

LOVELINES

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ABSTRACT

LOVELINES

NATHAN LEMIN

This thesis is comprised of a novella titled *Lovelines*, which follows the title character, an Instagram poet and ad-agency copywriter. Lovelines writes for markets rather than art, and the plot is propelled by his grappling with disconnection from the physical world. He lives through the persona he has created in his phone and Instagram and exists to much of the world as an anonymous writer on the internet. Through self-doubt, strained relationships with other characters, and the solace of natural spaces, Lovelines attempts to discover the meaning of his art, as well as his life.

The novella is built upon my interest in artistic liminality: where is the threshold between market and art? Between persona and artist and who we actually are? How do we draw a line for “good” art or writing? And how should a writer create their goals as an artist? This interest in liminality has grown from the rapid digitalization of our world over the course of my life, which has been so amplified by COVID-19 and the isolation that the pandemic brought. Everyone tries to cloud or efface in some way how and who they actually are through their online presence. Lovelines attempts to process that effacement through his simple craft; he tries to project an image of life through a poem, through a caption, through hashtags, and yet each of those options falls short. The touch of social media is not a physical one. But purely physical touch is not what Lovelines is after either. His generation, which is my own, has been so thoroughly processed in an online, social media world, that there exists simultaneously pleasure and hollowness in both the complete absence of touch and the purely sexual touch, which complicates all intimacy. Furthermore, a product of our digital age is that we risk losing correct

perception of ourselves to our personas; we're depressed and anxious about ourselves because we buy into the way we have crafted this persona. And then we begin living to fit the persona we have created. In the novella, Lovelines starts to live the way he thinks his poetry dictates that he should. It is not until Mary, someone who lives the version of life that she has created for herself in what appears to be a meaningful, fulfilling way, that Lovelines begins to see that you can both create yourself *and* love yourself. But there is profound implication in that self-creation: there is a space—between the brain and the page, between the reader and writer, between a good decision and a bad—where exists the truth of art. The hard part for Lovelines is finding that truth.

The novella at its inception was influenced by Nathanael West's novella *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Nearly a century later, I wanted to rewrite the darkly comic, lonely book for our contemporary audience. An Instagram poet seemed the modern-day equivalent to the love columnist of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, with their relative anonymity, crafted persona, and potential inability to meaningfully help their audience. Beyond the basic structure and obvious naming homage, the dark comedy, profound loneliness, and absurdity of West's novella influenced my own. And the hybrid form: a novella interspersed with faux "Insta-poems," is one that further grows from my interest in liminality and hybridity, both informed by my experience in Northern Arizona University's MFA program. The flexibility to take courses in different genres, as well as combine that creative work with meaningful literary theory has propelled this thesis where it would not have dared go two years ago.

Increasingly, when writing, my attraction to liminality gravitates toward choice, whether it be on the line, or the action/inaction of a speaker. The cliché goes: there is always a choice. But art, *truth* knows that is not the full extent of reality: to be fully some body, choice is often an

illusion or a privilege. By discovering the fictional in-between my writing hopes to learn its own agency, or what can be chosen and what is predestined. For Lovelines, meaningful choice is the ultimate discomfort. For him choice has become flattened because he believes his world is flat. He believes his world fits in a screen, is catered to him, targeted for him, propped up and flattened by our technology. When he finally chooses not to buy into this version of himself and his world, my hope is that he progresses incrementally forward. But he makes mistakes, profound mistakes. We all do. And at some level my fiction believes in valuing the humor and humanity found in these mistakes. Perhaps this is the final threshold the work hopes to elucidate: where does dark beauty and dark humor shake hands? As much as I want the reader to believe in the image of Lovelines' poems, or the story itself, I also want them to smirk and shake their head. That does not mean I want sympathy for him, rather, something closer to empathy. My hope is that readers will realize that, like Lovelines, we often miss something in ourselves, something profoundly loveable, because we are buying into the created version of ourselves. This novella hopes readers will leap between all the clever, loving, and creative spaces in their minds.

I believe in this novella, this idea, and *Lovelines*. Without the caring readers, collaborators, and teachers I have had here in Flagstaff, at home in the Midwest, and otherwise, I would not have been able to see this work through the COVID-19 pandemic. And I am so grateful that I was able to, because the extended isolation and further digitalization of our lives that the pandemic incited, amplified the meaning I hoped to reveal when I started this work.

LOVELINES

He thumbed it. Smooth. No cracks. Hairline scratches that were impossibly fine. It was beautiful, in a way things are now. It seemed that design had supplanted art. Clean, cool efficiency over complexity, over depth of thought. Anyway, art wasn't always beautiful. But design had to be. Otherwise, who would buy it?

In the apartment below a dog was barking—every afternoon, when the owner was nearly home, the dog barked. Lovelines opened Instagram. He already knew what he was going to do, but he wanted to write it down first. He started typing in “create” mode. Then a spare key zipped in his door lock. Katrina. He locked his phone, but not before saving to drafts.

Goodbye, Snow in April

After dark, when
everyone falls

asleep, I go
around waking

them up, saying:
“ope, sorry. I’m leaving

you for someone
I know I don’t

love,” instead of
this, this

terrible
uncertainty.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: For anyone going through a breakup, Lovelines is here for you. Summer is just around the corner, hang in there fam.

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#lovelines #loveliness #lovelinespoet #poetry #instapoet #instapoetry #nationalpoetrymonth #april #dark #goodbye #lostlove #romance #love #lovepoem #spring #springpoetry

Though he'd been discussing it with friends for weeks, this was the evening Lovelines finally broke up with his partner, Katrina, on April 1, which is a heartless day to break up with someone, at least that's what she said, sitting on his couch wiping tearstained mascara from her face while frazzled hair choked the tips of her index fingers. Only two months ago they'd been at Costco, half-seriously browsing engagement rings. And he felt bad, he really did, but now that Lovelines had started, he could not stop.

When you live your whole life in Minnesota like he had, you learn to avoid confrontation, to be unclear with your intentions if you know those intentions will cause pain. And standing there over his partner becoming past, he wondered if all this sadness they were both feeling meant that he really did love Katrina, if this really sucked just because he was making a mistake.

His birthday was just a week away and between tearful outbursts Katrina kept saying she'd already gotten a gift, an incredible gift. It wasn't long before he just wanted her gone, wanted not to feel anymore. Lovelines decided she might leave if he got angry. He began shouting, telling her to "Get out! Get out of my apartment! You're hurting me by staying! This is what I meant about being overbearing! You are exactly like your mom!"

The shouting only made her cry harder, so Lovelines went to sit in the kitchen and drink a Hamm's. A Metro Transit bus went by and he watched the downstairs neighbor get off. Now that man could scream at a woman: his auntie, his girl, his grandma. Lovelines decided he didn't want to be known like that, so he went back in the living room and said he was sorry for yelling, that he just didn't love Katrina anymore. That didn't help.

After about an hour, when the tide of her tears went out and Katrina was reduced to low moans, she whispered, “Can I at least have a hug before I go?”

The sweetness of such a request softened him. “Of course,” he said, and went to pull her up by the hands. They wrapped each other in a hug so familiar made awkward by what they knew was an ending. This made Lovelines cry too, and they soaked the shoulders of each other’s shirts. Katrina pulled her head back and moved to kiss him and he relented, not wanting to be more cruel than he already had been. Hard not to wonder if she’d ever set foot in here again.

Katrina turned around in the threshold and said, “Don’t you dare write about this,” and then walked to her car, throwing her purse at the windshield when she got close.

Back inside Lovelines cried more and drank more Hamm’s. He messaged *dezinefrique* and *lord-beeron*, two friends from work, asking if they wanted to go out. They both replied *yeeet* so he took a cold shower to unpufl his eyes and threw on a black shirt and jeans. Of his four pairs of Stan Smiths, he put on the newest and whitest ones.

They met in Uptown, at Cowboy Slims, a spendy nightmare of highwaisted bootylifting denim and \$46 sculpting clay. The three of them drank Vegas bombs and danced to Savage and talked about their work at T@NGENT, the ad-agency where they supported the same team.

Dezinefrique was a video editor with a penchant for the gloomy, neon noir styling popularized by Ryan Gosling in *Drive*. Under his eyes were dark bags from scrolling miles of vintage clothing on ebay. May have been his \$4000 in credit card debt that made him so grim.

Lord-beeron was an assistant to the art director. He worked for two years as an intern for pocket lint and change, until someone felt bad enough to give him a benefit-less assistant position that paid double his internship, but still not nearly enough to rent his well lit Uptown studio loft. His dad, a tax accountant, wired money monthly from London to help with bills.

Lovelines wrote copy and worked closely with a couple high-strung art directors who were all addicted to molly, spent every night at Skyway with the bassheads. The whole team fell under the umbrella of Preston Piper, or preston-pied-piper, an Executive Creative director at T@NGENT, who ran his team like some cult of inclusion and was the man responsible for using handles as names.

T@NGENT was one of those uber-competitive, cool ad agencies to work at. Like, they had two ping-pong tables, were dog friendly, and the fridges were always stocked with Grain Belt. Every Wednesday and Friday T@NGENT had lunch catered from neighborhood joints: lobster rolls from Smack Shack or burgers from Red Cow, or wings and fries from Monte Carlo. The Carlson Business School grads appreciated this extension of their UMN high roller status. The office space was settled on the third and fourth floors of a gorgeous red-stone building with faded blue paint that read GEN RAL MIL S and might as well have said G NTRIF ED. Due to places like T@NGENT, the North Loop neighborhood in Minneapolis was squeezing out its old school, rough-bricked warehouse feel and looking more and more like some twisted cocktail of white collar Downtown douchers and Uptown faux hipsters living off mom and dad's hedge fund. Had the kind of cutesy mass appeal Jacob Frey had, that is before folks looked a little more closely.

