
but for hours, our home resonates with the mixtape requiems
of a departed artist before the last curtains descend.
The songs mean more when you know how they end.

Fairy Tales

There's something tragic about knowing
I will not marry my high school sweetheart.

I will not spend my adolescence pining over
some quintessentially perfect girl next door.

I will not make a new friend in kindergarten
and write a desperate love story in a lifetime.

No. I will not. I will not because I have not.
Quod erat demonstrandum. Close the books.

All I can hope for is a plaintive narration,
a silent autobiography on a dusty shelf.

Even then, it will sit entirely unmoving,
characters and plot of no interest to anyone but me.

Stitches

I don't enjoy telling stories about myself – at least not true ones. It's incredibly easy to try and ascribe some meaning to the pasts with which we frame ourselves, but it's an entirely artificial, secondary construct. Life does not assemble around themes, motifs, and morals. They only exist if we pretend they do, so why read significance into chaos?

This isn't to say that our histories are pointless, just that we should accept them as they are. The harder we try to conform the past to some comforting or consoling structure, the more it will resist our attempts.

To illustrate this, I'd like to share a regaling anecdote from my youth. It's one that I've told many times before as people kept asking for explanations, but this is the first time I've sought out an audience myself. Sometimes I lie, actively or by omission, in an attempt to cover up my stupidity. Usually I skip to the exciting parts, the sanguine depictions of childhood trauma, to keep the listener's attention.

This time I will just be telling a story. It goes like this.

At approximately eight-fifteen in the evening on a warm, humid Tuesday in mid-September, I fell off my bike. I was speeding down a hill toward my house at the time and wanted to make a skid mark on the pavement, because I was fourteen and that's what fourteen-year-old boys do. I imagined a group of my high school classmates standing on my neighbour's lawn, unable to turn away from such a grand display of bravado, and clamped my hands down on both brakes simultaneously.

Suddenly I was airborne and my awestruck audience had disappeared. Time did not slow down to let me fully realize my

mistake or meditate on the boyish hubris that made me leave my helmet in the garage. All I had was a single suspended moment, propelled by unexpected momentum and defined by an unflinching arc. I used that brief second to notice how orange the asphalt looked under the streetlights before instinctively closing my eyes.

Thanks to quick-acting endorphins, I heard the impact much more than I actually felt it, like the beat of a bowling ball dropping onto the bones in my head and bouncing a few times to punctuate the ellipsis of consciousness.

My eyes reopened to a view of the sky, where the stars were just sparking into existence for another night. I couldn't see them very clearly – probably because of those streetlights again.

I sat up and let out a tense breath when I realized I wasn't in any urgent pain, nor did I have any trouble when I slowly rose to a standing position. A quick checklist of basic motor skills and mental faculties gave positive results. Thoroughly reassured of my own adolescent invincibility and ignoring any contradictory evidence, I strode over to where my bicycle was pitifully spinning its wheels at the side of the road.

I was about twenty feet from my driveway, but I made sure to strut as fiercely as is possible while wheeling a bike, just in case there were any spectators. I was deathly afraid that someone would glance out a window and assume that a little mishap was enough to hurt me.

Once in the shelter of the garage, I dropped the bike, spitefully kicked my absentee helmet, and began to feel a rapidly intensifying ache in my limbs and head. I told myself it was probably just some bruises and went inside the house to clean myself up, a task that I expected would just involve brushing

some dirt off my arms. I walked into the hallway bathroom, flipped the light switch, saw myself in the mirror, and immediately realized the scope of my problem.

Both arms were abstract compositions of cuts, scrapes, and bruises. The area between my neck and stomach served as canvas for a splatter of blood, slowly dripping downward from a wound that I somehow could not locate. I made eye contact with my reflection, tried to smile in an act of performative comfort, and just ended up staring blankly. For a moment, I was completely unsure of what to do.

“Mom?” I eventually shouted with what I hoped was a steady voice. “I think I need to go to the hospital.”

Ninety seconds later, I was sitting in the passenger seat of her car with a towel pressed up against my chin, which had been pinpointed as the source of all the blood. Thankfully, my mother held onto her questions until we were on our way to the ER, but she took advantage of the fifteen minute drive to start a rapid dialogue.

“What happened?”

“I fell off my bike.”

“Were you wearing your helmet?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you hit your head?”

“Probably.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does your head hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Then you probably hit it.”

“That’s what I said.”

“You could have died.”

Silence.

“You know that you could have died, right?”

“Well, I didn’t.”

And so on. I didn’t look at her as I replied, just stared out the window and watched the other cars winding their way through the autumn darkness, headlights flashing like fireflies. Soon my mother gave up the interrogation and said nothing more until we got to the hospital.

