

Work for Approaches to Creative Sources  
By Jeffrey Martin

Course Reflection

Throughout approaches to creative sources we delved into the lives of influential authors and poets. We looked at the events and people who contributed to their outlooks, personality, and, ultimately, their writing. I find it extremely beneficial to study literary icons as it offers insight into their writing methods which I can apply to my own.

Individually, during this block, I additionally looked into the practices of Hemingway and Stephen King. While doing so I discovered that each author and poet held a general consensus. A rather simple outlook and practice which I had not really considered before. Each one of them wrote daily, believing that it is a necessary means of keeping one's writing sharp. The quality of writing was irrelevant. The project they were writing was irrelevant. The only important thing was that words were put to paper.

Because of this I chose to, and struggled to, write five hundred words daily. It was difficult to begin with. I found myself rushing at the end of the day before bed, struggling to reach the word limit. Because of this they were tired, lazy, and lacking any real care. They read more like an afterthought, which they were. After I realized this I began to write earlier in the day, pumping out the five hundred words in the morning, afternoon, or throughout the day in general. When I made this switch I quickly felt rust shaking off and found that more complicated words and sentence structures were being formed.

This is a practice I intend to keep. It puts writing above other elements of my life, and, because of this, I am finding myself more relaxed and happy with my content. Writing is, first and foremost, a job. It is hard work and because of this must be treated as hard work. It is a game of trial and error. Almost a science, but don't get caught saying that to any engineering students! A story will always have issues, characters flaws. It is by sweating over the paper, over the keyboard, where these issues are resolved and the story begins to take its true form. Writing is a labor, and it has to be treated as such if you are to improve.

I chose the particular pieces because of the overwhelming difficulty that the five hundred words a day posed to me. Each one was a product of this challenge.

Honduran Sunrise was inspired by the documentary we watched in class on the political turmoil in South America. The documentary was especially poignant to me since I have visited the area in the past and have seen the war torn cities and villages. It was a difficult piece to write. It came out of me slow as molasses. My mind wandered and pleaded to procrastinate. The Day After, was again painful to push out. It was nearly impossible for me to keep focused during the writing. It was inspired by the challenge to walk around campus and write on an experience we had there. I chose the day after my arrival. I was delirious, sick from lack of sleep, and entirely turned around. I may have taken some liberties with the story, since I did not actually puke, but the details other than that are altogether accurate.

Son was, yet again, a difficult one to write also. I recognized that the majority of authors we looked at over the span of the course left home, abandoning family and friends in order for

them to pursue their dreams as a writer. I wanted to write a piece where one of them returns home.

The other two I selected for a few reasons. First they were much easier days of writing. I never struggled with sitting down and typing the five hundred words. They were much smoother and pleasant to write. Secondly they were both images that came to my mind during our author study in class. I had an image of Jack London and Charmian boxing in the rain. Also I had an image of Kerouac sitting alone in a bar, confronted by a fan. I tend to get an image then write from there. I dislike letting an image go to waste.

Haunted barstool came from a documentary on the life of Kerouac. The end of his life stood out to me. The alcoholic part. The part of his life where he was defeated and waiting for death.

Shape shifter was again inspired by a documentary we watched in class. Jack London has always been an interest of mine. I have loved his work for some time, and found the man very interesting. His desire for adventure really shone through in his literature.

When I looked back on the pieces for their editing, I found that I was using the same mistakes in most of my pieces. The mistakes were found in both those that were difficult to write and the ones that flowed easily. I tended to use similar sentence structures between dialogue or patterns of grammar. It became very repetitive and made the prose stunted. I shortened the sentences down, breaking up the patterns, and creating a more streamlined reading experience. Another practice I adopted in an attempt to improve my writing was that I began to read my work out loud. It was stressed often during class, the importance of doing so. When I did this I found it highlighted whether dialog was stilted, or vibrant. I likely sounded crazy to my flatmate's, but I began to read out entire dialog scenes in order to work out the kinks and try to have them sound as natural as possible. I found myself using easier words, and tighter sentences. People tend not to be verbose. We are rather simple when conversing with one another, trying to get out our ideas and feelings in as short a way as possible.