Later that night, well early that morning, Lovelines stumbled into his apartment dm-ing gemma_the_gem on Instagram. She too worked at T@NGENT, but on different accounts. All the majors wanted to land her; she did the best work and had no qualms charming the frequently perve-y middle-aged chubs who communicated creative work for big brands. It didn't hurt that she could run video, graphics, and copywrite, not to mention she sent emails that made men feel like they were 21 and thin again. Lovelines messaged her because she was always leaving notes

in his work email about how much she *looooooved* his content. He wrote and rewrote his booty call opener and settled on:

@lovelinespoet: *U up?*
@gemma_the_gem: *yusss.*
@lovelinespoet: *Wanna come over?*
@gemma_the_gem: *getin line boi*
@lovelinespoet: *?*
@gemma_the_gem: *u can come here, im in the pool*
@lovelinespoet: *It's 3am*
@gemma_the_gem: *So?*
@lovelinespoet: *Okay. Comin. Address?*
@gemma_the_gem: *1201 University, pool code 256.*

Lovelines took a shot of rye, brushed his teeth, and ordered a Lyft. The driver talked to him about how hard it was to make rent, asked him please not to puke in the car, he didn't want to have to charge him the fee, but he said it like he did want to, like that \$50 bonus would be quite welcome. Normally Lovelines tipped a dollar, but he left three instead.

Pool

You outlasted
the others
in the pool,
got your shot
at betrayal.

Now you know

better and

now you say you

want me back.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: Everybody makes mistakes. Everybody has regrets. Everybody has ghosts. We just have to do our best not to let them haunt us.

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#lovelines #relationships #betrayal #single #love #takemeback #wantyouback #imissyou #missingyou #poetry #lovepoem #lovepoetry #instapoet #instapoetry #instapoem

It wasn't until Lovelines opened the gate to the pool that he realized he hadn't worn a suit or brought a towel. He saw gemma_the_gem standing in the shallow end, arms winged on the ledge, thumbing the label on a Corona Light. On each side of her was a dude: a tall one who looked eerily like Little Nicky, no wait, Lil Dicky, and another thick and sausagey Buzz Lightyear / Tito Ortiz type. When she saw Lovelines she swam over and grabbed the ankle of his jeans; "Look," she said, "I'm *sooo* wet."

After a few minutes standing awkwardly in his clothes, Lovelines decided there was nothing better to do than get in the pool, so he stripped to his Calvins and formed a triangle around gemma_the_gem with the other suitors. It quickly became apparent he was the only one there that thought this was fucking weird, so he tried to cling to his inebriation, let it massage this situation into normality.

At some point between the pool and gemma_the_gem's bedroom they lost the muscly man. His mom used to say it looked like a hurricane struck when his room was messy. Now he understood. Gemma_the_gem's bed floated on a sea of bras, tight tops with tags still on, black scuffed high heels, streaked thongs, tattered jackets, foamy pink makeup brushes, cracked hangers, lipsticks in so many colors they looked out of children's art kits, and a thin layer of white cathair coating everything. The three of them were dripping poolwater on the piles. In one

corner a container of blue nail polish was spilled Pollockly over white jeans and sneakers and Lovelines wondered if there were fractal patterns in this hoard.

The tall lanky fellow was quite clearly destroyed. Lovelines suspected he was ping-ponging between cocaine and Jaeger bombs, judging by his pupils and a putrid anise smell. The guy kept wandering from the room to the kitchen screaming at unpredictable intervals how much he *fucking loves gemma_the_gem*. When Lovelines looked over at her she was pushing her laptop and cat off the bed. He noticed a T@NGENT tattoo on her back, just above her left buttock.

She asked him if he was ready and before waiting to hear she pulled down her suit bottoms and bent over the bed. She insisted the other guy “Won’t mind, won’t even notice. So, *fucking come on.*”

Home

Only after you’ve

slept

under different

stars

can you really

say

this is home.

This is where I want to stay.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: Spent so long searching for someone, something I could call home. Maybe someday.

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#stillsearching #home #whereareyou #lovelines #poetry

Lovelines had moved every year since he was 18, when he started college at the U. He'd finally found a nice, reasonable apartment in Northeast and wanted to stay. Across 28th to the north was a funeral home, and across Central to the west was a cemetery, so he told people death was covered. But life was too: a block south was a Walgreens, and just across Fillmore Street to the east was Audubon Park, which had a basketball court, a wading pool, huge twisting trees, a walking path, and wide open swaths of green grass. The park and the fact that there was a tattoo parlor within five minutes sold Lovelines on the place. He'd grown to love the local restaurants. Holy Land had the best hummus he'd ever tasted, it was so, so lemony. The Mill's biscones and gravy could cure any hangover, and the panang curry at Karta Thai was Lovelines' favorite taste in the world.

Now that the weekends were warming up he liked to read Louise Erdrich and Kao Kalia Yang and Ed Bok Lee on a little blanket in Audubon Park. He'd watch collies catch frisbees and corgis graze the grass and children throw woodchips and old men bike and it all started to feel a little like home.

Glue

You think the
silly little

twice broken

toy

knows a thing
about its being

g-held-l-together-u-with-e

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: You don't always realize what's holding you together.

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#lovelines #poetry #glue #fallingapart #holdmetogether #sillylittletoy #stupidlittleboy
#whathaveidone #heartbreak #lostlove

After his breakup, Lovelines felt darkness seep into his mood and his concentration fracturing.

And after he hooked up with gemma_the_gem, she kept messaging him on Instagram:

@gemma_the_gem: *I looooooved your content this week*

@gemma_the_gem: *is that poem for meee??*

@gemma_the_gem: *tryna get that dick wet?*

@gemma_the_gem: *cuz im tryna get this dick wet...*

@gemma_the_gem: *im not stopping til you anser meeeee.*

@gemma_the_gem: *fuuuuuuuuck me plsssss*

@gemma_the_gem: *k. Fine.*

@gemma_the_gem: *ur such a dick.*

@gemma_the_gem: *u know I fuck ur friends right*

@gemma_the_gem: *do u even feel or are u some social media ghost?*

The Minnesotan in him felt a need to reply, to be nice, but he really just didn't want to see her.

Those long late days of spring where you hope the sun will last a little longer, and it does and it does, but never long enough when you're hurting. And then it goes dark and you become dark and you just want someone to tell. You want someone to tell: that you've done nothing

today, that you feel rotten. You want to laugh a little and hope they feel bad but not too bad, not bad enough for them to get serious, to ask if you're okay, to give you those eyes that feel like they're better than you. You want a friend and a beer and to not feel guilty for taking up their time with your darkness.

No doubt, gemma_the_gem was a great time. Her hair dropped heavily to her shoulders, dark and shiny as a commercial actress, and she had a mouth that never seemed to close around her teeth, but in a good way, like Brigitte Bardot. Lovelines believed, however, that she was pure Bacchant, that there was no way he could keep up with someone like her. He left her on read and it made him feel worse.

@lovelinespoet: Sorry, just saw these. I've been soo busy, and not feeling so well. I'll let you know when I can do something, hopefully soon! Seeyu at the office.

He read his message and heard how pathetic it made him sound, but it gave him a moment of relief.

Some nights Lovelines would go out with friends, but if it was near the end of a pay period, they'd ask him if he could cover the tab. If they stayed out late it didn't matter. Becoming increasingly apparent was that Lovelines didn't really do anything at his job. He wrote some emails, wrote some content. Most of the day he ended up on Instagram. Lovelines would scroll through the tiny poems of Rupi Kaur, Cleo Wade, or Madisen Kuhn. He'd lose hours. Why do I like this? Why is this good? He'd ask and ask and not quite know and he wondered whether that was a strength or a weakness.

Then he'd move to dms. Dezinefrique and lord-beeron were always sending him posts from GQ and Esquire, cocktails or new jeans that he must try. Gemma_the_gem would send five or six selfies at a time. But his fans and his trolls, that's what he really read.

@jerryh1966: beautiful poem Lovelines!
@twentysomething_: ugh all the feels love your work
@newjerseydvls1fan: ur a dum bitch!
@reagan-fisher01: omg break my heart :'/
@writers_of-insta1790875: dm for collab
@bunchofdaisiez: sent this to my man<3 i LOVE your LINES:)
@tedtalksterrible: lol u cant even write good. hope u die

That at once Lovelines could be loved and wished death upon in one unreal space felt so much deeper than anything he could write. That one person could be moved enough to correspond, no matter how simple the correspondence, was all he'd ever wanted from writing. But the trolls. Sometimes, if they weren't private, he'd stalk their feeds. They always seemed to be the same guy, always a guy. They wore their ballcaps too close to their brow. They did a certain thing with the hair around their mouths. Their hashtags were misogynistic. It all made Lovelines laugh a cruel laugh, a laugh cruel to himself, one that didn't feel funny, but sad. It was a laugh that made him think what he didn't want to: what do we do about this? How will we be okay like this? It was this laugh that led, most nights, to Lovelines listening to records too loud and drinking too much rye.

John's Spring

I always imagine it the river,
blazer wet wrapped tight to what's
now considered corpse, gin sticky.
Then I read and realize
you broke upon
the bank. Must've been icy,
oh 7 January, what

hungers, wonders with me whether
it was cold that day? And
how long does death
warm the winter? Did you
melt the snowpack? Did
it soften your life?

I advance upon (despairing) that
bridge, downcast my eyes. There's laws
against us. Your horned beard glances
twice and waves once. I fall at your little
feet; --Mr. Bones: please,
put your drink on my nightstand,
please choose my side of the riverbed.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: John Berryman meant so much for my learning to love poetry, and I always think about him in the springtime. This isn't really like most of my poetry on this page, but I hope you'll like it anyway. (check out "Dream Song #4" it's my favorite poem in the world).

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#JohnBerryman #lovelines #dreamsongs #minneapolis #minnesotapoet #washingtonavebridge #rip

Spring in Minneapolis made everyone joyous: *this is why we live here*, everyone would remind themselves, as the snowplowed piles turned wet, brown to black, and began melting away, and it smelled bad, the putrid smells of life and not death that everyone welcomed. But it harmed Lovelines, made him sick and empty. He tried biking around town for enjoyment, but he always came home feeling like he'd been hollowed out with a spoon, hungry for something that he could not eat. Some days he'd go to campus, where the flowers smelled like baked apples and Katrina's crotch and Dogwood coffee. Where he believed he'd last been truly happy. That smell used to be there every spring when he'd walk to Art History classes on the West Bank. He had to cross the Washington Ave Bridge, the bridge from which John Berryman leapt to his death. Lovelines wanted to press that smell between the pages of *Dream Songs*.

