

This short work of nonfiction is included in [Out of Step: A Memoir](#), which won the 2017 Non/Fiction Prize from The Ohio State University Press and the 2019 Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Nonfiction.

It appeared on its own, in the following format, in [March 2019 in the Baltimore Beat](#).

Great Basin

My brand new body stretches toward the hills. This valley on the western edge of the Great Basin isn't home, not anymore.

It has been only two days since I've been back in Reno, a town primarily known for not being Las Vegas, and I'm already aching to leave. Here in the valley, where the landscape is all pale shrub and stone from my front door until the desert reaches the Sierras in the distance, I'm trying to figure out why I came back in the first place. A matted Chow barks at every car that passes the fence of this dirt and crabgrass yard. Pickup trucks rest in the driveway, and the driveway across the street, and the driveways down the street. A few years ago, my whole family found themselves marooned here in the Biggest Little City and decided to start calling it home.

The Army offered me about a week's worth of leave before reporting to my first duty station, a small base 5,600 miles away in South Korea. A few lonely soldiers traveled directly to their new lives, but most of us jumped at the chance to go home and show off how much we had changed. That week was nearing its end, so I decided to do my showing off as I said goodbye.

I shouldn't drink. I know this. Not just because I'm nineteen, and fresh from seventeen weeks of working out and eating healthy, and down twenty pounds since I left, but because my family has a history of addiction. And bad choices. My father still smokes something that keeps him up and anxious all night. My older brother has transitioned from breaking into cars to selling drugs. My mother can still sit in front one of the hundreds of thousands of video poker machines in this city for hours at a time, more days than not in a given week.

But tonight is a time for celebration, and celebrations are times for regrets. I clink bottles of too-sweet malt booze with Viggy, another newly minted brother-in-arms who followed me home when he didn't have a rat's nest of a family of his own to return to. On our last night in town before running off to be soldiers, we celebrate our brief return and looming departure. We crowd into a house on the edge of town, a valley north of the city that people are embarrassed to say that they are from.

The night is blurry. Annie, the girl who waited for me through Basic Training, promised her father that nothing unsavory would happen that night, so she goes home before the evening begins its slide. Because she leaves, I stumble into bed with the pudgy and unreserved Alexis loudly enough for everyone to hear as bottles pile up in the crowded kitchen. In the next room, Viggy and a cousin of mine watch and drink as Pearl, the first girl I ever kissed, sleeps with Tabby, the first woman I ever locked bodies with. Then a switch, then another, then regrets, then hiccupped conversations about the Illuminati on the back porch, where the Sierra foothills begin their climb toward the seamless Tahoe sky, before eventually descending into fog-drenched Sonoma wine country, until the land gives way to the endless Pacific, across which we will travel tomorrow, fresh-cut soldiers who

don't know a thing about a damn thing on their way to a new home in the Land of the Morning Calm.

It will remain difficult to untangle this scene. The night is about tongues and limbs and teenage hormones, of course, but it is also about some strange sort of ritual, one that lands somewhere between a sendoff for the doomed, a send up for those who made it out, and a reverence for some role that home believes I have become.

When Pearl, Alexis, Tabby, and my cousin wake up later in the day, they will begin the first of many uncomfortable conversations that begin to repair a night of ignoring all the rules.

Here at dawn though, their bodies are still strewn about a house turned over by celebration, while Viggie and I are concerned only with packing our duffle bags into the back of a car. Though our bodies throb a reminder of the night before, we are able to simply walk away from the fallout unscathed.

As we wrap up and Viggie squeezes close the car doors, I pantomime some final, hungover goodbyes before piling into the car and rolling toward the airport. As morning gold fills the car, and sagebrush and the now-dimmed neon lights of the city flip by, my thoughts are not with home, or the blurry night of mistakes, or bodies that touched, tasted, and penetrated each other. My mind is already pointed west. I'm ready to leave by the time we go. Everyone wishes for a clean slate at some point in their life, and when that wish is paired with the fantasy of escaping poverty and the means to do so, it is particularly arresting.

Goodbye Reno. Goodbye desert. Goodbye history, poverty, life, and Anthony and eighteen years of figuring out how my parts fit together to make a complete person.

A day later, after travel and transfers and connecting with our Basic Training buddies in the Seattle airport, in processing offices, and orders and shuttle vans through a world we've never seen before, Viggie and I part, and perhaps I should have seen this coming: we never really speak again. Viggie doesn't ever really speak to anyone he met the nights before, and honestly, neither do I. I stay in touch in an American soldier sort of way, sporadic emails and brief updates over expensive calls home, but it doesn't take long for home, and everyone therein, to slip from a place to a memory.