Moving forward I intend to test out other methods of writing. I know some others only write while standing. Others prefer to write facing a wall so that there are no distractions. Others do not go back and re-read their work, choosing only to edit once the final full stop is typed onto the page. I have purchased a plethora of books on the practice of writing and will be reading through them during the rest of my school year at UWTSD. Perhaps, by doing so, I will find new and interesting ways of writing that will work best with my personality.

### Bibliography

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## Son

He hadn't been home for some time, and, up until recently, home hadn't crossed his mind. He had left a boy, though he was a grown man: twenty or twenty one - he couldn't remember. He'd left unceremoniously, not being one for theatrics or long, drawn-out ordeals that would delay one's departure. He remembered it'd been a frosty morning. The grass had crunched beneath his boots. Perhaps it was November?

He left a card for his mother on the kitchen table. He signed it in bold cursive, 'your loving son'. His father neither earned or deserved such tokens.

Time, as it tends to do, slipped through his fingers and disappeared. His body became disobedient, revolting against the ravishing of age: his hair grayed, joints tired, and skin became worn, creased with wrinkles, hardened by the sun. He had enjoyed the years, immensely: rambling on the Orleans strip, hopping round the Mississippi bayou, spending a time in the Hollywood-hills, even holding down a stint in a New York office. The years were kind, full of pleasure, but he felt them. He felt them like a boxer feels their chin shatter, or a dancer feels their ankle snap. And now, returning home, back to where he spent his gleeful youth in twilight-licked streets, winding brooks, amongst endless hills soft as breasts, he felt young once again, stripped of his years and exposed.

He flipped up his jacket collar against the nipping wind which stirred from the bow of the ferry. It playfully rustled his hair. He reached into the canvas bag slung over his shoulder, extracting a crumpled box of cigarettes. One left. He took out the cigarette, stuffing the empty box into a nearby trash bin. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and flicked it to life. Quickly a salty gust of wind snuffed out the flame, slapping him in the face. His eyes watered and he turned away. He cupped his hands over the end of the cigarette and flicked the lighter on again. This time it stayed alight and he inhaled when the flame touched the tobacco. The herb was dry and quickly formed a strong cherry. He exhaled his first puff of the cigarette, watching as the smoke was carried away in small wisps.

He'd meant to quit. Thirty years was a long time to smoke. He'd developed a cough. An aching, dry nuisance that tended to strike at night; waking him from some sensual experience he could only enjoy in dreams anymore. Smoking wasn't the same as when he was younger. With what they knew now he thought only a loony would pick up the habit. The sickness. The cancer. How many people had he known who rotted from the disease, their insides turning black. Too many. He took another puff, feeling a tension release. A tension he didn't know existed, not until the nicotine entered his bloodstream. He knew he would never quit.

The ferry, salt rusted, nearing decommissioning, was capable of carrying no more than twenty or so passengers - plus a handful of cars. There hadn't been one there when he grew up, and had there been, he likely would have left home much sooner.

The ferry hit the wooden stopper, that marked the end of its voyage, harder than expected. It sent a jolt across the deck that rocked those aboard. The workers, in luminescent work-vests, connected the ramps and walkways with machine efficiency. One by one the cars engines sputtered to life. An elderly voice echoed through a buzzing speaker system, giving the all clear. Walk-ons were the first to disembark. The throng of people filed out, up the ramp, onto the pier, but he stayed behind. He didn't want to brush against them, to hear their small talk, or

smell the stench of their perfumes, colognes, and defrosting lunches. It wasn't that he was misanthropic. Most days he would revel in the company of others; he was, by nature, an extrovert. But not today. And certainly not here.

He pulled the last tar-dripping drags from his cigarette, smoking it to the stained filter. He tossed the butt away and took his leave when the cars funneled out.