On crossing the bridge, he would look down at the bank that Berryman broke against and wonder what it was like. Lovelines' professors would talk about Berryman like he was a real

person. It was always easy to forget dead famous writers were real. English faculty would call him nice and not as nice things: genius, soaked with booze, an incredible teacher, a dramatic reader, and so very bright amid his darkness.

The other Shakespeare scholar at the U, the one who survived, who grew old, would say that John, John he called him, John like he was flesh and blood, would get a cab from in-patient rehab to teach class and then go straight back. Lovelines admired that dedication, for he could barely make it as a student to this Shakespeare scholar's class. And *he* had total free will, nothing yet to save himself from. There was always the dream that he too would become a scholar, that he too would sit at a desk in a dungeonesque office and spend eight hours a day for fifty years studying transcripts and writing, and that he might even know more about one text than everyone else in the world. But it didn't take too long to find out he had just enough drive to suck up to Carlson professors and just enough patience to write Instagram poetry.

Another Year Older

Another year
another older

gentleman taps me
on my shoulder

and asks:
“what's it like?”

I say it's the same
only sadder.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: it's hard getting old, folks. I'm lucky, though, to have you all! Take a shot for me.

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#happybirthday #birthday #itsmybirthday #drake #lovelines #loveliness #poetry #instapoet #instapoetry #nationalpoetrymonth #april #dark #goodbye #birthdaysong #gettingolder #sad #birthdaypoem #spring #getlit

A big T@NGENT crew dragged Lovelines to Freehouse for his 27th birthday. It wasn't the best spot in the North Loop, but it was big and quick to accommodate large groups, plus they had a broad menu that could please everyone and they brewed their own beer, some of which was fine.

Katrina used to serve there on the weekends when she was still a social media intern at **BOLD**nes, another up and comer in the ad agency world. Sometimes during the workweek Lovelines would come to Freehouse for lunch and leave drunk because the bartender, Bubba, would feed him free Cabin Still shots. He'd say "on the house, the Freehouse!" and rail a shot with Lovelines.

Not expecting them to show up, Lovelines had invited his boss, preston-pied-piper, and his wife Mary. But sure enough, like good Midwesterners, they were among the first to arrive. Preston-pied-piper, always the dresser, was wearing a spectacularly blue blazer and a tie so skinny you could floss your teeth with it. Mary had on a white dress with pink and blue flowers that looked hopefully toward spring. She'd thrown a deep purple shawl over her narrow shoulders, and for some reason it looked like she was clutching pistols beneath it.

Lovelines had never met her before. Long hair waved down her back like a boat wake; her chin was high and sharp like Kim Possible. Mary's eyes were fucking huge, and she had pinup lips, doughy and a little cracked, beneath a tiny lizard nose.

Most of them were drunk by the gift opening. Lord-beeron got Lovelines a home-brewing kit with two recipes, an IPA and another IPA. “It’s so cool and delicious to brew your own beer,” he insisted. Dezinefrigue got him this 2009 vintage Adidas track jacket that was purple with orange arm stripes, Lovelines’ two favorite colors. Gemma_the_gem’s gift, on the surface, looked like a beautiful hand-bound leather journal. He held it up and everyone admired it, but when he brought it down to open it and feel the paper’s weight, he realized she’d tucked dozens of pictures of herself between the pages. They looked professionally done. His face flushed and he tucked the journal back in the gift bag. She winked at him but no one noticed. He also got a few bottles of booze and a scarf and a Twins t-shirt. Preston-pied-piper bought everyone’s drinks, and Mary wrote a card to Lovelines that read:

Dear Lovelines,

Heard you write poems, so here goes:

What does the writer want for their birthday?

What?

The Truth!

Well, for your birthday you’re getting

old.

HAPPY DAY—Mary&Preston

In his heart Lovelines enjoyed people wishing him well for his birthday, but he was never one to be the center of attention, at least not among people he knew. However, he did enjoy making moody mysterious impressions on attractive women he didn’t yet know.

He decided to go pee in the parking lot and breathe, see if there were any stars out. There were but only faintly; the moon was nearly full and brightly white. Waxing or waning Lovelines didn't care. He thought of Astronomy, a classmate who made his crotch throb, wait no, throat close, who, weirdly enough, on his birthday six years prior, suggested they fuck in the bathroom at a house party, and with everyone right outside the door, which he could not get over get in or get by knowing, who, after he refused, after he gave her a few tongue kisses, never answered his messages again, who later that night found Lovelines' best friend a more willing bathroom partner, and who came out, lightly patted his cheek and said, "Look what you missed" with a smile. Gemma_the_gem had the same energy, he thought.

Mary came out of the restaurant and saw Lovelines out in the parking lot laughing to himself. "How ya doing bud?" she asked.

"Terrifyingly well. You? You leaving?"

"Was gonna Lyft home."

"Bummer! Hey, thanks much for the card, it was great, the best gift I got."

"Naw."

"Well, I guess the free drinks *are* pretty nice."

She flipped him double birds. "Come on," Mary said, "I'll buy you one before I go."

Lovelines insisted she didn't have to, that he was only joking. "Besides," he said, "your husband's already paying for me to drink."

"He's paying for this one too, but if I use *my* debit card it'll look like *I* made the nice gesture."

At that they laughed and walked toward the door. She opened it and held it for him. At Freehouse the bar was positioned close to the entrance. The T@NGENT group was in a private

room, up a few steps in the back of the restaurant. Mary and Lovelines could hear them back there causing ruckus; lord-beeron was shouting jokes with his accent, and gemma_the_gem was screaming laughter.

Lovelines let Mary stand at the bar, it was busy and he felt aware of how close his mouth was to her scalp. Servers pushed past him and he tried not to touch her. His eyes followed hairs from their roots down her back.

She turned around. “What do you wish for?”

“You choose.”

Bubba the bartender was backing and noticed Lovelines. He barely made eye contact and started pouring out Cabin Still shots for the two of them, and one for himself. The bar was too busy to say cheers so they all three raised the shots and downed them.

“What was that about?” Mary asked.

“Oh just an old friend.”

“You’re like Tommy Shelby or some shit.” She grabbed two Kolsches another bartender had poured them and handed one to Lovelines. “Cheers! Old balls.” Her big eyes went downcast when she drank and Lovelines had to look away because his face felt hot. She pointed to the beer “I went light, figured this wouldn’t be your last.”

“Sure hope not! Want to head back to the group?”

“Not really. Already said bye.”

“Yeah. Me neither.”

“Let’s go outside.” She pushed through the bar area and held the patio door open.

Lovelines found a place for them to stand near the beer brite tanks. He asked if she wanted to see something sort of freaky, and showed her his Instagram poem from earlier that day, “Another Year Older.”

“Whoa,” she said, “Just like my card. Great minds dude!” They high fived.

“This is normally when I ask what your handle is, so I can follow you.”

“Oh, I don’t have one. I don’t do Instagram.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, I did in college, but I never posted and wasted time scrolling, so I said fuck it. Plus, don’t you think we’re too old for that shit?”

His eyes went big and blank as he stared over Mary’s shoulder, through the windows into Freehouse.

“Easy. I said I don’t have Instagram, not that I killed your dog!”

“Huh?”

“What are you looking at?” Mary turned to look through the windows too.

“Sorry,” Lovelines said, “I just saw my ex. Didn’t think she was still working here.”

“Ahhh, got it. Well we’ll hunker down out here.” She put her hand on his stomach and pushed him behind the brite tank a bit, so they were mostly obscured from view. He looked down, and then smiled and they clicked their beers.

Lovelines, in his growing drunk, admitted that deep down he had never dreamed of writing copy for an ad agency. He had read the book *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech when he was in fourth grade and it made him want to write poems, and, well, this Instagram thing was the best he could muster.

Mary talked about her teaching job, and her dogs. The dogs were the two ventricles of her heart. She worked at Wellstone International High, which supported English as second language learners—predominately speaking Somali, Spanish, and Oromo. Though she spoke Spanish well, Mary was still working on her Somali. Was the hardest job she'd ever had in her life, but she knew now that she couldn't be anywhere else, and Lovelines knew she was a teacher that students loved, knew already that she had this loving authority thing that you wanted to follow forever.

They finished their beers and Mary ordered a Lyft and hugged Lovelines goodbye, wished him another “happy old-balls day.”

He made his way back to the T@NGENT party, trying to look out for signs of Katrina. Started to think about the meeting he should not have scheduled for 9am the next morning.

Their private room looked less like the business casual birthday party they started with and more like a scummy house party after midnight. Preston-pied-piper stood on the table and practically screamed an announcement regarding the annual T@NGENT retreat. Everyone gave a wavering whoop and gemma_the_gem actually started screeching with excitement. It would be at his family lake house in Eagle River, Wisconsin. He told them he understood that Minnesota was the “Land of 10,000 Lakes,” but Wisconsin's got plenty too, and they're just as beautiful, he assured. They would have a meeting next Friday to discuss rideshares, who was bringing what, and run through the itinerary.

Before they left the restaurant Lovelines asked lord-beeron to put all his gifts in one bag, and he'd meet them outside. In the bathroom Lovelines looked at himself in the mirror. Another year older? He certainly noticed the pores framing his nose looked bigger. He noticed a slight

doughiness in his cheeks. And there was something tired in his eyes, something he didn't have when he first moved to this city.

When he came back to the table to grab his gifts, Katrina was bussing it. She didn't turn around but said, "Before you ask, I got fired. Well, my job got cut. Guess I wasn't BOLD enough."

"Shit. I'm sorry, K."

"Are you? I'm fucking serving again."

"Of course I am." Lovelines sat against the table. "That really sucks."