The plastic-and-linoleum waiting room was sparsely populated, and the few people there seemed superficially healthy. Since my emergency was straightforward and I was leaving droplets of blood on the floor, I was promptly assigned a bed. A nurse arrived, took away my towel, and began a familiar line of questioning while inspecting my injuries.

“What happened?”

“I fell off my bike.”

“Were you wearing a helmet?”

“No.”

A condescending glare. “You should really wear your helmet from now on.”

“I know.”

“You could have died.”

“So I hear.”

“What?”

“I said I know.”

“Alright, let’s get you fixed up.”

My mother sat at the bedside and squeezed my hand as the needle passed in and out of the gap in my chin, fastening four stitches in light blue thread. I glared up at the fluorescent lights

in the ceiling, blaming them for the tears in my eyes as the nurse knotted and snipped the tails. The whole process was probably quicker than it felt, maybe a few minutes, and then he was bandaging the cuts on my arms.

Afterward, the nurse looked me in the eyes. “Just one last thing to do before I send you home. I’m going to feel your head and you have to tell me if it hurts, okay? If you’ve got a head injury, we have to give you an MRI.”

The fact that he didn’t explain any of the possible consequences made me nervous, made worse by the fact that he immediately started poking at my scalp. He got to one point on the back of my head and clearly noticed a bump. I noticed it too, and felt a little twinge of pain every time one of his fingers made contact.

“Does that hurt?”

Only a little. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

It couldn’t be anything major. “Yes.”

He looked me in the eyes again like he wasn’t sure if he believed me. After a moment, he exhaled in a display of resignation. “Fine. Go home and get some rest.”

The drive home was much quieter, probably because it was getting late and my mother and I were both exhausted. When we arrived, she gave me a long hug and told me to wear a helmet next time before sending me to bed. I told her I would be going to school the next morning, and she didn’t question the decision.

At approximately eight-fifteen in the morning on a brisk, cloudy Wednesday in mid-September, I walked into homeroom with my head down. My chin looked like a puffy apple with string poking out of it, and a nontrivial portion of my body was

covered by gauze. The typical high school conversations in the room soon fell dead and silent on the ground, and even the teacher was taken aback.

“What happened?” someone asked as I lowered myself into a plastic chair beside one of my friends.

“I fell off my bike.”

There was some muffled laughter, and someone across the room did a very poor job of whispering, “Seriously?” No clarification was requested and none was given. The teacher coughed to maintain his composure, told the class to settle down, and started talking about geography.

My friend turned and gave me a quick once-over. “What really happened?”

“I already told you. I fell off my bike.”

“Were you wearing a helmet?”

“No.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I know.”

“At least you’re not dead.”

“Thanks.”

He turned away, then snickered and said that I should have told everyone I was in a fight. “Nobody would have bought it, but it would have been funny.”

I nodded silently and ran a hand through the hair on the back of my head, wincing as my hand brushed the bump. I tried vainly to pay attention to a lesson on latitude and longitude, but I just kept glancing at the clock, counting the minutes until I could leave.

At home, my mother leaned on the kitchen counter, worrying about my recklessness and preparing an in-depth lecture on mortality for when I returned that afternoon.

At school, my friends sat at the lunch table, chuckling over the silliness of my injuries and gauging how many jokes they could make before I got angry.

None of that really mattered to me. I stood at my locker and wondered if the bloodstains would come out of my shirt in the wash, whether or not the stitches would be visible in my school pictures, and how much time I would need before I could trust myself on a bike again.

Home, Unvisited

It's time for me to go.

My bags are packed with
everything I brought along.

There is a destination that
awaits me in the distance.

I have said my goodbyes
many times over.

Affecting the straight-faced
impersonality of lighting and
dropping a match, I open the
door, turn, and make my exit.

There is an unmistakable familiarity
in all these elements once used as
manifestations of identity:

the things I owned,
the places I went,
the people I knew.

They hold reflections – not of me,
but of some removed observer hoping
to return to the world to which he belonged.
His arms are straining, reaching out.
All I can do is sigh, shrug, and avert my gaze.

It's time for me to go.

About the Author

Mitchell Gunn is currently a student at Mount Allison University, majoring in English literature and psychology. He has yet to decide exactly what he will do or where he will go after graduation, but he hopes to have it all figured out soon.

Mitchell has always dreamed of becoming an author and hopes to write many more things in the future. In the event that he fails in this regard, he politely requests that you only make fun of him quietly and behind his back.

To read more of Mitchell's work, please visit his website at weightedwords.ca.