In Reno, one is constantly surrounded by hills. The city rests trapped between the Sierra Nevadas and the Virginia Range. It is a desert, tucked in the rain shadow of the mountains to its west. In the valley, one can see the evergreen pines coloring the mountains, but only the muted sagebrush decorates the sand tones of the city. In the midst of this drabness, the city's primary colors are neon and green. The skyline, where one would expect to find towers of office buildings in a city of this size, is made up of hotel-casinos, great monuments to the industry that drives the local economy. At night, they brighten the valley with luminous lines drawn in the night sky. In the end though, not even the shine of capital resists fading beneath the desert's inescapable light. Photodegradation touches everything: billboards and building exteriors, car paint and cowboy hats. Beneath the bastard sun, everything inches toward the wash of the sagebrush. It is a superhuman task to keep anything looking new or clean in the city. To be out in the daylight is to damage oneself.

In Reno, one supports themselves by packing boxes, by building on a line, by serving drinks, by serving skin, by changing coin, by changing sheets. “We’re crossing our fingers for that Tesla plant,” my brother tells me between shifts unloading food in a freezer.

In Reno, one brother gets married and the other has children. My cousin does both. My father sobers up after chest pains put him in a hospital. Tabby finds her dream job cutting hair. Pearl joins the army to get away too, then marries a soldier and has his kid to get out of uniform. Alexis and her squad of children live in the sort of cluttered house that she grew up in. That I grew up in. That I fled. I don’t talk to anyone from home now. Annie, the girl who waited, did not wait long. She met a guy, then a girl, and I met a girl, and a guy, and another girl. We pretended for a while, thought the romantic idea of a long-distance love between a soldier and his girl was worth carrying the weight of being dishonest, but eventually, balancing several lives stopped being worth it. Eventually, she left town, but made it back after a few years in Vegas. Reno is a basin: everything finds its way back to the bottom.

I don’t know any of those friends anymore. I don’t know Reno, or the snow-capped Sierras, or the north valleys, those punchline suburbs of a punchline city. The next time that I stop in town, over a decade later and only then as a pit stop during a cross-country trip, I see as few people as I can manage. I stay as briefly as I can. Reno is a basin, and I am still terrified of being trapped in its earthworks.

It takes a transformation to stay away, but it takes something else too: distance. The same sort of distance writers talk about needing to see a subject or event clearly. Merely leaving Reno gave me the distance I needed to believe that I could leave. Not only to leave the sagebrush and the warm air, but to escape the orbit that keeps people in the city, that keeps people thinking that it’s not so bad on the western edge of the Silver State. There’s a quote from Fitzgerald that I find myself often returning to: “A clean break is something you cannot come back from; that is irretrievable because it makes the past cease to exist.” That is what I was looking for when I left home, and also when I left the military, that vivisection of one life and the next.

I left the military during a particularly cold winter in Washington, D.C. As the snows came down, I found myself unlacing my boots for the last time, and by the time the thaw arrived, I worked for an LGBT nonprofit in the polished Dupont Circle neighborhood of the nation’s capital. The polished surfaces and floor to ceiling windows were the furthest I could get from returning to the casinos and dusty foothills of Nevada. It was my irretrievable break. I did not want to be a bootstraps story from Reno. I wanted that Anthony to cease to exist. I wanted to be a historyless figure with only his future ahead of him. Only joy, only shine. Brunches with mimosas. Business travel. Happy hours and keeping eyes open for the next big break.

So when my colleagues spoke about the past, over overpriced drinks in bars where all the shirts have collars and all the pockets have business cards, I spoke in ambiguities. I passed as someone who belonged by mimicking, just as we all do on occasion. That is how you dress for visitors. That is how you dress for drinks. This is when you are honest. This is when you are not. I aimed to be a blank slate, a Standard American success with no history and no heritage.

Reno leaves a stain though: imperfect manners and teeth, a constant state of apprehension about what I should and should not know. Tattoos that demand long-sleeved shirts. I notice when my

measures of success get counted as “settling” by those who grew up expecting Ivy League success. I stand out here, or, at least, I am convinced that I stand out. The rules are different here, and I’m learning them mid-pitch.

Here even the horizon looks different; the sun rises in the east, over the sea, the origin of that brand-new golden light of morning, instead of a light that comes and goes behind the hills, the walls beyond which the rest of the world moves forward.