The pier was nothing like he remembered. It was updated, clean, metallic. Thick support beams plunged down into the water, allowing for the weight of heavy traffic. Food stands, performers, and portrait artists pandered to those who passed by. Benches, positioned to view the oceans horizon, were taken by seniors and young families. Flocks of seagulls hung on the fringes, ready to pounce on any stray piece of food.

In his youth the pier had been nothing more than a place to booze up, make out, and smoke hash. He'd spent many misguided nights on its rotting frame, under the vast swarms of pin-prick stars. He had his first lay there. Susan Doyle, a girl just turned sixteen with lustful curiosity in her eyes. They met up on a school night. He brought condoms. They didn't use them. Remembering the small tuft of hair between her legs, the softness of her skin, the smell of her as they thrust against each-other, it sent a spurt of blood to places long dormant. They had gone steady for a while, him and Susan. Eventually he tired of her, as he did most women, and found himself another, then another.

He wondered where Susan Doyle was now. Who she had grown to become. Had she married, birthed children. Maybe she never found love. He wondered where they all were, those faces and names that mixed together to form his childhood and adolescence. He felt it strange he never came across any of them again, out in the world, beyond the borders of this small seaside town. No chance run in at a restaurant, or a familiar face on a busy street. Nothing. As if they were phantoms, bound to the place of their birth. Cursed never to leave.

He looked up, past the pier, to the colonial houses that rose in the distance, and beyond them, jagged mountains draped in the deep greens of summer. He breathed in the salty air. It tasted the same as he remembered. A little cleaner, sanitized. But the same.

He readjusted the canvas bag and set off. He knew the way. Blindfold him and he could still make it. Damn the years. Damn his senses. He swore he could. It was burnt into him. Past the colonial homes, left through a bend of commercial streets that blended into quiet residential areas. Then beyond that, where the green of the mountains cascaded down to form the towering forest of cedar. Where the creek dried in the heat, waiting for the cool of fall to rejuvenate its clay bed. A little red house with a metal chimney. The front light was on.

## The Day After

He steadied himself against a brick wall as a wave of nausea rolled over him. It gurgled volcanically in his belly and made his head spin. He curled his toes and clenched his fists, fighting hard to hold back the torrent of vomit that threatened to spill out of his mouth.

He tried to distract himself, to focus on other things: clouds, buttons, sick... Planes, quills, vomit... Skin, underwear, puke...

It didn't work. The acidic contents of his stomach rose up and splattered onto the sidewalk, burning his throat. A passing couple cringed at the sight and briskly passed by. One of them gagged.

He didn't care. He wasn't in any state to care. He wiped the spittle from his mouth and swallowed the chunky bits that remained in his mouth. They were soft and he couldn't pinpoint what he ate that would've been. Some of the bile had smeared on his shoes and kicked it off.

In the distance a car horn honked and it vibrated painfully in his head. He felt hungover, but hadn't had anything to drink. Poisoned would have been the better term. He felt poisoned. His muscles ached, his eyes throbbed, his head pounded, and his stomach wouldn't keep anything down.

He raised his head and leaned against the wall. He looked around. It was foreign to him. The colors were sharper. The buildings were older. Even the people who walked by, casting sidelong glances at the young man throwing up in an alley, looked different. Their faces looked fuller, their bodies rounder. They reminded him of what a population of pig eaters would look like.

His watch read noon and he sighed. He wanted to sleep. He needed to sleep. He couldn't let himself sleep. He had to get accustomed to this new time. To this new place.

A bird, unlike any he had seen before, swooped down and perched itself atop a telephone box. It sang an aggressive, loud sound, despite its small size.

"Shut the fuck up," he groaned. Waving a pale hand at the bird.

It paid him no mind and carried on with its cheerful tune.

"No one cares," he yelled, turning from the bird.

The sun struggled to touch the deeper parts of the alley. Here and there a successful tendril found its way in, revealing drain grates, trash bins, and the occasional graffiti scrawl.

A cat, black and thin, bounded atop a nearby bin and looked at him curiously.

"Nothing to see here, bud." He said.

The cat, as if in agreement, leapt down from the bin and disappeared.

