

Eventually Everything

by Gabriel Sage

From my back, lying on the only corner of the rug not pinned under the burden of furniture legs, I realize I have stopped writing in past tense. At first the idea seems weightless, an accidental thought hovering without meaning—the chance product of my afterhours-brain meandering promiscuously through late-night thoughts. But then it gains effect and gravity, sits full bore on the forefront of my mind, taps me enigmatically with a reflex hammer. I look up to try and bring the thought into focus, but there is only the dense stillness of the house and the thick inky darkness of unlit morning sticking to the outside of the window. I take a quick mental inventory of my recent writing to test the idea: I find no *was* or *were*, only *is* and *are*. Frowning, I wonder if there is undiscovered significance here and roll onto my stomach, pressing up onto my elbows. Below me, an indentation of matted fibers is recessed from where my body had just been.

To my right, a messy stack of records leans against a small metal rack that is home to a turntable. The record playing is *Either/Or* by Elliott Smith. A black spiraling chord reaches from behind the console and connects to bulky headphones pressed over my ears. I am enveloped in haunting vulnerability and whispering melodies that tear with candor from the stark but ethereal music. I listen carefully to the reverberating tones until the last chord of the song decays into a gentle hum. A soft looping click, not unlike the whirl of moving water, signals that it is time to flip the record. I obey, lift the opaque plastic cover, carefully handle the vinyl by its edges, and lower the crystal stylus softly back into the thin spiral of grooves.

Music resumes and as it does a memory flashes behind my eyes, a moment I haven't recalled in years. In it I was doing almost what I am doing now, only I was fifteen years old and in the middle of a rainy afternoon. It was my sophomore year of high school and I had cut class, as I often did, to buy records at a music store in Venice Beach. I spent my entire pocketed twelve dollars on one still-in-the-plastic-new copy of

Either/Or. I shielded the recent vinyl purchase under my jacket (feeling a rebel as I became soaked in rain). After taking the bus back to a house empty of parents, I sat on the floor of my room. A gray-veined sky dropped water in loud rhythmic heaps against the house, but it was easy to ignore as I squeezed myself into the songs. I closed my eyes and wanted nothing more from my future than to create something as chilling and perfect as what I was hearing slip from the stereo.

A decade and a half later, that enigmatic notion of future has materialized into now; and listening to *Either/Or* closes the temporal distance, inviting me to think about the past and all its grammatical forms. The first encounter I had with Elliott Smith was the summer after middle school. It was memorably hot and I spent most of the time learning to play guitar with my best friend in the sour and musty but cool air of his garage, full of juvenescent certainty. We had a vinyl-strung guitar that was slathered with a glazed orange lacquer and we would pass it back and forth as we awkwardly trained our unpracticed hands to shape chords. We listened to the same few CDs compulsively. I can't remember how Elliott Smith ended up in the heavy rotation, who showed him to us or where we got the hand-labeled home-made CD, but suddenly it was there, and we were mesmerized by the low-fi angelic grit belonging to every track; the piercing lyrics and quiet power that echoed at us like a cannon in a steel tank.

It was (at least symbolically) the inciting incident that opened my hormonal floodgates and portended adolescence. The induction of a sudden bodily awareness—emotional tiers rooted in desires far more carnal and complex than wanting to go run around somewhere or throw rocks at something. That summer I tried smoking pot, dyed my hair black, pierced my ears, and found myself naked in a walk-in closet with a girl. The experimental effects of a pubescent snowball. At the time, I wouldn't have identified it as that, but looking back it is blatantly obvious. It makes sense, you can't see yourself age in a mirror, but find an old photo and everything becomes apparent and unmistakable.

The experience isn't unique. Eventually everything becomes past tense and everyone has a similar story to some degree. That is what happens at that age; you're a kid until you're not. It's *we all live in a yellow submarine* until you hear Elliott Smith harmonize the word *fuck* in elegant melliflence and the clouds part for a javelin of light

and a cosmic hand that reaches down from the sky and passes you a fistful of acne and a surreptitious cigarette.