"So is that the new me?"

"Who?"

"You were outside with someone. Bubba said you did shots."

Lovelines laughed. Katrina glared at him. "No, no that's my boss's wife. Mary."

Katrina grabbed the bin of dishes. Before she left the room she turned to Lovelines: "You know this still hurts. Pretty fuckin bad. I told you not to write about me. I wish you weren't here." She walked quickly out, and Lovelines couldn't decide if he was supposed to follow her, to apologize again. Before he could figure it out she was gone to the kitchen. At least they still had wishes in common.

Much of the birthday group made their way to Cowboy Slims. It was always the favorite among young professionals who wanted to pretend like they had real money. Gemma_the_gem wanted to dance, wanted to grind on Lovelines like they were in high school. During "Dangerous" by Ying Yang Twins, some tall thin man with a chinstrap beard shoved Lovelines in the back after gemma_the_gem used her ass to leverage them backwards into the guy. A chinstrap, Lovelines, thought; we really are in high school. Gemma_the_gem slapped the guy in

the face loud enough to be heard out on the dance floor. Lovelines stood there kinda stupefied, and the guy glared at them, but walked away.

That felt like a natural spot to end the birthday, so Lovelines went to the bar to close out and order a Lyft. Outside, waiting for it, gemma_the_gem found him leaning against a brick wall. She asked him where the fuck he was going, and then pushed him against the brick and kissed him sloppily. Lovelines could feel the brick rough against the back of his head. His eyes were closed until a man shouted “That’s them!” and two guys, one of them the tall thin one from the dancefloor walked up to them. “This bitch slapped me!” The thin guy said to his friend. Gemma_the_gem told him she’d do it again. She took out her phone and began recording a video of the guys. With her phone out, she pointed to a police car across the street from the bar, and said on the recording, *“These two fuckers think I WON’T scream. Y’all better get out. Of. My. SIGHT!”*

They called Lovelines and gemma_the_gem a few more crude names as they walked away. Lovelines let go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

There wasn’t much conversation about it, but gemma_the_gem ended up in the Lyft with him, and he was grateful in a way that anyone would be who didn’t want to spend the rest of their birthday alone. She’d saved his ass, anyway.

In his apartment he set his gifts by the door. Gemma_the_gem licked his earlobes and kept shoving her hands down the back of his pants. While Lovelines didn’t especially feel like having sex, he let her undress them both on his couch. He thought, at least, after they fucked they could go watch Netflix or scroll through their phones in bed. He came, sitting on the couch, shortly after she turned around backward and put her “Dangerous” dance moves to new use. But when he was done, she sprinted to the kitchen and sat on the counter next to the toaster,

spreading her legs with crumbs sticking to her thighs, asking for *breakfast*, which turned out to be short-lived and coffee-less. She dashed to the bedroom and *needed* Lovelines to finish her there. *Wait* she decided, and took her socks off, pranced to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

By then it was 3am and he was really dreading waking up for his morning meeting. *Okay*, he agreed, *but this is it*. She had him lie down in the tub and straddled him, rode him there with the shower spraying her face. She'd let it fill her mouth and then spill the water down on him. After a minute, *gemma_the_gem* stood up and started peeing on Lovelines. He ended up falling asleep at some point before it was over and woke up in the tub freezing in small pools of water and urine, just thirteen minutes before he was supposed to be at T@NGENT for his meeting.

Fuck, Lovelines thought as he pulled on the pants from last night. *Gemma_the_gem* told him to *shut the fuck up*, she was sleeping, but could he *please get Caribou* while he was up. He told her he needed to go in to work, *here*, he showed her his extra key, *lock up when you leave*. *Just give it back whenever*. He'd left his car at Freehouse so he ordered a Lyft. When he got in he asked the driver, "Can you drive fast? I have a meeting."

"Sure bud, what time?"

"Ahh, about two and a half minutes."

"Oh, geez."

Party

It was just
a party

but we both
know that's

not quite

true.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: when you meet someone and promptly get hit by a train...

.
. .

#party #lovelines #wemet #inacrowdedroom #wow #poetry #thinkinboutyou

In the weeks after his birthday Lovelines felt like he was swimming against a current stronger than him, and not far behind him was a dam and he knew somehow that he wouldn't fit through the spillway. No longer could he stand to listen to lord-beeron and dezinefrique talk about which album just dropped, or what GQ said was the style-staple of the season. He didn't want gemma_the_gem to keep messaging him to close the blinds and make sexy silhouettes in the light Meeting Room C's projector.

@gemma_the_gem: *gimmeee dat diq*

@gemma_the_gem: *now.*

@gemma_the_gem: *loooooovelines y u no anser?*

@gemma_the_gem: *y u make a girl miss lonelyhearts*

@gemma_the_gem: *i still have ur key u know dumass*

@gemma_the_gem: *i wont use it but pls just fuck me.*

@gemma_the_gem: *shoulda let those boys beat ur ass*

@gemma_the_gem: *u kno I wont always be available, right?*

@gemma_the_gem: *one day someone gonna fuck me good and love me good*

He'd been sick before, but not like this. He couldn't focus for more than ten minutes. He checked Instagram constantly. Sex with gemma_the_gem was like that: a hopeful surge, the pure elation of minor feedback, a moment of clarity, and then the emptiness until the app was opened again. Really, he just wanted to talk to Mary. He searched for signs of her on preston-pied-piper's profile. Lovelines considered calling Katrina, asking her to get back together. How did she know that he liked Mary? How could she tell? Could she? He knew, now that they were done, that he

didn't love Katrina, knew that he was right to break up with her. But at least she could provide him with an emotional connection; at least he could talk to her, even if he had grown tired of everything they had to say. He knew what everyone knew: conflict is attractive up to a certain point; conflict is passion; conflict kept them together for the last few months at least. But he wasn't sure there was anything left to fight about. Lovelines texted Katrina to get coffee and she ignored him.

The approaching retreat began to appeal to him simply because it would provide a change of scenery. Something to do outside of the T@NGENT office and his Instagram feed. In some part that he tried hiding from himself he was hopeful that maybe Mary would even be at the retreat, though she'd never been before, and preston-pied-piper was pretty intense about "keeping it within the team."

When T@NGENT got the itinerary and packing list, they all whooped and hollered and after work that day they scrambled to pack their bags and buy the food and booze they were slotted to bring.

Dearest T@NGENT team,

Preston-pied-piper cordially invites you to his family lake house at 125 Little Bass Lake Road, Eagle River, Wisconsin for the weekend of the 29th to the 31st of May. Of course you can use some paid time off for the following Monday, 1st of June, for recovery. Attached you will find the T@NGENT reTREAT Itinerary. Thank you for your dedication to our incredible team; we couldn't ball this fucking hard without you. —PPP

T@NGENT reTREAT Itinerary:

May 29:

*5pm-unpack, grab drink
6pm-bigfuqqing bbq
7pm-team building 1*

*8pm-sunset pontoon booze cruise
9pm-fire, live set from lord-beeron & whitevansstan
SLEEP*

May 30:

*8am-breakfast w preston
9am-team building 2
11am-waterskiing/beach time
12:30pm-pontoon to Lumpy's for lunch
Free time until 4pm
4pm-team building 3
6pm-all team potluck
8pm-sunest pontoon booze cruise
9pm-fire, live set from wiccangel, julie-wed, & joniver
SLEEP*

May 31:

*8am-breakfast w preston
9am-team building 4
10am-cabin cleanup
11am-sadsappy bye byes*

Team members: *julie-wed, gemma_the_gem, nastyn8, lord-beeron, joniver, lovelinespoet, wiccangel, broadripple-lit, preston-pied-piper, dezinefrique, whitevansstan, pink-cady.*

Trip

Let's take a trip
we can go far,
truly, to
 the edge

and when we
get there we
can fall off
 the ledge

and take a little swim.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: excited for a little fresh air on vacation this weekend, hope everyone is enjoying this weather!

.
.
#lovelines #loveliness #lovelinespoet #trip #vacay #vacation #swimming #theedge #romance
#love #lovepoem #summer #summerpoem

By Saturday afternoon Lovelines was ready to be alone. He was tired of being cornered around the cabin by gemma_the_gem, with her lips parted and her eyes drilling him. He was tired of lord-beeron and dezinefrique, completely wasted, forcing shots down his throat. He was tired of all the team building and everyone on the team, all acting like drunken robots following algorithms and using cookies to sell their bullshit. Becoming clear was that none of these people were very cool, but they all wanted to be, desperately.

The lake house was gigantic and ugly, apparently designed by a contemporary of Frank Lloyd Wright. The wall facing the lake had floor to ceiling windows. There were 9 bedrooms, 5 full bathrooms, 2 half baths, 2 kitchens, a dining hall, and “wings.” *Fucking wings*, Lovelines thought. Someone said Hitchcock had filmed something at the property. Felt like that kind of terrifying. But the grounds were incredible. The grass stretched out on a small peninsula where a statue of a man Lovelines assumed was Jesus pointed out into the water. There was a simple boathouse with a deck wrapped around the top and a few docks jutting into the lake. Spaced every fifty feet or so were tall pine trees that provided just enough sun and shade.

Lovelines tried to wake up before everyone and walk down the dirt roads with a cup of coffee. Preston-pied-piper beat him awake, but didn't ask him for help with breakfast, just filled him a mug and kept working. On Sunday morning Lovelines thanked him, said this place was incredible. Preston-pied-piper told him it was no problem at all, said it was a shame that it didn't get used more, people only came for the Fourth of July.

One Road

You ever heard the one
about the road not taken?

At a station, midway between
where you've always been

and

where you've always wanted to go,
you idle with both blinkers on.

The tank is full, so whichever
way you choose you know you'll
get

all

the

way

there .

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: do you ever feel like you make the same bad choices over and over? I think it's time to make a change, and I'm going to start today. Hbu?

.
. .

#change #changes #lovelines #roadnottaken #robertfrost #poet #poem #poetry

On Sunday everyone left in a big caravan. He got lucky that dezinefrique and lord-beeron wanted to listen to some concept album that leaked over the weekend and wiccangel got their hands on.

