



After months of endless searching, I've finally found the perfect spot to sit and sketch. It's on the top of the Bank One building, just west of Johnson Controls headquarters in the center of town. In the morning, when the sun is rising over Lake Michigan, the shadow from U.S. Bank's giant skyscraper drapes over the smaller, wider Bank One. I have thirty minutes to draw before the sun blinds my eyes and I have to turn away from my object of desire, focusing instead on one of the more historic buildings to the west.

The object of my desire: at the shore of the lake, almost pressing against the calm blue water, the art museum's metallic wings fold open to capture the morning sunlight. I use my imagination to fill in the details that are too minute to see from so far away. I see feathers, long and white, folding open to prepare for flight. I see an eagle, not a building, its body shaking away sleep and squinting as the sun begins its slow journey west.

For a moment, my mind is away from everything else.

The sun begins to sneak out from behind the large white skyscraper off to my right. I turn west before it can obscure my view of the art museum and fold my sketch pad back to the first page, where a half-finished tower has begun to manifest over hairline pencil strokes. It will be an obelisk, I've decided, since I can't see the third or fourth side of the U.S. Bank building anyway. The individual details of the concrete designs around each of the second floor windows have taken a life of their own and have begun creeping up toward the heavens. It's no longer a building. It reminds me more of a metrosexual H.R. Giger design, as if I've summoned the soul of his long-lost innocent twin brother.

What if only the most gothic buildings existed, and everything else in downtown was gone? I imagine it would look a lot like medieval times—a serfdom, with the towers standing tall like castles, surrounded on three sides by the poor who cash their paychecks at Potawatomi Casino.

I don't continue sketching right away. My vision is unfocused in the direction of the western skyscrapers. I'm thinking a lot of a girl named Shelley. It's a fantasy, really, my mind playing out the perfect conversation for the next time we talk. In these existential delusions, I always have something ready to say. And the girl always says what I want her to. Nothing ever goes wrong. I suppose it's a testament to my character that I'm caught up in fantasies that are focused on the pessimistically inevitable 'not interested' talk rather than the more optimistic sex scene.

This line, this vertical line that's supposed to connect the eastern face with the northern face—I can't finish it. In my sketch, the building doesn't have four sides. It has three instead, coming together at the top like a pyramid. I trace the outline of the sea maiden carved into the north face over the murder of crows from the east face. I darken in lines from both images, solidifying something entirely new, something more from my imagination, a beautiful long-haired siren floating upward with hundreds of wings and a mermaid's tail.

There isn't anything I can't make this page do. The white space has no rules, no barriers. I can take what I want from the real world. I can leave what I don't want. I can take all the love and the good things and the blue eyes that reflect only the good moments. I can erase all the letdowns and cold shoulders and broken hearts and phone calls never returned. I can draw the two of us sitting atop this building. I sketch a hard line of interest along her brow when she asks me about myself.

'What do you do for fun?' she would ask.

Me: 'Draw. Sketch. Paint, once in awhile when I get ahead in bills.'

I would draw her smiling, the genuine kind that wrinkles her cheeks. 'I would love to see some of it sometime. I love looking at artists' work, maybe because I'm a little jealous of their talent. I was never good at drawing.'

What's to be good? That's the beauty of the canvas: the freedom to make your own reality. You can create whatever you want, and if you don't like it, you can crumple it up and throw it out.

I try to think back to any particular moment with any particular girl where such beautiful prose managed to escape from between my lips. All that comes to mind is one girl, Mandy Hemingway. Two months when I was most happy, most in love with a girl who would look at me late in the night while we were lying in bed and bite her lower lip and tell me how crazy she was about me, and I would feel my heart speed up; I would kiss her, always, after she said it, feeling my eyes get hot and wet so that I would have to close them, but not for too long because I didn't want to miss her—I think I knew even then that our time was limited, that she wouldn't want to stay in our hometown after she graduated from the college, because who would, honestly, if they didn't have to? To live in a town with no concept of 'career' unless you were a carpenter, a town with no sense of purpose other than to entertain the tourists passing through?