For me, that also meant a clarity of vision: a post-punk mentality of raising middle-fingers at anything remotely redolent of mainstream and an indefatigable penchant for confronting angst with music. The chimerical reality of 'making it' professionally never at all factored in, and even if it had, I wouldn't have known what to factor. I experienced only pure excitement. Pure possibility. I stayed up all night diagramming guitar chord schematics and spent the next day in school writing down ideas for band names in theatrical fonts. Putting the time in wasn't part of some grand pragmatic plan rooted in axiomatic ideas about hard work paying off. It was unadulterated pleasure, emphasis on the *un-adult*. There was no back-up plan, no expectations yoked to realistic outcomes, no consideration of practicality or sensibility, no preoccupation, no tense of any kind. Just the fervent unconcern that accompanies full, obdurate commitment. I bought a Tascam four-track cassette recorder and set up a living-room recording studio between the couch and coffee table, sitting cross-legged with my guitar, plucking strings until I couldn't feel my fingers. In my hand the little grey level knobs and input sliders on the four-track felt like they were adjusting fate more than volume.

It's late. Late enough that I am purposefully avoiding checking the time, afraid of how late it really is, worried about having to get up early in the morning. I make a few tedious calculations for when to leave the house, factoring in all the possible variables: how much time I will need to make coffee, cut fruit for breakfast, the best route to avoid traffic. I catch myself anxiously remembering an article I recently read about the decline of quality sleep for people in their thirties. I make a few adjustments to the plan. The rug beneath me feels stiffer than it did when I first lay down and I notice a few aggregates of dust under my bookshelf. I wonder where I can find a deal on a felt rug-pad, make a mental note that I need to sweep. None of this is very punk, I think, and laugh quietly.

Another song plays and eventually everything becomes past tense. The low-numbered hours of morning stretch above me dreamlike into the irradiated starkness of tomorrow, and the music from the stereo pulls me backward. Waves of nostalgia crash silently with a pleasant longing and the good-hurt of getting tattooed. I picture myself a

something-teen with a head full of potential band names on the way to a show. One of my first. A drummer from one of the local high-school bands was driving, and little slices of guilt pressed against my temples because I had told my mom someone's parents were taking us. He held the steering wheel in one hand and drum sticks in the other, tapping out paradiddles and flams on the dashboard at every red light. The windows were down and the Pixies were blasting and we stuck our heads into the moving night to loudly wonder where our minds were.

We parked somewhere off Main and walked to a roll-up door that opened to the entrance for The Smell, where the fee to get in is always five dollars. Some crust-punk-garage-noise-indie-experimental band was sending power chords and strange synth sounds through the venue's PA system to a crowd of people with hair of every color and fish-net ensembles moving in a rhythmic circle of fists and high-knees. It felt as if I was being inaugurated into a clandestine scene of sweat and sound and screams. Someone gave me a sip of clear alcohol they had masquerading as water in a plastic bottle. I closed my eyes, trying to arrest the feeling in my mind, knowing that in a few short hours, I would be back home sucking on the memory.

My jaw clenches against a sweet sting.

There was a subterranean creek that ran through my neighborhood, hidden from the street by long, sloping concrete embankments. The water was always thick with green knots of slow-moving sludge, the air heavy with an unidentifiable brine. I was walking there with a friend while stabbing through the core of an apple with a number two pencil. She told me Elliott Smith was playing at the Henry Fonda Theatre and asked me if I wanted to go. I was probably wearing a shirt with his face on it. I don't remember the conversation, and even if I did it wouldn't make any sense. Whatever the reasons were, we didn't go. Maybe someone had parents going out of town. Maybe the tickets were more than five dollars. Maybe we wanted to buy weed and lie somewhere spitting smoke at the sky. In the romantic realm of expectant enthusiasm, nothing is urgent, everything endless.

That conversation happened early in January. Seven months later, Elliott Smith died in his apartment with a kitchen knife in his chest. I never saw him play. When I

heard what happened I was in my living room. The sun was hot edges of light falling around me through the window. I watched illuminated particles hover in the air, noticed a stale taste in my throat, pictured sloping concrete. I was probably wearing a t-shirt with his face on it.

I sit up as the last song of the record plays. The bookshelf against the wall now in view is horizontally stacked with strips of colored book spines. Pressing the headphones into my ears I listen closely, paying attention for signs of life buried within the complicated chord changes—a quick inhale between lyrics, the muted squeak of fingers sliding across steel strings.

Eventually everything becomes past tense. Moments perpetually break off and fall away as quickly as they begin. Just look at a clock, the way the second-hand cuts with twitching consistency. Watching it disappear is easy. It usually happens in enormous slabs, leaving only small, reminiscent fragments behind. A guitar buried in a cluttered garage. A few recordings on an external hard drive. A bad habit of smoking. It's holding on that is challenging—working against the ebb, even as the ground slides away below your feet.