Another wave of sick swept across him and he doubled over. He tried again to think of something, anything, to take his mind off of it. Tulips, makeup, sick... Comics, sex, vomit... Miles, sports, puke...

It didn't work.

## Honduran Sunrise

Gunfire echoed in the distance like new years fireworks. Plumes of thick, gray-smoke rose in elegant wisps from smoldering, leveled buildings. The sky was tainted brown, and orange streaked across the Honduran skyline like the stroke of a paintbrush. The stars did not pierce through the chaos below.

Mira watched and trembled as the crowd overtook her brother. He was swallowed up, consumed by a fury of fists and feet, curses and cheers. She dared not scream, or intervene, lest the blood-lust of the frenzied mob be turned towards her.

She could see him, in flashes, fighting back - valiant. He pushed, crawled, desperately holding his own. She saw the a boot rise, heavy, with black leather. Then he was still. As quickly as they came, the throng receded. They swarmed down the street, like a shot of cyanide in the veins. A deafening silence struck Mira. The street was empty, frozen, as if nothing had happened.

Henry was supine, sprawled out like a deflated scarecrow.

"Henry," Mira whispered, certain that any sound would bring back the turbulent mass. He didn't respond.

She rose to her feet, her knees wobbling. "Henry," she whispered again, this time with more force.

Still nothing.

Her heart pounded in her throat. Why wouldn't he answer? She turned her head left, searching the long, residential street. She listened, closing her eyes. It was quiet. Nothing. She looked right, listening. A cat strolled mindlessly along the battered neighborhood. A fire raged from an overturned vehicle, but still, no one. Nothing.

She gingerly stepped onto the street then stopped, certain that figures would pour out from the shadows, would overtake her, beat her as they beat her brother. But they didn't, so she continued. Each footfall labored - slow. She felt like she was walking through molasses. She wanted to run, to run to him, but her body would not listen.

She fell to her knees beside him, turning his head to face her. Her eyes dragged slowly across his body. His nose was flat, caked with blood, and his jaw looked soft - malleable. His jacket was torn, missing an entire sleeve, and beneath, his previously white shirt had turned a sickly crimson. She looked down to his legs. His right twisted round, his heel now where his toes should be. One of his shoes had been lost.

"Henry," she softly cried. Fresh tears clearing streaks of dirt away from her cheeks.

Her words stirred him. His eyelids fluttered and a groan left his cracked, swollen lips.

"They're gone, Henry," she sniffled. "Gone. And won't be back."

His chest rose in stuttered movements. His exhales sounded wet.

A crash echoed down the block, and voices jeered. She wiped the tears from her face and crawled around to Henry's back.

"We gotta go," she said, digging her hands under his back. She reached under his armpits, gripped around his chest. She staggered to her feet, and began to pull.

He moaned as she dragged him across the debris strewn streets. He moaned and sobbed. Cheering men and women ran by; some with guns, others with makeshift weapons.

They paid Mira no mind.

She pulled him into an alleyway. It was dark and narrow. A sharp explosion ruptured down the block and Mira fell backwards, stunned. Henry didn't flinch. She scrambled back to her feet, slipped her arms under Henry's armpits once again and gripped tightly around his blood sopped chest. She heaved, lifting him from the ground, inching backwards, shuffling her feet. Once, twice. The blood vessels bulged from her forehead. Dancing lights formed and flickered in her vision.

Another explosion boomed, this time farther away. It lit up the night sky. She stayed afoot, dragging Henry, until agony burst from her right ankle. She collapsed backwards, bringing his full weight upon herself. She tried to cry out but all the oxygen was pushed from her lungs. A hollow wheeze was all that left her mouth. When she inhaled, gasping for air, it tasted smoky and stale.

She felt the warm trickle of blood pool into her shoe. She had caught against a rusted pipe. It jutted from the ground like a gnarled finger.

Mira kicked against the cobblestones, still gripping Henry, until her back hit the brick buildings which rose to form the alley. In the dull light of night she saw the streak of blood which Henry left behind him. She brushed his hair with her fingers, wiping away the dirt and grime from his dented forehead.