Lovelines had never heard of the artist. He didn't feel like driving all the way back to

Minneapolis in the caravan, so he pulled off at the first gas station to fill up and get some gummy bears and a cold coffee.

He realized he was dreading going home. Dreading work, dreading Minneapolis, the people, the cars, the busy bars, the screaming neighbors. He wanted to stay here. Stay in this town, by the lake, in the woods. He wanted air and wanted something in the air that wasn't there.

He got in his car and pulled out to the road. He flicked his right blinker on, west, back home. A car went by. Another turned in to the gas station. Lovelines turned left. East. He was going back to the lake.

Lovelines decided to stay in the boathouse. The doors all had codes on them, just the address number: 125. He didn't want to stay in the house, it was such a monstrosity, would just make him feel small. Anyway, the boathouse had the deck, a small bedroom, a kitchen, a toilet, and a long, dark wood floor that kept the light ambient all day. He could shower in the lake, he decided. T@NGENT, like many hip companies, had unlimited PTO, but he'd never tested the waters. Unlimited is good, he thought, when you have no clue what you're doing.

Surprise

Some surprises are bad
like

you'll never figure out why you're here.

Some surprises are good
like

that's okay because I'll show you.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: sometimes, when you're searching really hard, and about to give up, you just have to keep going. I've learned this the hard way. Be patient, good things will come.

.
. .
.

#goodthingsarecoming #patience #poetry #lovelines #surprise #goodsurprise #justwait

One late morning the following week, while Lovelines was lying under the sun in the lake house yard with *The Shakespeare Requirement* spread next to him, he heard the gravel in the driveway crack like knuckles. Panic surged in him, what if it was Piper family? He thought of running, but his car was in the driveway so he would be found out one way or another. He crept to the side of the cabin to look at who it could be when something jumped right into his crotch. He let out a yelp and realized it was a dog. It ran around him wagging its tail and hanging tongue. The dog was light brown with a white star, a thick pitbull with a head like a hippo and an ass like Man o' War. Lovelines squatted down to love on the dog and read his tag: Gerald. That sounded familiar. Another dog came around the corner, tags jingling. This one was taller and thinner, lighter in color with white dipped paws and a winter nose. Looked like a lab, but sleeker, prettier. The dog stared at Lovelines and approached slowly, nosed his ear then trotted off to the lake. Lola, he thought and realized who had just arrived. Lifting himself from the grass he walked with Gerald around front where Mary was pulling a big backpack from her car. Lovelines didn't see Preston. He didn't know what to do or say so he asked, "Need a hand?"

She dropped the backpack and said, "Fuck!" Turned to Lovelines. "Jesus Christ you scared the shit outta me." Gerald trotted over to her expectantly.

"I guess that makes us even."

"How so?"

"Well I heard your car. Thought I'd have to make a swimaway."

"I was wondering whose this was." She motioned at his car. "No one's ever up here."

"Well, yeah, Preston said so. That's why I'm here. I guess I should apologize for the B&E."

“Nah don’t be sorry, I won’t tell. I’m doing the same thing. Spend most of my summer here. Help me grab my shit.”

Lovelines walked over and grabbed a bag in each arm. He began to carry things to the cabin but Mary said, “This way” and started toward the boathouse.

“Aren’t you staying in the...?”

“No. Too big and freaky.”

“Oh well, I mean, I’ve got my... well I’ve been sleeping in the boathouse.” He felt awkward, like he didn’t want to give it up but he knew she had every right to it.

“Don’t blame you”

They walked in and Lovelines set the bags on the counter. He turned to go get the rest, heard Mary mutter “Smells like a dude in here.”

When Lovelines closed the trunk to Mary’s car he read her bumper stickers: *Planned Parenthood, Obama - Biden, Bernie for President 2016*. He wondered how those went over at a cabin like this.

Lola came trotting over to him and walked at his side, head cocked to look at him. Smiling, he told her she took after her mama, to which she yawned and trotted back down to the lake.

In the boathouse Lovelines set down a cooler and the rest of the groceries and went to the bedroom to begin packing up his stuff. Mary had opened the doors and was out on the deck over the lake. She came in and asked him to help her throw together lunch.

They dug out romaine hearts and spinach and radishes and cucumbers from Mary’s CSA share, and farmstand cherry tomatoes from town. She pulled everything else out to find some

bleu cheese from a small dairy farm in Thorpe she always stopped at on the way. Asked Lovelines to slice the radishes and cukes.

“I’ve got smoked white fish here somewhere,” she said. She set 5 loaves of Brake Bread from St. Paul on the counter. They put together salads and ate them with fish and sourdough out on the deck. “Wanna beer?” Mary asked as she walked to her cooler and pulled out two Surly Helles.

They cracked them on the deck and tinked cheers. Down by the bank the dogs were wrestling and splashing in the shallows. Mary and Lovelines admired their joy.

He tried to get going after but Mary asked if he wanted to go hiking, she knew a great trail, and the dogs needed to burn off some stored up car-ride energy. Lovelines agreed. She drove the crooked lake roads, through dense pine and birch forest, told him he could pick the music. He scrolled through her playlists, clicked shuffle on “grl pwr.” Kacey Musgrave’s “Follow Your Arrow” came on first. A text from Preston³ popped up, *did you forget your toothbrush*, but Lovelines pretended not to see. Each dog had their head out a window, Lola on the left, Gerald on the right. The afternoon sun cast crystal chandelier fragments of light across the road and Lovelines said, “It’s so surprising here.”

“Surprising?”

“Well, you think nothing ever happens in places like this. You think the city is where all the action’s at. But, really, in the city you just start to ignore all the small, slow things, all the subtleties. Here you slow down, find out there’s more you need to know.”

“Damn, dude. Gettin deep.”

“Sorry,” Lovelines laughed awkwardly.

“I know exactly what you mean.”

The next song came on, “Me and My Dog” by boygenius, and Mary cranked it, sang the whole thing. She had an unpolished, but appealing voice; couldn’t hit the high highs and low lows, but her pitch was near perfect and she had a roadhouse rasp. She even added an ‘s’: *Just me and my DOGS and an impossible view.*

Lovelines gave her a golfclap at the end. The dogs looked at him with their tongues long and happy. “Wow that was...”

But Mary cut him off when the track changed, “shhh, this song FUCKS.”

“What is it?”

“Pull Up, by Abra. *Told me you like me you was in trouble the moment you said it.*”

They pulled into the trail parking lot and Mary put it in park, but kept singing along, “*Said I’m crazy YOU AIN’T SEEN SHIT YET.*” The dogs’ tails were thumping the back seat. “Whew,” she said when it was done, “that song makes me want to *do* something.”

They got out and Mary threw on a small daypack with water. The dogs sprinted ahead on the trail: Gerald stopped to lift a leg on trees and bushes; Lola grabbed sticks until she decided there was a better stick and upgraded and repeated this process every few feet. Lovelines asked how Mary decided to name them. She explained she always loved that song “Lola” by the Kinks, but realized as she got older that it was probably problematic, so now she tells people she’s named after Lola Bunny, who is wicked hot and a total baller, after all. She had that energy. “Don’t ever call me Doll’,” Mary said in Lola’s voice. As for Gerald, well she just had a soft spot for cute old men, and that was such a cute old man name, and of course she wanted him to live forever, so Gerald it had to be.

At the end of the trail there was a picnic table littered with seed shells; Mary walked over and set the pack on it. “Watch this,” she said. She reached in the pack and grabbed a handful of seeds.

“What?”

She shushed him and stood motionless with her hand stretched out in front of her, palm up and open with the seeds resting on top. Lovelines watched.

After a minute he was about to say what again, but then a small bird appeared on Mary’s hand. She smiled.

“Where’d it come from?” he asked, amazed.

“The trees, dummy. Chickadees.”

He watched more closely and another one sped from a branch to Mary’s hand. Lovelines stepped toward her and the chickadee flew back.

“Here,” she said and dumped the seeds in his hand. “Try it.”

Lovelines stood like she had. Not long until one landed on his hand, but he recoiled and dropped the seeds. “Wait! Did you think about bird flu?”

“Nut up, toots.” Mary grabbed more seed from her pack and they both stood arms stretched. Lovelines got used to the sensation of the tiny birds pecking at his hand, even closed his eyes and tried to really feel.

Bird Flu

Are you gonna tell him

(

how many times
you landed in my

hand

how it felt to be
kissed from the
tips

of tree branches
seeds littered like
proof

on the ground
and just two
feathers

)

or should I?

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: don't be afraid of the bird in your hand. Feed it!

.
. .

#lovelines #lovepoem #bird #thebirdinyourhand #feedthebird #poetry #love #poem

Mary had the windows down and it was close to evening so the air coming through was cool and perfect. The dogs were curled up in the back and sometimes Lola would lift her head and sniff at something Lovelines and Mary would never smell.

“So what are you doing about work?” Mary asked on the drive home.

“I don't know. I guess I'm just, I'm taking off right now? We have unlimited PTO as I'm sure you know. I just dread going back there. I don't know. I don't know if I, even, like can right now.”

“Then don’t. You can stay. Stay and write, I think it’ll do you good. I’ll show you this room in the house with the sickest desk I’ve ever seen. Write there. Even if you write shit the desk is beautiful.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. We could use the company. After about a week we get lonely. It’s, like, I want to be here alone until I don’t. And vice versa.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

She turned up the stereo. Some trippy lean voice was reverberating and then The Weeknd repeating the words “Don’t Apologize.”

“Hey, Mary.”

She turned the music down.

“Thank you. I appreciate you offering to let me stay.”

“Hear that pups? We got a sucker to pick up your shit!” She rolled the volume all the way up and started warbling to the song: “IT MAKES ME SMILE, IT MAKES ME SMILE, ‘CAUSE I GOT IT!”

Sledding

Hey

you decide to sit down

and

damn if the sled ain’t
already sleddin’

and

you have trouble not

thinking about walking
back up the hill, how
hard all that gets

and

you're really trying
to enjoy this
 this
 this
falling.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: sometimes we just gotta hold on and fall.

