

Sean Thomas Dougherty

## Nowhere Near Somewhere

It's true that the heaviest grief carries no weight, moving through us so lightly we can no longer feel the ground. Its sound is the hissing of a wounded balloon propelling haphazardly into the sky. At Andy's pool hall, the young Korean hotshot Raleigh Song Lee leaned over the green felt and pushed the cue with the green tip of his stick, and the white cue ball clacked the red ball spinning it like a planet, like a choreography of suns, a solar system of watch-this-trick-shot cut-and-roll into the far pocket, roll with all the hours Raleigh spent practicing alone in the basement of his home in Meadville, Pennsylvania, as a teenager, spent practicing the art of being alone while wrestling with his ability to stay in the world. Caught in the shadows of adolescent angst, he practiced until it almost swallowed him, and his ability to speak stopped for years, stopped as the ball rolled with the weight of those years that nearly took his life, the way so many lives are almost taken until we find something as simple and repetitive as shelling peas, as putting a ball through a hoop, or knitting loops, or sinking colored ball after colored ball into the deep pockets of a pool table. Pock pock, they fall, nearly silent with a soft percussive thud. I almost floated upward in the unbearable lightness. I watched Raleigh, my young friend, about to leave for graduate school, a half dozen of us out on a summer night to wish him farewell, I watched him sink those balls, and for the first time in months I began to feel—to feel I was going to be able to find the ground. I fell into a pocket of felt. Just a glimmer of good, a good feeling, that began in my gut. I held my cue as I watched, felt its weight in my hands, and knew I had found the way that might lead me back from my long journey against grief and loss. I knew that to finish the walk across the tightrope that stretched over a great chasm, I had to hold onto that cue as if it were my life, as if it were a pole to balance myself against falling.

Against falling. What is the weight of a pool cue? Lighter than an oar one might need to row across a river, the black river, the last river. A pool hall can feel that way: cemetery or sanctuary, so that every bad ass gun-toting

two-bit cheap shark or hustler leaves it at the door, the threat of more than take my money—watch me play. Gold Crown pool hall is a sanctuary, not the old kind one might have seen in big cities in post-World War II America, a place ex-veterans frequented to drink and forget the war, a place where skill mattered and who you were or where you were from meant little. Leave it all behind you, bend over the felt and let the balls roll where they might. The attendant rushing to brush the table afterward, brush the table smooth, brush up the cigarette smoke and the blue chalk dust. No, this is not a dim place, not a bar counter in Havana Hemingway might have leaned over to drink, no this is a well-lighted place. This is the twenty-first century. Muted televisions hang from the high-beamed ceiling broadcasting sports. Screens allowing the novices to lean on their cues and talk about the Steelers game, or the Penguins fighting on ice. The conversation turns and ebbs, and then there's always this moment when no one says a word and everyone is eyeing a ball over his or her bridge. A strange synchronicity of silence. Nothing but the sound of balls banking and clacking. Never before have I felt this sense of . . . unexplainable. No, that's not true.

Basketball, playing my life in schoolyard after schoolyard, rising with the rock, taking the pill to the rim, rocking the cage, the same feeling of the day tripping into night with only the buzz of the street lamps shining on, the red rim of sun setting to rise on the playgrounds on the other side of the world, Chinese kids in Beijing, lacing up their sneakers to rock, and no one ever pulled a gun where we played, from Boston to New York, I can't even remember more than only a fistful of fights that I witnessed on a court, as to fight was cowardly, meant your game couldn't hold count. Meant you were a punk. Meant you couldn't rock the ball. It was rough, there were throw-downs but that often meant you were weak as water. Take it hard and give it back harder. Drip dry your game and come back on another day. Take that beat-down bullshit somewhere else. No, it was high five high-leaping slam or jacked fade away and always talking trash that you could back up with your game—your game could shut anybody up, watch me do what I am about to do, now sit down and wait for nexts. We're gonna hold court all day. And when you arrived at a court where they didn't know you, like in pool, you played a hustle. You leaned over your goofy Chuck Taylors, took your time, tried to look too-slow, too-fat, too-cautious, too-white, before you rose over some chump's outstretched hands, before you took flight.