"I got you Henry. I got you."

She placed her hand against his pale cheek. He was cold. She looked over his shoulder and felt his chest, looking for the wounds that flowed like streams. She found one, a deep laceration that ran the line of his left shoulder. She prodded it with her finger, it went up to her mid knuckle. She pressed hard, applying pressure, praying to god that the bleeding would stop. It didn't. The blood seeped and bubbled between her thin fingers.

"Help!," she cried, her voice drowned out by a fresh batch of crackling gunfire. She called out again, and again. She screamed until her vocal chords burned and she tasted iron in her throat. She screamed until the only sound she could muster was a hoarse, pathetic gurgling. She rocked Henry, cradling his head against her bosom. Tears fell from her chin, landing onto the ragged shoulder of his torn jacket.

Mira didn't know that the blood which flowed from his wounds was arterial blood - life blood. It was sweeter, redder. Had she known, she would have held him closer, tighter. She would have pulled him in until they were one, so he wouldn't be alone.

She didn't know he had died before they reached the alleyway.

## Shapeshifter

The sky had turned a slate-stone gray as a violent wind crashed across the mucky, forlorn valley. Grass folded under the onslaught of rain that fell like marbles. Pools of mud congealed into thick, brown masses. A house, built of wood and will, stood alone at the end of a long, gravel road. Glittering light emanated from its windows, piercing through the darkness. It backed sturdily upon a forest of tall pines and cedar. They loomed over the building, threatening to swallow it whole.

Inside, a whooshing cacophony bellowed, the dreary cold finding its way into the houses many rooms and halls. It seeped in, all tooth and nail, through drafty, thin windows, between loose slats of wood, clawing its way into the dark attic of dusty mementos and forgotten boxes. The cold caused goose pimples to form on her pale skin, and perked up her nipples. Given a few minutes more it would've had her teeth chattering and bones shaking.

Yet here was Jack standing before her. Drunk as an Irish priest. Utterly oblivious to the cold. Struggling to slip his final boxing glove on.

"Harder, Woman," he grunted, swaying on his feet.

"I am pushing harder," Charmian said, struggling with the stiff leather glove. It refused to budge over Jack's fat, boyish hands; hands that used to be strong and masculine.

The stench of booze was strong on him. It stung her nose like piss on a subway car. Acrid. An alcoholic aftershave. Whiskey this time. Sour and dry.

His face was ruddy and his neck swelled over the sweat-stained collar of his shirt. He was dressed in loosely fitted clothing. It did very little to hide his engorged belly and thick, meaty thighs.

With a muffled sound the glove conceded and shuffled down his wrist. Charmian laced it up and sat back into a nearby chesterfield. Jack thumped the gloves together gruffly, pushing his knuckles to the interiors uttermost edges. Satisfied, he raised his hands to guard his stubble ridden chin, and lightly shadow boxed. His form had gone down the drain. His stance had become far too wide, compensating for his mounting weight, and previously crisp one-twos had become lumbering swings with little hip movement and no grace. Surgical, that was what boxing is supposed to be - surgical and precise. This was neither. He reminded her of a gorilla wearing gloves. She felt bad for drawing the comparison, but the resemblance was striking. After a handful of labored punches his breathing grew heavy and his forehead sweat-slicked.

Charmian picked up her own, smaller pair of gloves that waited for her on the couch. She slipped them over her small, thin hands, lacing them up with ease. It had been some time since he asked her to box, since he had asked her to do anything, really. He'd stormed into her study, giddy as a child, pleading for her to join him. She gave in. She couldn't remember the last time she saw him as vibrant and lively. He'd grown cold, not to her, just to life it seemed - but maybe she was just being too harsh. He had this way of losing himself, of shedding his exterior, becoming anew. Through travel or writing. Today a grizzled, old sailor, tomorrow a peace-loving veteran, maybe next a chef from the down and out of Paris. But despite his characters, the roles he put himself into, he always found his way back, one way or another. She loved that about him. It was always fresh. Exciting. This time though. This time was different. This time was the

alcoholic. The down and out of nothing. The bum. This time she wasn't sure if he could find his way back.