.
. .
. . .

#lovelines #lovepoem #poetry #love #poem #falling #sledding #hey

Mary woke up with the sunrise every day and let the dogs out and made coffee and texted Lovelines to come down from the house to get breakfast. At about 8am she'd take the dogs for a walk and tell him, "Go and take a shit on that desk."

If he still had steam at noon, Lovelines would stop writing. Lunch and dinner were his. The least he could do. And he did them with pride, with a bit of joy even. He had been finding little decorative baskets and dishes in the house, and carried them down to Mary and the dogs. He'd fill them with some cheese and bread and raw vegetables, sometimes cured meats rolled to look photogenic. If he went to town he'd look up recipes and buy the necessities, bring it all home and silently, carefully prepare full meals.

In the afternoons they'd all four go kayaking, or drive to a trail in the national forest, or go fishing off the dock (Mary was teaching Lovelines how, and the names of the fish). At sunset, Lovelines would mix up gin and tonics or brandy old-fashionedes depending on how warm it was

out, and they'd grab blankets and go below the boathouse with the dogs, get on the speedboat and idle around the edge of the lake, watching the fish jump and listening to the loons sing.

When they got home he would mix more cocktails and Mary would play music on her portable speaker. She loved to dance and was showing him simple steps. Sometimes she'd play old country tunes, sometimes Prince, her favorites were "When You Were Mine," and "Sometimes it Snows in April," or she'd thump Alan Kingdom, Lizzo, and Doomtree. Lovelines had a touch of rhythm but zilch for formal training so it was a slow go. They had fun just moving around the boathouse with the night air coming through the screen doors. And he always did all the dishes before going back up to the house. Always a simple reset.

June went by like that. Mary would talk to her husband most evenings, and Lovelines tried to obscure where he was to anyone who might have cared. Mostly it was just gemma_the_gem texting at late hours about coming over, at times even sending selfies from his bed with a pouty face, she still had his key after all. Or dezinefrique and lord-beeron would ask if he wanted to go out; it was unclear if they missed him or his paying the tab. A few client emails trickled in. He'd answer them all in a morning, Sundays usually, at a little diner in town. Sad, he thought, that he could do his job for the week in about three hours. It was good for him, though. The reception at the lake was terrible. He didn't spend much time checking Instagram. He only drank as much beer and wine as Mary.

And then he began to feel himself slipping. He knew what July meant. More than anything he wanted more days here, more Mary. He wanted a Fourth of July out on the boat at night, with a cocktail, under the stars and the fireworks, wrapped together in a worn sleeping bag adorned with wood ducks, the dogs spooning their cold barefeet. So soon he'd have to leave, go

back to Minneapolis. He'd have obligations, explanations. So, like anyone who senses the end of joy, self-sabotage was what he did.

One night, June 30, while Mary was reading a book and Lovelines was shallow frying ground steaks with a mushroom and bourbon pan sauce, he looked up and said, "Do you ever worry people, like, consider you the definition of liberal elite?"

"What the fuck kinda question is that?"

"Well, I dunno. I mean, like, your husband's family is rich as fuck, you donate to Planned Parenthood and the DNC and you volunteer at food pantries and animal shelters and you buy local food and ethically sourced clothing, you save your cooking oil and hang dry clothes and teach in the worst public school in Minneapolis and support local Somali women who're victims of domestic abuse, you have a place like this, a 3000-square-foot house on Lake of the Isles, your husband drives a GLK and you were fucking friends with Prince."

Mary let out a sinister little snort and took a big drink of her beer, avoided Lovelines eyes. "I don't think that list makes me sound so bad."

In otherwise silence, "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore," strummed along as a minute passed. She spoke again: "Listen, I got lucky. I couldn't give a fuck about what you think about what I do. I got lucky and I'm trying to make it easier for other folks to get lucky. I do my best.

"As for why you're trying to piss me off, well, I don't know. I understand you have to leave soon. Maybe that's stressing you out. But I suggest you think about what you say while you're still here." She stood up and set down her beer.

"Now, before I change my mind and punch you in the dick, come here and two-step to this song, and don't say a word unless you're singing along."

He looked at his feet, wandered over and moved his mouth for *sorry* but Mary lightly slapped his lips, and so they drew hands together, shoulders tight, nodded out the rhythm in sync for two measures, then took off to “Yes I Guess they Oughta Name a Drink After You.” The two of them stepped and stepped and step step stepped and stepped and twirled and stepped and stepped and step step stepped their way over the dark wood floor. Occasionally the boards made deep creaks beneath their paired feet, but the wood grain, thick and woven around knots like black holes, felt solid, felt like they had lasted and would last. Lovelines knew that Mary didn’t care whether he liked what she liked. He knew if she wanted to do something, she did it. If she wanted him to do something, he did it. Love for Lovelines was obedience and effort. He hadn’t known this before.

Later that night they took a blanket out on the dock and lay on their backs looking up at the sky. Flitting bats made the stars look like they were flickering and even so close to midnight there was faint light hanging above the western tree line.

“Minneapolis is great,” Mary said.

“Yeah?”

“Christ, I fuckin’ live on a beautiful lake.”

Her voice sounded weak. Lovelines looked to her and saw tears pooled in her eyes. He pretended not to see.

“But, like. It doesn’t have this. I guess I mean: you can’t have everything.”

“Damn, dude. Getting’ deep.”

Mary laughed and smacked his leg. “Come on, I’m tired.”

They followed two sleepy dogs up into the boathouse. Set their empty drinks by the sink. Brushed their teeth, Lovelines in the kitchen, Mary in the bathroom. He grabbed his sweatshirt and made for the door, said, “G’night,” when Mary came out.

“No.” she said. “Sleep in here tonight.”

No one spoke, but Gerald whined from the bedroom. Mary turned and walked in, and Lovelines followed.

“On your bed,” Mary said to the dogs. Gerald leapt off and snuggled on his right away. Lola stood up and stared at Lovelines for a few seconds, and then she stepped slowly into a stretch off the bed, and then settled in her bed.

Lovelines and Mary reclined, and she tucked his arm behind her head, put her hand on his chest. “Can I ask you something?” she said.

“Shoot.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“Are you sure?”

“Would I ask you if I wasn’t?”

He used his arm to draw her mouth to his. After a long time kissing, Lovelines said “I want to fuck you so bad.”

Mary recoiled like a duck filled with steel shot. She started crying.

Lovelines left without doing the dishes.

Goodbye, Joy in July

It’s nine with
the sun just
setting,

the waves just
waning,

the clouds just
filling.

And this felt like
the l o n g e s t day

so far. So why

did I orbit my mouth
and swallow it
early.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: “Alexa, play “My Stupid Mouth,” by John Mayer.

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. .
.

#mystupidmouth #gotmeintrouble #lovelines #july #heartbreak #summerpoetry

On the way back to Minneapolis Lovelines stopped at the same gas station that had been his turning point just a month before. He bought a pack of cigarettes, but didn't know what kind to get because he didn't smoke. “Surprise me,” he said. And the clerk, with the savvy of a server upselling in a high-end restaurant, placed a pack of Parliaments on the counter and rang them up at nearly \$10.

Ripping off the plastic he thwapped the pack on his palm like he'd seen people do. Realizing he didn't have a lighter, and not wanting to appear even more foolish, he looked in the glove compartment and found a small pack of matches. It was from The Freehouse, probably from way back when Katrina worked there the first time, and he'd visit at lunch. Those were good times, he thought and believed.

#despair #darkness #lovelines #halfandhalf #coffee #blackcoffee #blackandwhite

Gemma_the_gem started spending every night at Lovelines' whether he'd asked her to or not, she still had his key after all. Sometimes he'd be passed out drunk on the couch with the record arm still clicking on the label, and she'd come in, wake him up to have sex and then graze whatever takeout he'd gotten for dinner while he fell back asleep. One night it would be El Taco Riendo, the next Karta Thai, the next Blue Door pub. He let this go on for the same reason he had a Facebook account, or still subscribed to newsletters: often enough, any indication that there was a world out there, that there was something in it for him, was enough to pass one moment into the next.

And how could he complain? Gemma_the_gem didn't ask of him more than he could give. Just that he be in one place at one time each day. Just that he not tell her things she did not want to hear. Just that he exist. And how hard was that?

Robbery

You walk to your mother's for lunch one day—
a nice day. A masked man sprints by but
stops when he sees you, says: "hey,
here's a million dollars" and runs off.

You never realized how heavy a million dollars
would feel. Two cops run up, ask you
if you've seen a bank robber, ask if you've
seen a man with a million dollars.

Your eyes betray you, look down and then up
into theirs. They take the money and
lock you up in jail. You call your mother
and tell her you'll be late for dinner.

In your cell, considering your circumstance,

you wonder what you held that day.
You wonder if a million dollars for one
minute makes you a millionaire or a romantic.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: did I have what I think I had? Let this be a parable.

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. .
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#millionaire #romantic #lovepoem #lovelines #poetry #robbers #stealinghearts

On July 13th Lovelines woke up late. Gemma_the_gem had already left for work. When he checked his phone he had a few Instagram notifications and texts. One was from a 612 number that he didn't recognize. He felt a silly, random desire that it would be Mary. And it was.

Hey, could you do us a huge favor? Want to watch Ger and Lola next week? Sorry it's last minute, our other person bailed. Plus, they miss you. Let me know!

Emotions cycloned through him. It wasn't the best text he could receive from Mary, but it was far from the worst. Lovelines felt elation and gutwrench and something like hope.

Yes! Of course, I'd be happy to. Just let me know when you're dropping them off.

Mary brought the dogs over in a rush. They were on the way to the airport and she said she wrote all the instructions out, and just text her or Preston if he had questions.

Lovelines said, "Can I kiss you?"

Mary looked at him like she knew this was coming, but that she was still annoyed that it did. "Dude, no. Look I'm sorry about what happened, that wasn't right of me."

"I'm not sorry."