Aim low and listen for the hard clack or barely heard contact on the soft shooters. Listen for the laughter and the bad pool sharks trying (and making) impossible trick shots on the table reserved for players—just like center court at Wimbledon or the one court at O'Connell park in Queens no one ran on unless you could really hoop, where Bob Cousy learned to tie up his laces. The good pool players drive from miles, cues carried in leather

cases, and every now and then a hustler, a young kid, pretending to know far less than he knows, and the hall's resident kings know they've been taken too late. Fives per game, twenties if you have the cash, and the stories in every town of thousands of dollars on the line. The great ones never miss. The greatest never miss when money is on the line. That is the difference between shooting basketball and shooting pool—the slang itself taken from a place where gamblers would “pool” their bets, the “true” name for all “pocket games” being billiards—the exchange of cash, moolah, cheese.

We never bet when I played schoolyard hoops. The game was everything. Not like in pool: fives and twenties, first one to race to five games wins, nine-ball makes it sweet, the added chutzpah, bravado, breeze that turns the hall game more street than the ball game that wears the street's name across its nubby skin. Pool is a hustle, a bustle, a get-over-and-show-what-you-got, but not too much right away, save a little for when the cash is up. These small exchanges between men, smoking and lifting beers. Friendly or fierce, hustle or home, every pool place has the ching of change between exchanged, some chump, soon to take a man's mortgage payment or his rent. But many pool games, the kind I was caught by, are low-key, laid back, small change, five, ten, maybe twenty a game. Between friends and an occasional “fish.” Hook ‘em with a few early misses, then reel them in slowly, lose five, lose five, win twenty. Then another twenty. You do the math who ends up ahead.

I never played pool as a kid, never learned, not even as a young man; I can probably count on my fingers how many times I held a cue. I lived on the tough courts of northern New England—Manchester, Nashua, Lowell—where we played basketball and street hockey all spring, summer, fall. Then indoors league all winter. Or home in our red brick tenements. If anything, I spent my free time getting high and reading books. Long hours of lazy afternoons pushing the rock up the court until the crew light and the shadows long. Spark a smoke and wait for the streetlights to flare on. Far from the somewhere called the suburbia of my friends in college who could shoot sure pockets. I imagined them pale-faced in their furnished basements and rec rooms. All of them white. Funny—the best pool players I ever met in college weren't thugs or hustlers or movie star gangsters, but white boys from upper middle class homes.

But that isn't the way to learn, I hear Kory say down at Gold Crown pool hall in Erie, Pennsylvania, where I live. Kory is leaning against his stick and arguing that the only way to learn is to play for cash. You concentrate better, he says, if you have something you need to lose. That's why rich kids can't shoot when the money is on the line. They don't have anything to fear.

He looks up at the television above the attendant's register. The Celtics are playing the Suns. Kevin Garnett is posting up and about to spin and

dunk. Like that, Kory says, you don't learn how to play basketball in your backyard. Yeah, maybe you get your jump shot down rattling that rim, but what do you do when the smoke is thick and you want twenty for a round of rum? You think you get that hunger Garnett has without coming from someplace you don't want to be no more?

That's when you learn to shoot pool.

That's when you learn how to fire your gun.

The very best players are the children of hustlers. Like my boy Corey—Corey C we call him, to distinguish him from Kory K—whose father took him to bars when he was growing up. A pint by his side, Dean leaned little Corey over the green felt and taught him to eye the cue.

I was barely able to hold the pool cue, he says.

What is the weight of a pool cue?

My old man was a hustler, Corey says. He hustled everything. We'll be driving by some house and he'll say, I think I robbed that house once.

We laugh.

His old man sells Cadillacs now. Still hustling.

But man, Corey says, when I was small he'd take me to Jack's pool hall downtown and we'd play. He was so patient with me then, quiet, not like later. Well, maybe that was me. My father has a temper, you know. But that's why the game always puts me in a good mood. How many times I tell you these stories? Yeah, I know. When I shoot I remember him touching my hand and telling me how to hold the cue. I remember me shooting and him smiling and sometimes, man, sometimes it's like that ball is rolling straight and true forever.

What is the weight of a pool cue? Measured in ounces. The great ones play, Kory says, with eighteen ounce sticks. Ralph Greenleaf, Willie Mosconi, and Jersey Red, who was named, the legend goes, because the brothers in the all black pool halls where he learned to play in Newark thought the Jewish Jersey boy was black.

I ask Kory, Well, bro, how much does your cue weigh? Kory looks at the long black thin stick in his hand, a little puzzled, eyes the base and turns it slowly in his hands. You know, Sean, I really don't know, but it *feeellls* like eighteen ounces.