"Still got it you know," he slurred, huffing with each short movement of his large arms. "Could give 'em all a run for their money."

"You couldn't give a two legged dog a run for its money," she mumbled. "Not even with a head start."

His shadow boxing stuttered and she saw a momentary glimpse of pain roll over his face. It didn't last long. Nothing with Jack ever did. It was quickly overtaken by his usual unwavering bravado. He began pumping his arms again.

"That would have to be one impressive dog."

"The most impressive," she agreed, feeling a pang of regret for her snide remark. She stood up, thumping her gloves together, just as Jack did - but with less force. Her hands inched down to the cushion of the glove. It was a fond, familiar feeling. She looked around the living room. It was open, spacious, but littered with breakables: fine teacups from China, colorful pottery from Africa, elegant paintings from Europe. Maybe when they were younger, and he sober, they could have masterfully bobbed and weaved throughout the room, incurring little or no damage. But in their current state that seemed an overwhelming impossibility.

"And where are we to have our tussle?" she asked incredulously.

A smile slapped across Jack's face and he strode to a large window, revealing the chaotic weather outside. He spread his arms wide, as if unveiling a grand new work of art. "There," he cheered. "There, where the weather wages war with the earth."

"You've gone mad," Charmian said. "Ain't no way you're getting me out there, Jack."

"Isn't there?" Jack ran from the window to the large entrance door. He fumbled with the lock, not accounting for his gloves. Eventually he was able to twist it. A loud click, audible over the wind, signified the moving of the internal mechanisms. He struggled less with the handle, and when it gave way, he burst out of the door, out their front walk, into the torrential rain.

Charmian stood in the doorway, aghast. "You get your ass back in here, Jack. You'll catch cold, or worse!"

Jack merely laughed. He raised his face to the sky and opened his mouth. Droplets ran down his chin, splattered on his cheeks. He looked back at her, still smiling.

"Catch a cold? Catch a cold!?" He laughed loudly, almost defiantly, and a shock of thunder boomed throughout the night. "Charmian, I'll catch life! Life I tell you." He continued to laugh and began boxing. His feet splashed in the puddles and his hair flattened, curling over his forehead.

Charmian shook her head. "You're a bloody loon, you know that?"

"Oh I know it," Jack said, throwing lefts and right. "I know it, and you love it."

She could only smile. He was right. She did.

With reservation quickly being overtaken, she walked towards Jack. Her Jack. The sailor, the veteran, the chef, the drunkard, the author. The rain tickled her nose, and this time the cold did perk her nipples. She felt a shiver sink into her bones as her clothes became heavy with water. Jack watched her approach, and she was sure she saw admiration in his eyes. She kissed him on the lips. They were wet and firm.

"Alright, Jack. You have me. You always have me."

“And you me, Charmian.” He stepped away and raised his gloves. “Now...Put ‘em up.”

## Haunted Barstool

A wave of relief passed through her as she burst through the heavy metal doors. He was still there: seated on a leather stool in the corner, haloed by a pathetically dim light, half filled tumbler gripped in his right hand. She ran home the moment she recognized him, nearly breaking her ankles as she took the steps to her room two at a time. It wasn't until she stuffed the book from the nightstand into her bag when a thought hit her. What if he left? She cursed her short sightedness and barreled back down the stairs.

She darted back in half the time it took before; feet barely touching pavement, shoulder checking those that stood to slow her time. She bounded across the street, cars headlights causing spots in her vision. A horn blasted behind her but she paid it no mind, the bars neon sign was in view.

Her sudden entrance drew attention from the scattered handful of patrons: some seated in conversations around chipped, wooden tables, others playing billiards on a faded-green felt table - but he remained still, either unfazed, or unaware. She avoided the curious onlookers who, one by one, lost interest. She wiped the sweat from her brow and steadied her breathing. She hadn't noticed the sharp stinging in her lungs and the stabbing pain in her side. A rivulet formed at the nape of her neck and ran down between her shoulder-blades.