Bending down, Mary said goodbye to the dogs. When she left Lovelines knew he'd just been an ass, but he also knew he'd be one again if given the chance.

That afternoon he called the landlord and said his keys had been lost, asked if they could change the apartment locks. The building manager showed up within the hour and swapped them out. “Don’t lose these ones,” was all he said.

Each of those mornings Lovelines took Lola and Gerald to Uptown to walk around one of the lakes. He was still sort of taking PTO, sort of working from home. It seemed like no one really needed him at T@NGENT, and so he didn’t ask for more than he thought he should.

Some days for lunch the three would sit on the shore of Bde Maka Ska’s eating seafood from the Tin Fish, or grab their favorite burgers on the patio of Burger Jones. Though the dogs were large, Mary had trained them to be calm in restaurants and stores, so Lovelines liked to bring them in to Magers and Quinn Booksellers, where he always found used gems. It brought to mind the bookstore in James Salter’s short story “Bangkok.” Lovelines would pretend he was Hollis, and throw glances at the door, waiting for an impeccably dressed seductress to try and tempt them away from their simplified life. He never wondered why he so often simulated his life. Never asked why he lived in books or on the internet instead of the spaces his body occupied.

And on Gerald, Lola, and Loveline’s favorite days they’d walk around Lake of the Isles and eat brunch out front of the Kenwood, and when they finished they would go into Louise Erdrich’s tiny shop, Birch Bark books, where all the employees knew Mary and the dogs, and where they’d get homemade treats and play while Lovelines read the staff picks and stacked titles at the checkout, always happy to spend more than he intended. Was hard not to feel calm there, hard not to feel connected to Mary, connected to Erdrich and all of her genius, connected to all the Native writers and artists carefully selected and represented in the store, connected to all the potential in himself.

The Saturday before Preston-Pied-Piper and Mary returned Lovelines took the dogs to Minnehaha Falls because he wanted to take a walk up to the river so they could swim, and then let them play in the park before settling in for some music and fish and beer at Sea Salt, the only-open-in-the-summer restaurant in the pavilion next to the falls.

A trail ran along both sides of Minnehaha creek, where the falls feed into the Mississippi River. At the end of the trail there's a small, arched and wooden bridge that crosses the creek to walk along the other bank. A few people skipped rocks against the Mississippi's current, and on the bridge a man about Lovelines' age strummed a guitar with his shirt tucked in. Lovelines took the dogs to cross the bridge and make their way back to the Falls. When they passed the man he turned and said, "Is he coming?" Lovelines looked blank and the man said, "Sorry, I'm nervous." He leaned over the guitar to pet the dogs. "Sorry, my boyfriend, I'm about to propose. Did you see a guy with a photographer?"

"No, sorry, I didn't. They could be on the other bank."

"S'okay! Whew I'm nervous."

"I bet! Good luck, I mean."

"Can you do me a favor? Can you tell me if this song sounds corny?"

"Uhhh," Lovelines wondered what to do if it did. But he said sure.

The man cleared his throat and sang:

*Didn't know how to be someone I liked
until I followed you to Red Wing
and we square danced through the night
in that tiny town so filled with love
for the way you moved your feet,
and I may have had two lefts but
I already hoped you'd never leave.*

*It's three years later, you're still here,
And though I've learned how to dance*

*and how to let go of my fear
I hope you'll hold both of my hands
As I get down on one knee
and ask you "will you marry me?"*

"It's lovely. Really." The man thanked him over and over, said he felt better having rehearsed it. Lola, Lovelines, and Gerald continued walking across the bridge when Lovelines stopped and turned; he said, "Congratulations. This is a good day." On the trail along the other bank, they passed a man with a photographer trailing him. Lovelines could not help but smile at them. He wanted to give away his power.

They made their way back to Sea Salt, and Lovelines scouted out a seat from which he could still hear the music.

Mentor

Took this long
to realize the

reason your
mentor is better

than you is
because you

look up to
your mentor.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: growth means you recognize yourself as worthy of your own admiration.

.
. .

#selflove #poetry #lovelines #lovelinespoet #mentor #mentorship #growth #loveyourself
#loveyourpoetry

Bluegrassy music muffled by happy summer patio chatter rested on Lovelines and the dogs and they all three wore smiles. Gerald and Lola got all sorts of approving looks and shy children hoping to scratch their ears. Lovelines was drinking Bauhaus Sky Five and munching fried calamari and the pairing was hitting a spot he forgot he had. And then there across the patio, walking with a number and searching for a table, was his first poetry instructor. His first instinct was to look down, but a day like this, with the grass green and the bluegrass music, the sun low and the temperature perfect, people asking to spend lives together, the falls falling and the skinned knees not hurting, Lovelines said to himself what the hell and smiled, held his head up.

This particular poetry instructor, Vivian, was the first of his teachers at the U to get him to come to class. He even visited her in office hours. She wore these elaborate and colorful headscarves and walked with her chin angled upward and kept bees and knew famous writers by first name. Lovelines had never wanted to succeed more for a teacher. Vivian recognized his attentiveness in class, and one day she mentioned that there was a reading at the American Swedish Institute he might like to attend. He thought of it as a bit of a leading offer, so he eagerly agreed. The whole thing made him nervous because he'd never been to a reading so he begged his best friend to come with. They wore jeans and baseball caps to such a lovely building.

When Vivian entered the room she smiled at him and sat with writers she knew. Lovelines couldn't help feel disappointment, though when he looked around there were no free chairs close to him and his friend.

The reader, a local poet of national renown, had spent a year in the basement of the museum, reading old Swedish village records and tales, and translated them into poems. Only

thing is he didn't know a lick of Swedish, wasn't even Swedish in the slightest: he translated purely on sound, which Lovelines had thought sounded pretty easy. But when he read, they were vivid, breathful poems, and when the audience stood to clap, Lovelines stood with them.

There was a little reception afterward where well-dressed older folks shook the poet's hand, got his books signed by him. It was then that Lovelines noticed Vivian was shouldered right up to the renowned poet, and in fact, when he looked closely, they were holding hands, and when he looked even more closely, they had rings on their fingers.

The upshot was Lovelines and his friend left quickly and he scaled back the office visits and emails to Bridget and guarded his poetry more the rest of that semester.

And there at Sea Salt, walking right behind Vivian, was her husband, the renowned poet. He was carrying a toddler with lime green sunglasses resting lopsidedly across their head. It took Vivian a moment to recognize Lovelines, but when she did she waved her husband behind her and they mazed their way to his table. "Can we sit here with you?"

"Yeah, of course, how are you?"

"We're good! You? Jeff, this is Nate. He was a student, wow, what six or so years ago?"

The poets shook hands.

Their toddler asked, "Are these your dogs? Can I pet them?"

"They're my friend's! This one is Gerald and this one is Lola. And yes! They'd love for you to pet them."

When Lovelines check his phone toward the bottom of his beer, gemma_the_gem had sent him a bunch of messages.

@gemma_the_gem: *ummm...*

@gemma_the_gem: *why can't I get in*

@gemma_the_gem: *what did u do*

@gemma_the_gem: *u fuckin ass.*

@gemma_the_gem: *can u like, b a decent human*
@gemma_the_gem: *whatever u know ur poems suck ur dicks tiny and i.m.done.*

Peace on Dirt

another name for
earth is
dirt

another name for
love is
hurt

another name for
peace is
work

another name for
myself is

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: nothing is perfect on this holy dirt, but I love you all just the same.

.
.
.

#loveyou #iloveyou #poetry #lovelines #lovelinespoet #peace #love #dirt #work #loveeveryone

Later that night Lovelines took the dogs to the Audubon Park and let them off leash so they could run, wrestle, and burn a bit of energy before bed. It was getting dark but there were still a few birds for which Mary would have the names chattering above them. It was clear enough to see the brightest stars making their way into the sky. These were good nights, the nights that Lovelines would never be able to really write, to make real except in his memory.

Lola treed a squirrel and Gerald followed, looking at her looking up. Watching them, seeing their personality every day, Lovelines learned how much Gerald admired Lola, how much he relied on her guidance, how much he loved her. And of course he could see Lola loved Gerald back, but it was a different language: hers was a love of protective distance, a love of show and not tell, a love that said I'll let you be but I'll be right here if you need me.

When they both had eliminated, Lovelines cleaned up and called them to him. "Let's go home and read some new books!" he said as he leashed them. He promised he'd read them any parts with dogs out loud.

Inside Lovelines poured himself a glass of Tempranillo and put on a favorite reading record, a limited press from the local funk band, Pho. Before he opened the book, *The Feast of Love*, he checked his phone, opened Instagram. As of late he'd been looking through preston-pied-piper's profile constantly for pictures of Mary, so the first post on Lovelines' feed was of the two of them. Preston-pied-piper had on a perfectly tailored cream suit, and Mary was wearing a sleeveless dress in the palest yellow you can imagine. Their skin looked rich and dark against their outfits. They were both grinning hugely, glasses of wine in hand on a rooftop at sunset with the river Arno slinking below and behind them and those perfect bridges. Beneath the photo, this caption:

@preston-pied-piper: TL;DR alert! SO thankful for his woman, this city that means so much to us, to our history. Not one for hyperbole, but I could not feel LUCKIER to love such an incredible person, someone who puts the world before herself, and gives and gives and gives. Well, I wanted to do something special for her. When we first studied here we used to walk to school together across Ponte Vecchio (old bridge), the only one Hitler didn't bomb, and Mary would admire all the tiny jewelers lining the bridge. Adorable old men would beckon her in, let her try on rings, clasp necklaces around her, 'bellissima! Va bene,' they'd say. Of course back then we couldn't afford to buy anything. But earlier today, while we were walking, reminiscing on that bridge, I told her to go try on anything that really caught her eye. We wandered a bit until she found this delicate necklace. I don't know how to explain it, or why we feel this way, but something about it just felt like it represented everything between us, and I know we will never

forget today, this city, or the love we share. Swipe for a picture of a beautiful smile and a beautiful necklace!