The ability to tell the difference in weight by ounces. That's pool. An ounce too heavy and you don't fly, don't drill, don't cut and bank and masse. After work, after working eight hours. Eight hours before eight-ball. Nine hours before nine-ball. Closing the bank, Harry the teller counts his dollars, turns the key, and the long walk down to Junior's Bar and Pool Hall to push the balls awkwardly before someone approaches him to play a game. Nine-ball, straight up, five dollars a game. Counting the bills out onto the edge of the felt the way he spends his days counting other people's money, never off, never a dollar off. Inches, centimeters, precision. Pool is

a game of precision. The right stick, the right cue, the right eye, and yet there are the stories, like Johnny B telling the skeptical men gathered around middle table 6 at Gold Crown about the man he saw in Las Vegas who played blind billiards:

*They'd walk him to the table and he'd lean over and break and he'd listen and he always knew where his first shot was, he could hear the balls rolling. He could judge the distance a ball rolled by the sound. No, sometimes he'd have to ask, he had a partner who would explain but never touch him. But there were only a few times he needed help. No, he cleared the table almost every time, but I swear he missed a few on purpose just to make it more believable. No, I'm not making this up. I'll beat you with my eyes closed if you don't watch it. Yes, yes, he was the Ray Charles of pool.*

I remember once years ago in New Orleans, on the edge of the French Quarter on a night when the moon was a sliver like the lost fingernail of Louis Armstrong, when I was a younger man, my friend Patrice, who I loved as a friend, a writer, who lived with HIV and saw the sunlight in every shadow, she took me to this dive where we sat at the bar and she ordered me a vodka tonic and we toasted the cool wind and the sound of jazz pouring from the piano. The club did not have a pool table and even if it did back then I would not have noticed, I had another stick that balanced my life, invisible, that I did not know I carried, that I seemed to beat myself with. The club was long, a thin room with the bar running all along the backside, occupied by mostly men, white and black, cooled out, many in hip but inexpensive suits and everyone in hats, as if it were the 1940s. There were tables, white-clothed, occupied by couples, young and old, no one looked like money in this place. They looked like the place was born with them in it, some of the oldest men sitting at the bar leaned as if they breathed every note that had been played there—the slight fedora tilt of a hat, a nod of the chin, the little finger tapping. L said, This is the real joint, notice the low cover when we came in? Five dollars gets you a free drink and it goes in the hat. Every bill ends up in a musician's pocket, Patrice said. This is the neighborhood joint where the real musicians come to jam after they finish playing for money.

I drank too much that night, sashayed slow with a woman named Sonia, as Patrice closed her eyes and gleamed at the bar in the staccato pound of the piano. He was a young cat playing, his white shirt sleeves rolled up, leaning over the keys. I was standing on the dance floor with Sonia, this young white bohemian chick I'd met earlier walking through the French Quarter. She was a dark secret, leaning into the music as if she was floating on the thick smoke, when Patrice stood up, walked over, and took my hand and pointed at the door. See him, she said, pointing to an old man who had just entered. Come sit down, she said, watch this.

The place had paused. The kid on the piano turned in mid-chord and stopped, got up smiling off his stool, and walked to the door. This old man,

this old blind man, with a stooped stuttered walk, and he was whispering ahums and thank yous as different people took his hand to touch him. He was dressed in a large gray suit. He looked no more than five feet tall, frayed and weather-beaten, wearing a black fedora that had long ago lost its feather, the kind of man you might see doing his best to dress up while catching the bus with a brown bag of groceries up North in a town not exactly nowhere but nowhere near somewhere, a town like Bridgeport or Lowell or Utica. But there was a stutter to his stooped shuffle, his black shades pointed at the ends, and I saw his cane had a gold eagle for a handle, the kind of cane an African prince might carry or a Hoodoo priest. The bouncer, broad as a gladiator, took his hand after having passed it on to so many, and he and the young piano player led the old impresario to the piano. The entire joint was tight and tense with what was about to happen. I looked at L, awed, and then he flexed his fingers, touched a key, ding ding, F sharp, C, then he leaned into the keys, and bam! A dozen chords churned at furious time, blues, bad old school Bebop, bad as Bud Powell and Dizzy and Charlie Parker and Ella all channeled into the most discordant chunks, as if this was Monk's younger brother. His fingers didn't fly, they weaved, knitted notes, frayed tapestries, his feet pounded the pedals, and the place began to move, and people began to dance, and drinks were drunk, and that old man played for hours until I was so stoned and high on his contrapuntal chords I didn't even know the sound of my own name.