The past can be powerfully co-optive, a force syphoning the present and future with an *ed* that turns live into lived and hope into hoped. It sits behind a glass case so you can look but can't touch. A professor once told a writing class I was in always use the past tense, it's easier. The students all moved their pens to capture the wisdom. In capital letters I wrote: THE PAST IS EASY. Speaking syntactically, I suppose it is. Sentences are simpler to shape under the clarifying perspective of hindsight. The hermetic distance offers malleability and simultaneously concreteness; the awkward comfort and conspicuousness of finitude. The past has a flow to it that can be rethreaded and tied in strategic places. It's easy he told us, just think of something that happened and give it words.

I have been working on a story for a literary contest that is due tomorrow. It is almost done but there is something still missing. I know that if I want to get anywhere with words each submission needs to deliver the refined result of gratifying but laborious

work. To be a writer who successfully publishes is to be consistent and prudent, doused in diligence. It's making time to be at the computer even if that means spending afternoons staring at the wall and scratching my beard for a few hundred words. It's rewarding but it's also a nail-biting challenge of unlikely odds and unlikelier stability.

Earlier today, I walked with my dog down a fire trail that cuts between dense eucalyptus groves looking for final story ideas. It was a fog-filled late afternoon and I could smell the moisture moving between the trees, herby and sweet like steeping tea. I wasn't sure what I was hoping to find; I think I just needed something to do with my body while my mind played with plot possibilities. I had been sitting in my house at my desk most of the day watching the cursor in a word document blink. I made small and unsatisfying changes. My hands would often hover over the keyboard or unconsciously flick a pen in little circles while my eyes shot up to check if anything had manifested in the corners of my vision.

As I walked, the dirt trail hooked into vapory thickets of trees. The ground on either side was layered with a low, dense growth covered in a hoary coat of glinting water droplets. Even though I have submitted many stories before, the stakes always feel tangibly atmospheric. There is constantly a tide of anxiety being pulled by self-doubt and a concern for measurable accomplishment. Every sentence I have written has felt dire, like each one stretched into the future to dictate my life's potential outcome. The words on my page tend to have gravity and heft to them. Even in those rare and wonderful moments when they flow facilely from my fingers, I am desperately aware of their purpose and destination. Small animals in the trees above me scurried with what seemed to be childlike excitement, shaking the branches as they moved through the leafy canopy. My dog lifted her head hoping one would find its way to the ground and I had to tug the leash hard to break her concentration and head back home.

When I got to my house, the sun was just dropping behind a darkening horizon and the structured gray of evening was slowly spreading out. I took out a few records and climbed down onto the rug.

It's too late to look at the clock, my jaw is tight, the album is almost over, and I've been on the floor fidgeting half the night in flooding orange lamplight because I have a

piece I need to finish and I'm ardently looking for any gradient of inspiration. But it isn't the purity of passion that keeps me up now. It's fear. Fear that one day all these sentences will end up packed away collecting dust. Fear that placid comfort will win out over urgency, again. Fear that anything I don't say right now will get lost irreversibly to silence—every unfinished story not submitted a muted knock on the wall of a sepulcher that makes no sound. Fear that this too will become past tense.

Maybe that is why I have been writing in the present. Maybe I need the burning urgency that comes with it. The unruliness and volatility of it. Maybe I am trying to recapture an internal momentum I am not ready to let end with an *ed*; to feel an openness in which undiscovered things are still waiting to happen. Where the present perfect is continuous and the bow is not yet tied. Maybe the past is too convenient and I need the floor to be on fire in order to do my dance.

The record ends and I let it spin and click.

My brown-leather notebook is sitting on the edge of my bed and I pull it down onto the floor. A pen falls from the worn spine. I thumb through it and notice that the sound of the flipping paper is not unlike the whirl of moving water. Almost every blank space is full of concentrated notes. It falls open to a chaotic page covered in mad scribbling; re-worked plot arcs, edited character sketches, marginalia, sporadic ideas for later consideration. I think about how much time I spend placing words here, worrying over every syllable. The corners are furled up at the edges with use. The black ink is smudged from hurried and anxious palms into amorphous Rorschach blisters, and for a moment the blue lines underneath seem miles away.



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