

Zero

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* This essay originally appeared in [Creative Nonfiction #70 \(2019\)](#). Illustration by [Stephen Knezovich](#).

Oh, return to zero, the master said.

Use what's lying around the house.

Make it simple and sad.

—Stephen Dunn

My father helped my sister move out of Richmond. The lease was in his name; the blood on the carpet and walls, his financial burden. He scrubbed with a sponge and a bucket of bleach while my sister gathered her things. She could only take what fit in a suitcase and duffel. A lifetime of acquiring and now, here, at long last—the ineluctable purge of consequence.

She was lucky to be free. Police found gunshot residue on her hand, from the gun that killed her boyfriend—a shot to the head. It was his gun; his fingerprints were on it. There were no witnesses, though neighbors heard them arguing. She spent eleven days in jail before forensics concluded her story of his suicide was *probable*. The landlord, of course, didn't care for science. My sister was being evicted from a loft littered with fragments of death: blood and bone, pipes and syringes. She packed her most beautiful, cherished clothes in her duffel to wash. She left my father on his hands and knees, and took the flight of stairs in the hall to the cellar. While the washer ran, she returned to watch my father clean.

With a fan in place to dry the carpet, she helped my father carry items downstairs to a dumpster in the parking lot. They began by throwing in boxes filled with rusty pans and

dishes and dollar store silverware. Next came broken lamps and dusty end tables; Zeb's collection of sci-fi novels; a garbage bag filled with hunting magazines; a digital alarm clock; a broken toaster. When they dragged the futon down the stairs, they noticed people from the neighborhood gathering: someone had made off with a bent torchiere lamp; someone had taken a box of dishes; someone else took an end table. The toaster, too, was gone. They left a final load of old belongings on the curb, and what they left disappeared in the time it took to climb the stairs again.

My sister excused herself to put her laundry in the dryer and was gone for hours.

Alone in the loft, my father organized clothes bound for Goodwill into piles on the living room floor: men's tops, women's pants, men's shorts, women's coats. He bagged up all the clothes my sister could not fit in her duffel—donations for some other father's child, to be tagged on plastic hangers and sold at a discount. As night approached with humid languor, my father grew weary, his muscles sore. The gravity of the situation sank into him; he needed air. The landlord could deal with the bags of unwanted clothes, the yellow mop bucket in the tub, and the half-empty bottles of bleach on the counter. My father dragged my sister's suitcase into the hallway and locked the door behind him.

In the car with the suitcase, he ran the air conditioner. He pulled in front of the building's entrance, on Grace Street, and waited. A man, scanning the curb and the dumpster, tapped on my father's window and asked if more *good finds* were on their way down. It was July in the city, and my father had been so focused on the task at hand that he'd neglected to hydrate himself. My father gave the man ten dollars to run down the

street to the Sheetz and bring him back a Gatorade. The man never returned.

When my sister came back, she was high as a cloud; her movements slow and oily, her voice a slur of sad euphoria. She slumped in the seat beside my father and told him to drive, *Fast*.

~

When my father stopped for gas in Luray, my sister realized she'd left her clothes in the dryer in Richmond. They were too far to return, and she knew it. With bloodshot, desolate eyes, she opened her suitcase: panties and bras, Zeb's Faith No More T-shirt, and some toiletries. Her journal was there, and a box of love letters to Zeb—a box I'd inherit ten years later when a man named Gary found my sister's body in his living room, a needle beside her.

In the six years spanning my sister's first shot of heroin, at age twenty-four, and Zeb's death, my father had given her everything—his time, his wallet, his heart. There was nothing more he could do but let go. In the car that night, while my sister cried, my father, helpless, put the car in gear and headed north toward our local women's shelter, where he'd leave his only daughter with her one suitcase.

Though he'd learn to find peace over time, he'd never forget the look on my sister's face, back at the pumps, on a road that, for her, could never lead home—the moment she knew, truly, what she'd lost. *I'm afraid*, she told him, *of dying alone*. With his hands on the wheel, gripping it hard, my father stared at the highway ahead; as the lights of cars slipped by in the dark, he imagined a stranger stumbling upon my sister's lost clothes, sizing them up, trying them on, wondering, *Who would abandon such beautiful things?*

Text's Author & Title:

Consider the rhetorical situation. What circumstances bring this text forward? What is its audience?

Explain the author's primary purpose. Inform the audience? Entertain? Persuade? Call for action?

Cite a passage that illustrates the author's message (major point/thought) and discuss it.

Explain the exigence of the piece. What was the underlying motivation for this piece? What is the force real force "pushing" the author to speak?