Patrice calling me, Sean, Sean, hey Sean. I left Sonia that night on the dance floor. With her gold hoop earrings and stoned hippie gaze, five foot three of sway, I let her hand go and sat by Patrice and listened, listened to the air become improvisation, smoked my cigarettes and drank while Patrice, sipping water, her cocktail of pills keeping her alive, nodded her head to the unfolding act, as Lorca says, "the baptism of newly created" sounds, notes, feelings, fears.

I didn't think Patrice was dying then, didn't think of her death as that soon, only that some day, long far away from that night, she would be my friend who was dead. But still I felt a kind of loss follow us as we left that joint long past midnight. Patrice took me to her friend Steve's flat, who I didn't know, where I was crashing that night as he was away building houses in Tanzania, and Sonia faded into the candle-lit juke joint that I would never forget. Sonia, we barely spoke just a glance and wave. Patrice drove her Toyota station wagon through the gothic streets of New Orleans, past the late revelers with red and green boas, turquoise and translucent beads, high-heeled shemales and badly dressed bitches, a one-legged woman in short shorts and a crutch, a lone accordion player juking the night with his three-fingered amens. Patrice said then, Well that was something, wasn't it, wasn't that just something. As we pulled up to the white porch of her friend's house where I was staying and I watched her drive away, only then was I thinking that she was dying, as we all are dying,

not knowing how few years she might have left. But she had taken me someplace that night, I learned, as only those who are cool and compassionate and careful can do, those who find what is local and full of grace, she burned something on my chest that night. I slept without dreaming that night, my invisible cue, for a night, put away.

Can a piece of wood salve a man's grief? What was the cross made of? How many brothers hung from the lynching tree? The weight of a man hung from a stick. Weight is slang in pool for your game, your skill. One of the waiter's (weight-terrs) at Gold's is always teasing Kory about his weight. Kory is a big guy, 5'10, at least 200 stout. Why are you always on me about my weight? he asks, touching his belly, his crotch. For someone who doesn't know the secondary meaning, it sounds like an accusation: Kory is fat, a foolish jab. But the guy is a player too, teases Kory on off days when his cue is light, his weight. You gave away too much weight that game, he says. Spotted too many points or balls and got himself hustled, which is rare for Kory, he the consummate hustler, hustling everything all week: pool, nine-ball, poker every other night at the Pinochle club, a dim smoke-filled joint on the west side of town, a room full of blues. Pool halls and blues. The baptism of a broken guitar. Other nights Kory tells us, sipping a Yuengling, I took my guitar out of storage. When I go home, I plug it in and jam. Fuck my neighbors. Robert Johnson playing on the speaker as he talks. The owner of Andy's plugged into Sirius radio, live broadcast from a pool hall in Norfolk, Virginia. I laugh, tell Kory, Man, that town used to be the pool hall capital of America in the 40s, during the war.

No shit, Kory says.

I read this book called *Hustler Days*. I tell him all about Minnesota Fats, Wimpy Luther. Maybe one day there'll be a book about you, I tell him.

He smirks. More likely I'll make book one day or someone will make book on me.

Singing the blues, singing the blues.

After the devil bought Robert Johnson's soul, he went and hung out at a pool hall. The dim surrounded by the lights over the tables, the lean and clack, the percussive whack, the risk, and the desperate note. A hundred years of lost rent. No woman at home. The game on the line and maybe you get to eat today, the addictive combination of something near an art, a sport, and gambling. The art of gambling, the art of hustling, the art of knowing when not to call. Poker and pool the games the devil knows best, himself a gambler. He gambled it all, didn't he, in one great coup-d'état attempt.

There he is, the old white guy in the fedora, smoking a Philly blunt on the stool by the back bathrooms of the pool hall out on Buffalo Road, a smoky joint where the Bosnian and black boys trade barbs in the back. Whatchu got? one asks. His stoned girlfriend on a chair just nods, nearly

falls down. The hipsters in the hall off Flatbush where we went with my friend Bill one cold January night, Lisa and I only a few months' playing experience, all slick-suited sharks and black gangsters playing with black professionals. But then you'd twist your head around the room and there were sweet Dominican couples shooting and kissing on a far table, a couple kids just learning who couldn't throw a rock into the East River, the innocent choir to balance the brazen and brash, the dark and dreamy redeemers.

