

Douglas A. Wright

QUITTING

I've been trying to quit smoking, but every time I flick the lighter—three times for good luck, watch the ember flare, suck in the smoke—my brain lights up like a goddamn Christmas tree and I am released. Escaping at lightspeed. Temporal, here and now and everywhere else in between. I'm chasing a feeling from years ago, like a song in a dream spitting static on the radio.

"Fire it up!" My brother laughs from the couch, plucking at his guitar. He can play like a sparrow sings, fingers in flight. He's quit everything - nicotine, alcohol, diet coke, amphetamines, opioids, living. The only things he couldn't quit were cough syrup and Nintendo, a winning combination.

I hold the smoke in my lungs, feel the burn, exhale. I consider the poem I'm trying to write. It's about turtles. Is time faster for the cute little freaks? Do we only perceive them as slow because of our own phenomenological experience as giant clumsy humans? What's it like inside that shell? What does the turtle imagine in that quiet dark? Does it feel like home, or the way home once felt, or at least the idea of it, someplace safe and warm?

When we were kids, all the pets we owned tried to commit suicide. The rabbit, the gerbils, the fish. I'm guessing that's maybe a sign of a dysfunctional home. My brother once had a turtle, a real Houdini, who'd escape every few days, headbutting the rainbow pebbles into a

mound, knocking down the water filter, climbing up the spout out of the tank. We'd always find it in the bathroom, hopelessly trying to scramble up the porcelain base of the toilet, presumably to flush itself out, far and away.

"Here's the thing..." he says. He always starts that way. "Your mind is a curious sea, sometimes you're all fucked up in the riptide, struggling, and yeah you wonder what would happen if you just let go. You gotta be fearless. You think you need it, whatever it is, to get yourself upright instead of upside down but you don't, you know? That's why they call it a fix. You think you need it to feel normal but that's what keeps you trapped."

I tap my pencil on the page. "What rhymes with turtle?"

"Girdle, fertile..." He thinks. "Myrtle."

"That was his name."

"Yeah." He stops playing. "He was a good friend."

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I'm trying to quit drinking. The bartender and I are pals, as in he knows my name and I know his and he doesn't mind me scribbling on cocktail napkins like a madman racing against time to record my misbehaving thoughts before they escape from memory. He knows about the turtle poem. He's kind about it. Acts like it's not stupid. Do I want a shot? Yes, and five more after that until I'm liquid, seeping back into myself, this body limber and alive. The bar has aquarium tank set into the liquor

shelf like a television, glowing fish and coral and creepy sea anemones. It's fun and depressing to watch, especially the three clownfish that swim together like the Fates, round and round, their walleyes staring out. You ever feel like you're living in circles? Like you've been here before, catching yourself in a moment familiar? This life, over and over. Different variations of the same song. What choice did I make the last time around?

There's a young woman reading a book at the other end of the copper bar. White-rimmed glasses and a touch of sadness. She lances a gaze I can't return, numbly spinning my glass and chasing epiphany. I don't have the energy for hope tonight.

"Here's the thing..." my brother says. "You gotta gamble away your regrets. It's not worth holding onto that weight. You make a mistake, yeah you own it but you also gotta let the past be past. You listening? You think it's about guilt. It's not, it's about control. The cascade effect, thinking that one choice of yours could snowball into an avalanche. You really think you could've altered the outcome? Oh master of the universe, trying to game the future, living in your head when your hands touch what's real."

He chugs down a tallboy and crushes it in his fist.

"I thought you quit."

He drains the foam from the mangled can. "Is it really drinking if you don't feel anything?"

I'm trying to quit calling her. We had a kind of love like candy. Sweet, addictive, the kind that lifts you sky high until you crash and shatter into fragments of yourself.

"It's past midnight."

She always says that. Maybe because it's always past midnight when I've gotten liquid enough to feel the thrum of my heart and remember the chambers where the memories remain like stage sets of abandoned love, the good moments and some of the bad.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"I want to know why. We were happy, weren't we?"

"Why? Why?! You're such a jerk. You broke up with me. You moved out."

"Okay, yes, true, but you know me better than anyone. So I thought—"

"I don't want to scream and hang up the phone again," she says. "BUT I WANT TO SCREAM AND HANG UP THE PHONE."

"Well, I wouldn't want you to repress—"