The book in her hand was a well-worn hardcover. Pages were rabbit eared - some ripped - and a thick coffee ring stood out on its crinkled sleeve. It was a source of pride to her, and she hoped to him as well, as there could be no greater authorial compliment than a well read book.

A jukebox in the corner, that had been spitting out an upbeat rock tune, fell silent before sputtering back to life with an old, colored blues song. The vocals were low and raspy, the guitar painfully dragging between broken minor chords and string-bending melodies. She had heard the song before but couldn't place where from.

The man finished his drink and beckoned for the bartender to fill him another. The man behind the counter obliged, filling it with an opaque, reddish liquid. Her breathing at bay, and the dagger in her side now a dull pain, she gripped the book, inhaled, puffed out her chest, and approached.

He was bigger than she expected, not taller, but broader. His frizzy, brown hair was a mess. His chiseled chin and puffy cheeks were streaked with heavy morning shadow. He wore a denim jacket, and she noticed that his boots were untied. He mumbled to himself as he sipped deeply from his drink.

She felt the urge to turn away. What nerve, she thought. She had no right to disturb him. He was probably deep in thought, working out his next book.

Yet, she countered, when would she have this chance again?.

'Take the shot,' she thought to herself. 'Now or never.'

She softly cleared her throat, realizing just how dry and tight it had become. She balanced her teetering mind, and stuttered out, "e-exc-cus-ee me, Mr. K-ker..."

"Friend or foe," he quickly interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"Friend or foe? Questions simple enough."

Her mind went blank, unprepared for his abrasive counter-fire. "Friend," she responded. He finished his drink then sighed. "Shame."

"Why?" she asked.

"Friends are in such abundance these days. Foes'r far more interesting."

She stood in silence, feeling foolish. He turned his head and eyed the book in her hands.

"What you got there?" he slurred, raising his glass for another drink. The bartender quickly filled his glass then made his way back to a pair of dolled up middle-aged women who were both giddy with liquor.

She looked down at the book. "I w-was hoping..."

"To get my scrawl?" he interrupted again.

"Yes."

"If so, then why'd you lie?"

"Excuse me?" she asked, befuddled.

"You claim to be friend, when your clearly foe." He swirled his drink in the glass.

She could feel the blood draining from her face, leaving it a ghostly pale. Her chest tightened violently. Her mind betrayed her, calling her every foul world she knew. She wished she hadn't approached him. What nerve she had.

She began to stammer out an apology when he chuckled and half turned to her. The dim light just illuminating the mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"Don't lose your dinner now, girl. Not with the price of things these days. Lets see what you brought."

She stiffly held out the book, eyes at her feet, ashamed.

"Well..." the word was drawn out. "It would seem I pegged you wrong."

She looked up. He had turned completely to her. The gleam was gone. Deep wrinkles formed between his furrowed brows. The clamping vice in her chest released when she noticed he had left his drink on the counter. His attention was fully hers.

"How so," she managed. A cheer bellowed from the ladies. One had fallen to the floor, leaving a clear view of her underwear to the prying barman. Her friend grabbed at her wrists, struggling to get the fallen girl upright.

"It's not every day you encounter authenticity." His eyes rested on the girls. He swiveled back around on the stool, motioning for her to take the seat beside him. She tentatively took the seat, still shaken from the unexpected banter. He took a sip from the drink. She noticed the smell, his smell. He smelled of heavy liquor. Not the kind that comes from one night of heavy drinking, or even a weekend bender; but the kind that comes from years worth, a lifetime's worth.

"Forgive my sourness," he continued after she had settled herself, placing the book atop the spit-polished counter. "I've grown cynical. More cynical than I expected." His words trailed off and for a moment he seemed lost. The jukebox fell silent. The blues song fading out an a low note. It kicked back to life with a funky jazz tune. The middle aged women cheered and began dancing together. The bartender watched on yearningly. The sudden change in environment seemed to snap him back to life.