I would have stayed with her wherever she went, but the last conversation ended with what amounted to little more than a clever riddle.

Her: 'I would break your heart.'

Who says you didn't already? In retrospect, the mind thinks so much faster. Thinking back on that last day now, I can imagine a thousand things that would have been better than 'Please.' Twenty-twenty hindsight is a cliché, and yet I've found that it works so well as a keystone for my life. To have known then what I know now, to have been able to notice the little warning signs, the questions she asked about what would happen when she graduated, the less frequent calls during the week ... Euphoria drowned out all reason and logic.

I return to my sketch and notice that one of the angles at the top is all wrong. It's asymmetrical to the others, converging too quickly so the western face is distorted and obscured. My nagging pessimistic side is already telling me to abandon the sketch and start anew, just as it's done in recent days with this new girl. It hounds me during the evening, getting stronger with every night that goes by and she doesn't return my phone call. I try to say it's only a protector, a raindrop of reason drying on a plain of obscurity, trying to shield me from more heartbreak.

*Raindrop: 'You've been through this bullshit enough when you lived in Dodge County.'*

'She'll call. She's always just so busy working the closing shift.'

*The whole point of leaving Dodge County was to escape these same old traps. You said so yourself.'*

'I can't just give up right away.'

*'You don't deserve this much heartache.'*

There were obelisks in ancient Egypt before anywhere else, meant to represent the gods and serve as a home away from home for them during their earthly visits. The position of each god in Egypt depended on what particular belief group was in power at the time. The Ennead worshipped Atum as their chief god. When the Ogdoad of Hermopolis became more powerful, the god Ra took over, first as Atum-Ra and then simply Ra before being absorbed by a later belief group who worshipped Horus.

As belief groups changed, so did the roles of the gods. After the worshippers of Set were disposed, their god became known as a villain and was no longer worshipped as a savior. And while the gods changed, the obelisks did not. Standing still, always, through all of Egypt's seasons, through the years, the residents of the obelisk were the only continuously changing presence.

A god would have demanded perfection for his home, no matter the cost. I use my eraser to carefully fade away the gray pencil strokes of the triangular top. I had drawn them free-hand, which was a mistake because my hands shake too much nowadays to create any sort of straight line. I tear off the last piece of paper in the sketch pad and use its edge as a ruler to create three perfect lines coming together at a tip so sharp it could scrape the a hole in the empty blue sky.

What god resides in this creation? I wonder. Certainly not Ra—for the sun god to claim this sub-par standing monument as his home would be downright embarrassing. But maybe a lesser god, one who's newer to the game and hasn't yet accumulated such a loyal cultish following and is desperate enough to take whatever accommodations he or she can find. I'll leave the obelisk to Set, after his fall from grace, when he first began to absorb all of attributes of the villainous gods, doomed from then on to be remembered as something to fear and despise rather than love and worship.

This home will be Set's, a place of sanctuary from the harsh outer world that has forgotten his heroics, a place where he can avoid the pain of everyday life.

Maybe the gods were on to something. Maybe an obelisk is exactly what I need for myself. A place to reside where I can wall myself off from the harsh realities of the earthly realm, where I can live in perpetual denial of the fact that I truly haven't escaped from much of anything since leaving my hometown to return to the city. Three perfect walls carved out of one giant piece of stone, a monolith strong enough to keep out that little raindrop of reason that's beginning to grow to resemble more of a puddle.

*Puddle: 'It's still a shitty tower, even with the top all fixed up nice and pretty.'*

*'It's not a tower—it's an obelisk.'*

*'It's a shitty obelisk, then.'*

'It's a work-in-progress, and that's all. And what if it doesn't turn out to be an obelisk at all? What if I start to see something creeping out of the design along the windows? What if it's the face of an animal? What if there are more and more and the pyramid on top turns into a rat? What if it's a totem pole?'