Lovelines swiped. Mary was wearing the new pendant and a face that looked like the one she had on the kayak that day when Gerald flipped him and Lovelines into the lake trying to chase a duck. She looked exactly how Lovelines wanted her to look, how he wanted her to look at him. Felt like a drain plug had been plucked at the top of his cortex and dread was slipping down freely into his entire body. Tears stung his eyes, and Lola lifted her head to look at him.

Best Friend

I get sick and shit
the floor. Rosie
comes over

and tries it.

Rosie gets sick and shits
the floor. I
come over

and shout at it.

She's my best friend
but I am not
hers.

@lovelinespoet: dogs truly are incredible.

.
. .
.

#dogs #dogpoem #poetry #lovelines #ilovedogs #lovedogs #mansbestfriend #bff

The next morning the wine was gone along with half a bottle of rye. He never made it to bed.

Gerald came wandering out into the living room and set his slobbermouth next to Lovelines. “Okay Ger,” he said as he sat up. His eyes felt like his brain was trying to expel them from his skull.

“Lola.” He called, but she didn’t answer, stayed in the bedroom. Lovelines got up to pee and then went to the room. Lola was lying facing the window; she ignored him. “Lola, we’re going out. Wanna come?” Nothing. “Okay, breakfast when we’re back.”

He went again to the living room, past a squeaky toy and their favorite tug rope. Gerald was gulping water. “S’go Ger.” They walked out the front door, past the collar and the leash. Lovelines opened the door and Ger and his muscular rump trotted out in front. Somewhere Lovelines remembered reading a Hemingway metaphor that compared a woman’s breasts to a racing boat, which never could make itself clear in his mind, but if he had to try he guessed Gerald’s booty would maybe be a frigate or fluyt.

Out in the parking lot the sun was sharp and Lovelines forgot his shades inside. He made a kissy noise, “Gerald. Right here.” Gerald slowed down for a moment. They were walking to the Audubon Park. A few kids were kicking a soccer ball. A few more, belonging to phone-glued parents, played on the jungle gym.

A dog, a border collie or something, lay at the foot of one of the parents. Lovelines and Gerald got near the edge of the apartment lot with the park just across the street. A few cars were going by. Hanging out the the parkside of a car coming from the left, from the north, from death, was a barky dog which saw the collie in the park and started chattering. Gerald heard but couldn’t see them. “Stayyy,” Lovelines said firmly. The car passed and revealed the collie, now standing and staring at Gerald and Lovelines; the parent was still on their phone. Lovelines took a fraction of a step forward. All it took. He looked right and was about to say “Wait!” but Ger

was already running, trying to play with the dog in the park. He nearly made it across, but a bumper and tire crushed his butt. Spun him round and into the curb. A loud shriek and then some quieting cooing.

After a moment of shock, anger flooded Lovelines. At everything, everyone. Angry at the stupid fucking dog barking out the window. Angry at the goddamned phonecentric owner in the park. Angry at the border collie. At the car that hit Gerald. Angry at Gerald for running. Angry at himself for being drunk. At himself for being so fucking stupid, bringing him out without a leash. Angry for thinking he could be untethered.

He rushed to Gerald. The woman who hit him was getting out with her hands on her mouth and tears in her eyes. She kept saying “I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Gerald was crying gently with his head up on the curb. There wasn’t a lot of blood, but his legs looked pretty mangled, no shocking angles, just not quite right. Little bits of gravel were stuck to raw wounds on his haunches. Lovelines was crying and afraid to touch the dog, afraid he’d hurt him more.

“I, I, I think he needs to go to the vet,” the woman said with a whimper.

Lovelines ignored her or didn’t hear. He whispered in Gerald’s ear that this was going to hurt, and then scooped him from the road, letting his head rest over his shoulder, cradling his hindlegs lightly, trying to shift the weight to Gerald’s chest. Gerald was letting out low, consistent whines. Lovelines loaded him up in the car and went to go get Lola; he knew she’d help though he didn’t know how. He just hoped she wouldn’t hate him. He knew Mary would.

Broken

For bones go swimming
For glass get the vacuum

For screens buy a new one
For teeth see a dentist
For cars call AAA
For communication step back
For sobriety go to AA
For trust say sorry
For hearts go drinking

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: why do I break everything I touch?

.
.
.

#broken #brokenheart #brokenlegs #lovelines

At the vet office the prognosis was basically that Gerald's legs were fucked. He would survive all right, but he would need the assistance of K9 Cart doggy wheelchair at the low price of \$355. Of course they were going to have to do some surgery and rehab and he'd have to learn how to walk again, but they should be able to sort it out and make him right. They gave a low estimate and a high estimate, and required the low as a deposit; it was \$5,643.39, the high was double that.

Lovelines texted Katrina. She was serious, good at taking action. He said he was in a predicament. That he'd fucked up. That he needed help. Katrina ignored him.

Sorry

For a fleeting
moment
you can
look right down
one row of corn—
among thousands.
That's your
only chance
to say this.

Please take a ride with me—
through the fields—
and listen.

—Lovelines

@lovelinespoet: sometimes you just need to nut up, toots, and say you're sorry.

.
. .
.

#sorry #lovelines #poetry #imsosorry #onechance #fuckup

Pacing in the parking lot of the vet, with Lola looking at him through the car window, Lovelines called Mary. It went straight to voicemail; he didn't know whether to leave a message and by the time he decided the beep went off to start recording so here's what he said:

Mary? I want you to listen. This is really hard to say. I have some bad news. Well, it's really bad news, but it's also, sortof, in a small, small way, good. It's two-part news. I'll get to it. Okay. So this morning, when I woke up, I was taking Gerald to the park to go potty. I didn't grab the leash, well, because I mean he does so well with me, he's been doing so well. I guess, like, I should say right away, Gerald is alive. He's okay. He's not okay, but he's fine. Sorry. I should've started with that. Well, Gerald ran across the street to play with a dog in the park, and, well, I

don't wanna make it sound like it was his fault, but well, he ran and a car came and hit him in the hindlegs. I guess I really should've started with 'I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I fucked up.' I, I, well I haven't been exactly well since I came back from the cabin. I got pretty low for that week, and then you asked if I could do this and I didn't know how to feel but I just knew I needed to see you and feel close to you and this seemed like the best way to do that, and you know I thought I was doing really well with them, and I was, I really was we have been so good, but I messed, I got really fucked up last night. I saw that picture of you so happy with Preston and I don't know what I thought or expected but I didn't handle it well and I drank, like a lot, and I woke up without a coherent thought in my brain and I always think everything is going to be all good. I never learn and to see Gerald like that hurt me so deeply and I can't imagine what you're gonna feel when you hear this. Lola won't even look at me, she just rests her head over his neck and ignores me. Anyway he's getting surgery tomorrow to set the bones in his legs and I'm of course going to pay for it and then, and this is hard to hear, he's probably going to need to walk with a K9 Cart for at least a while, maybe forever. That's like a dog wheelchair. Oh, it's telling me my time is almost up I'm sorry Mary, I messed..."

The line went dead. Lovelines threw his phone at the ground hard. It sounded pathetic hitting the pavement, hollow almost, almost like there was nothing to it. The screen crinkle cracked into a rough ugly mess. Lola had gone to the other side of the car and wasn't looking at him anymore.

He picked up the phone and got in the driver's seat. "We have to go home without him tonight," he told her. "Just a few days. He needs some rest." Lola yawned. Lovelines read somewhere that, though people think yawning dogs are cute and that it means they're tired, it usually means they're uncomfortable.

His phone was useless. The backlight would turn on but he could not see anything through the glass, and he couldn't touch it without slicing the tips of his fingers. "I need a drink. Do you want a beer?" Lovelines looked in the mirror. Lola was watching a bird out the window.

Forward

On the kitchen table
I spread out one
thousand tongued
pieces—

Today I tell myself
I will put this life
together day and
night—

When the picture
comes home this
me is gone, gone
forward—

—Lovelines

It was around happy hour and he drove them to Surly. They walked out into the large yard and he got a Helles. A few people awwed at Lola as they went by, making their way to a far corner where some empty picnic tables were grouped together. When he sat down Lovelines dipped his pinky finger in the beer and let Lola lick it off. He reached for his phone by instinct but remembered he left it in the car, it being so cracked. Instead he had to watch the people, listen to the noise. Lola lay down.

There was a family sitting around a fire pit. Children. Maybe three years old and six. The older had the younger in their lap. Mom and dad were sitting across from them, taking pictures. The kids were smiling like it hurt, but the parents were smiling like it never could. A few people

played cornhole. Two of them looked like a fresh couple, he could tell. They were on the same team, which meant they were standing 27 feet away from each other, but they could not stop staring and smiling. It was that sort of summer thing where you could have sex in the morning, the afternoon, and at night and still want to pay too much for breakfast the next morning. There were two older women sitting at a picnic table, one holding a small terrier. They were leaning close like they were saying something not to be repeated in polite society. The one without the dog was much bigger, and looked gleeful at the details. At another picnic table parents and what looked like a newly minted 21-year-old son lifted their beers in celebration. A cheeseburger sat neglected by the father's elbow. A large group of women were sitting by a different fire pit. Maybe from a sorority or just a work group. There were eight of them and they were too loud, happily didn't care.

Lovelines felt an overwhelming urge to know these people. There had been times, of course there had been times, everyone has times, when he wanted to die, to not exist. And in these times he wanted to forget everyone and everything he knew, and learn people again. Maybe then it will take some more time time to get back to this point, he'd think. He wanted everyone at Surly to take him home, get to know him, learn everything about him so he could learn about them, and then maybe it would be years, maybe even decades, until he felt like this again.

Lovelines downed his beer, and he and Lola walked out to the car. Back at home he heated up some leftovers and put on a Sufjan Stevens record. Lola had curled up on the couch and he sat down next to her, began feeding her some of the rice from his plate. "I'm sorry, Lola."

That night she slept in bed with him. She never did; she knew the rules. But he had no qualms with her breaking them. He would never understand why she did him such a kindness, but he sure cried when the mattress shifted under her warmth.