He chuckled again. "What'll you have?"

"Nothing," she moused.

"Nothing?" he repeated, aghast. "Nothing won't do. Nothing good ever came from nothing." He waved at the bartender who begrudgingly pulled himself away from the drunken women. "Same for my friend," he ordered.

Before the words had left his lips, the drink was filled, set on a coaster, and the man returned to the women, enjoying the flash of thighs, stomach, and chest. The drink sloshed when she picked it up. She brought it to her nose and smelt. It was poisonous, acrid. Her nostrils flared and burned. Her reaction went unnoticed as he picked up his own glass.

"What should we toast to," he asked?

"You decide," she said, holding the glass away from her, dreading its burn.

He looked over the bartender and nodded his way. "How about to him. May he get his jollies, as it were."

She smirked. "To his jollies."

"May they be satisfied."

They downed their drinks, him with ease, her with difficulty. The substance was worse than she imagined, it was like swallowing liquid fire. He sighed pleasantly, his tumbler emptied. She coughed, bringing some of the dreadful substance up and out her nose, sending her into an even more violent coughing fit.

He laughed and slapped her on the back. "What's life without a little pain, huh?"

"Right," she mustered, setting down her glass, taking deep breaths. She wiped the spittle that had formed on her chin, then the tears that fell from her eyes.

He looked to the bartender imploringly, like a dog sitting before an empty food bowl. The women had made their way to the jukebox and were inserting coins into the machine. A fast paced Chuck Berry song began to play which made the two of them entirely giddy.

"Say what you will, but at least those girls have a decent ear for music," she said. The fire now settled into her belly, causing an uprising towards her throat. She couldn't believe anyone could drink this stuff, digest it, and she had seen him down multiples. She already felt heady.

His attention fell on the book which still rested on the bar. He picked it up and flipped through its pages. "Where'd you find this relic?"

"Was my moms."

"Was?"

"Yeah. Mine now."

He set it down and fished into the front pocket of his denim jacket. "Well, it's been well loved. No one could argue with that." He extracted a metal ball-point pen and opened the book to its title page. "Who should I make it out to?"

"Ellie."

"To Ellie," he muttered, scribbling onto the paper. She watched as his hand masterfully danced across the page. No amount of alcohol could remove that ability, she thought. That was there also, not just the smell of drink, but that ability. Some things can't drown.

He finished scratching in the book and closed it, returning his pen to the front pocket of his jacket. "There you go, friend Ellie. Now maybe it's worth enough for you to buy a new copy."

She laughed. "Maybe. But would you sign that one also?"

"Probably not," he said.

"Then this'll do me just fine."

She held the book firmly, afraid to let it go. It felt heavier somehow, burdened by some new, unseen weight. It also seemed more delicate, precious almost, as if the slightest whisper would crumble its pages.

He noticed her reverence and sniggered. "It's not the grail, girl. Ain't even a piece of it."

"All a matter of opinion, really."

He shrugged. "S'pose so."

She turned her gaze from the book to him. His attention was hooked to the bartender. He'd left his post behind the counter and joined the ladies at the jukebox.

She laughed. "Not subtle is he?"

"Subtlety is a gift of the bright. Those in the dark clumsily stumble."

One of the girls planted a kiss on the bartender's cheek.

"Doesn't look like he's stumbling," she said.

"S'pose not." He stood from the stool, and if he did sway, showing signs of the liquor, it was momentarily and uncaught by the untrained eye.

"I've lost my taste," he said, patting down his jacket and resetting it over his shoulders. "Best to be off. Lovely meeting you, friend Ellie."

Without another word he strode across the bar and disappeared through its double doors.

She thought about getting up, about following him. For a moment she almost did, but somehow it didn't seem possible. She didn't feel as if she'd met a person. He felt more like a specter, or a haunting. The room cooled when he was near. She bet if she tried to grab him there would be only air and dust.

Her attention turned back to her book. She opened it and found the page with his fresh scrawl.

'I didn't pay for the drinks. Best to run. - Jack'