A totem pole. A living story, carved out of the body of a Western Red cedar, told through the images of animals, creatures, humans and shapes. The murder of crows at the base could be replaced by one Raven, and above that the shape of a Cat and above the both of them—after their eventual marriage in one of the American Indians' most well-versed tales—the Bear Woman. Or I could tell my own story. I could replace my face with that of a wolf, and above me a beautiful woman, surrounded by the murder of crows. And at the top, to replace the pyramid, my face again, pointed in agony toward the night sky, crying out for the full moon's cold light.

A totem pole. Not a source of religious worship, no matter what Christian missionaries may have said at the time. The pole could just as easily be a warning, something I could place in front of me at all times to let new people I meet exactly what I've been through, what events have changed my life. On the pole, there could be things I would prefer to keep silent about. Let the totem pole reveal my innermost secrets and spare me the torture of having to reveal them myself.

I'll hide inside this obelisk when it's finished. I'll darken the edges of each side so nothing can sneak in. No cracks in the foundation, no white spaces to allow the infiltration of doubt. Waterproof, even in the harshest rain. Even if the second flood washes away every other building in the city, my obelisk will stand. And I'll be inside of it, playing cards with Set who really hasn't turned out to be such a bad guy after all. We'll be shooting the shit and maybe even sharing a few beers and stories.

*Set: 'Did I ever tell you about the time I fought Apep?'*

*'Who's that?'*

*'He was Ra's arch-nemesis, and he was a bad-ass. Get this: Ra's trying to get to the underworld, right? But it turned out Ra wasn't all that tough and he needed a little help. So the two of us head off to find Anubis, but this Apep guy keeps showing up every night to try and stop us. The worst part is that he came every night disguised as something else: one night he's a snake, the next night he's a snapping turtle.'*

*'So what did you do?'*

*'I'll tell you what I did. I killed him every single night. Every night. And we found Anubis and Ra and him got their business squared away and all was well. Until we got back to Egypt.'*

*'What happened when you got back to Egypt?'*

*'Everything changed, even quicker than it usually did in those days. The Hyksos were thrown out of the kingdom, and guess who their god was? Yours truly. So the new rulers started a smear campaign against me. They turned me into a murderer and a queer. Seriously, don't laugh. They said I killed Osiris and hacked him to bits and scattered the pieces across the world. And then someone started a nasty rumor that I was gone looking for Osiris's dick, because that was my favorite part.'*

*'You feel that? Something's outside.'*

Just in time. The puddle has begun to grow now into a river, and I can feel the strength of its current at the back of my legs. Boulders of rationality have begun to slip into the river, enraging the water into a rapid of frothy white foam and loud hisses. I don't want to think about the inevitable and yet I can't make another pencil stroke without letting it slip into the front of my mind.

*'I like you as a friend, and I think that's what we should be,' she'll say.*

How to react? I'll take the high road like I've always done, but I won't beg. I'll never say 'Please' again no matter how crazy I am about any girl, no matter how much in love I've become and no matter how long the relationship has lasted. I'll never look into another woman's eyes and resort to pleading for a place in her life, just a chance to make her happy, to show her I'm not like the other guys. To go out of my way to be with her—I shouldn't have to beg for that.

I darken in the lines of the walls.

I don't want to think about any of this right now. All I want is to sit with the warm sun on my back and stare out onto the city and picture what it would be like to lay in bed with this girl, holding her close to my chest, listening to

her deep breaths and occasional moaning exhale. I want to picture sitting in a restaurant with her, talking and laughing and staring at the color of each other's irises. I want to picture the perfect evening with her, where I say everything right and she says everything I want her to.

Just for a few more days. I'll take the consequences and the heartache and the depression that follows if only I can hold on to this good feeling for just a few more days, without worry, without rationale getting in the way and screwing it all up.

What would a modern Set look like? I sketch a very light outline along the eastern wall of a human body, and when my pencil reaches his neck I let my fingers take over, first detailing the headdress and then the face of a jackal. I keep everything simple, working around the windows, below the murder of crows so that a swarm of black is hovering over Set's head. I draw the river of reason next, flowing around the bottom of the obelisk and engulfing the first few inches of its base. The boulders underwater create raging rapids that send waves crashing violently against the eastern face.

But the obelisk does not budge. And behind it, the river is calm.