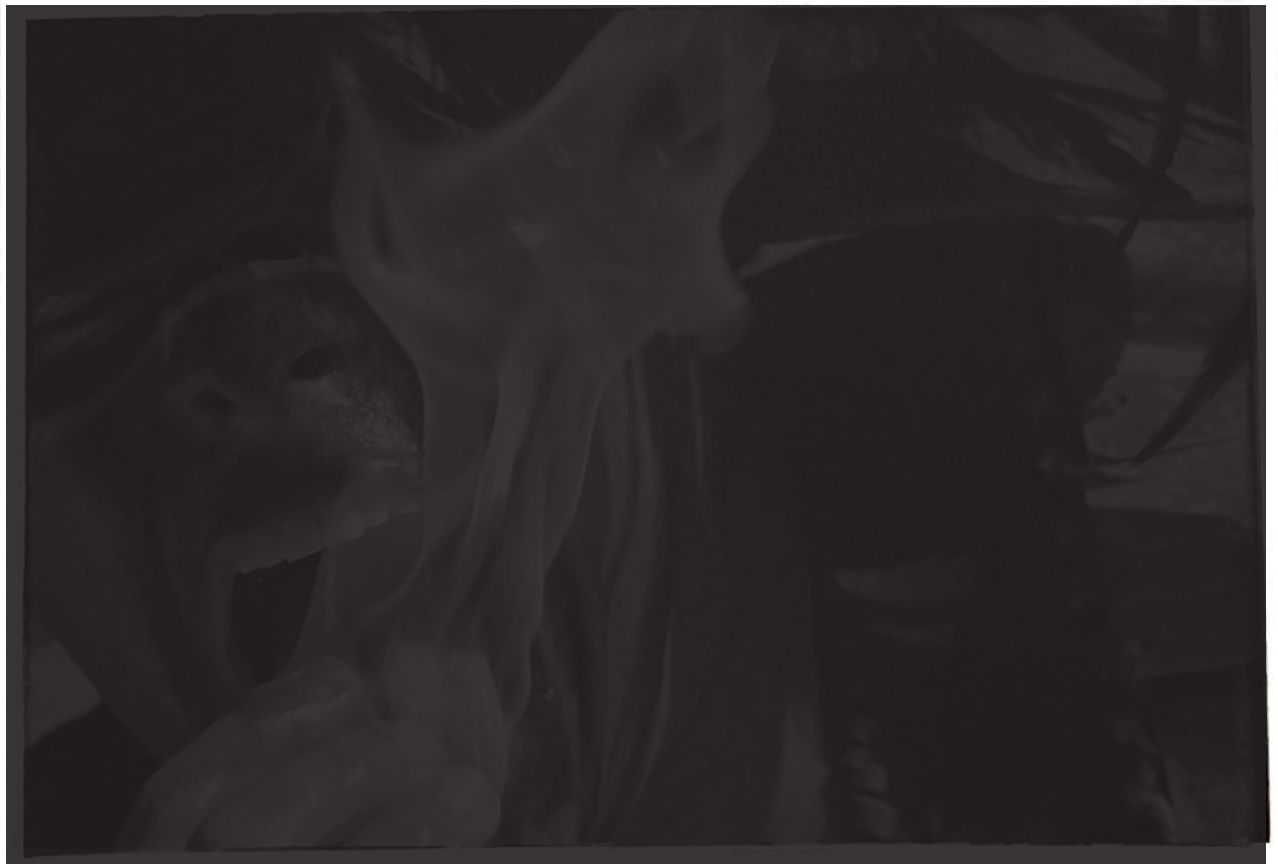
And then she does scream for a really long time, like a solid minute. I listen, plugging the phone into the stereo, cranking up the volume. It's a thrill to experience something so pure and wild, even if it's terror and rage.

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I've been trying to quit thinking. I've got this meditation app where Morgan Freeman reads airplane repair manuals. Cessna 172s. It's super boring but his voice is like a bell in a tower. I am soothed, my thoughts detached like clouds in the blue sky, until I hear faint arpeggios, the same riff over and over.

"Hey, cut it out," I say. I open my eyes, but I don't see him. I rise from the floor and go through door after door after door, searching. I don't find him anywhere. I give up, shuck on my coat, go outside. I make the long shivering walk down to the bodega.

The birds are liars. They're singing like it's spring but it still feels like December. I buy some cigarettes and feel guilty about it, while I'm buying them, asking for a pack like it's an apology, tearing off the cellophane outside, giddy and sinful, sparking the tip.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF BOGLE

"I thought you quit," my brother says, shadow under a streetlight.

I flick ash at the curb. "Fuck you, you're not even here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're dead, Tom."

He laughs, then his face goes screwy. "You serious?"

I nod, smoke.

"You're kidding me. How long?"

"Seven years," I say.

"Son of a bitch," he says. "Gimme one of those."

I shuck a cigarette from the pack. He lights it, takes a smooth pull like he's Jim Morrison. He was always so cool, even during the worst of it, a drugged-out surfer riding the waves.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks.

"Because it's my fault."

"No... it's not," he says. "Listen to me, it's not."

They found him in a motel room by the mall, blood on the carpet from where he hit his head, his toxicology report like a lotto ticket. And where was I? Why didn't I call? Why didn't I try to save him?

"I'm not talking about that," I say. "I can't... I can't stop. It keeps you around, you know?"

"Yeah, sure," he says. "But is that fair to me?"

"I can't."

"Let me go."

"What if I don't know how?"

"Just say goodbye," he says. "Keep on living, keep on trying."

I exhale out into the cool night, three last drags for good luck. I flick my cigarette away and walk off without looking back so I don't to see it burn out on the pavement.