But the innocent don't matter, the devil says. I let those white men, what's his name—Ralph Greenleaf—think he was the best, playing only white fellas. He's down here with me now, chalking his cue on my tail. I never let him stop playing, and he wasn't a saint. No matter, Greenleaf was no hustler. He might as well have carried a Dillinger as a cue. Pool is no game for angels, no heavenly choir. It's that, Mr. Lucifer says, chewing the end of his cigar and spitting, the what if, the what doesn't it matter who you are or what your skin color is, not like it did, all those Billiard Associations keeping the code perfectly pale even past segregation—but the game itself? Hell, I invented it! Don't look in the books to read all that talk about the British and snooker and it coming from India as if I weren't already long there guiding the British soldiers to shoot the innocent, strapping the holy men to cannon. Long before that, we shot in the taverns against wool-swapped banks, traded revolutionary pamphlets, and pocketed six balls in French basements, and there I taught the unrighteous how to race a rack, so now watch me make five of nine faster than I can play a steel guitar riff loud and leave your ears shattered, leave the room dark with fury, envy, regret, and grief, all the emotions that keep love loose. Look, no one in a pool hall cares about anything except how you can shoot. Look at me, no one cares what I look like when I lean over the cue (except maybe me burning the felt with my fiery red hair).

It's that *possibility*, that's where I come in.

You know why they really threw me out of heaven, because I could blow better than Gabriel, because I could break better than God, because I could shoot better than Saint Michael.

Don't believe the big man when he tells you I scratched the eight in the side pocket. That's what they like to call me you know, Old Scratch.

Hear me dragging my cue against the Holy Wall.

The big man can't handle no cue. He doesn't have the rage to dream and push the ball all day and night for money, for bread. What does he know? What does he know about despair?

To sing sorrow, to let the nine ball left stuck in the jaws. Money on the line. Eight ball in the side pocket just short. There are rarely second chances if you are playing with a player. Sing your blues of excuses after. Let the hustlers talk.

Johnny B, no wonder you lost the last game, you forgot to tie your shoelaces?

Pool is a slow hand, Eric Clapton strumming low, or Robert Montgomery leaning quiet into the slide guitar.

The best players down at the Gold Crown nearly whisper the ball into the hole. Watch them saunter every shot in straight pool, first to a hundred wins, a steady pace, the ball is not hammered in, the ball lisps in seventy percent of the time.

But the jazz in pool is aiming a long-banked amen, an impossibly cut hallelujah, like reaching for an incredibly cacophonous chord. There is Bebop along with the blues in pool, pool is physical jazz, blue-noted as any bar. The hustler's hall of fame, anything seedy speaks a pool hall, goes the cliché. Sometimes true, depends, as any bar. That's where the trouble begins: the liquor the quarter table fought for in the back, like at By the Bay down the block from my apartment in the lower east side of Erie, Pennsylvania, or Milichevski's on a Saturday night, where my neighbor Jaime, a short but powerfully built white guy, keeps missing long shots and showing me his biceps from nine years of blowing—he was a welder—telling me, I snorted too much Oxy before I came, to explain his misses. Blues off Sixth Street along the Bayfront overpass where the best African American players shoot bar pool when they aren't at Gold Crown running tables. Like Charles, a thick hard-bodied man with ten inch arms, nearly Asian-looking, square-jawed, and light on his feet, with a slightly crooked grin, a friendly and inviting face, who during a league game of nine-ball was locked behind another ball three straight times and three straight times I saw reach into a pocket of pure improvisation, geometry of the G-Clef, and triple bank three separate safeties in a row. No miracle there. Just magnificent.

Pool is just dangerous by design. I don't care if they prefer pocket billiards all over the world. Americans are the ones who made pool cool. We made it sharp as a switchblade, bad assed and brazen. For one hundred years, we in the States took it out of the gentlemen's parlor and made it smoky and hard.

Black and white as Bud Powell or Gerry Mulligan blowing with Dizzy Gillespie. Put it on the table and let's go. Pool is a kind of jazz and the cue is a horn, the felt is a snare drum, the cue ball a trumpet solo bellowing the blued notes of the other balls, the quiet hush of a high hat as they fall off the felt. Hear the percussion when you close your eyes, hear the clack and calm. A pool cue is a kind of saxophone, I said to my friend, you carry it in a case the way I carried my saxophone to school when I was a kid in the school band. You weren't ashamed. Kory says, You ever seen a blues musician carry his guitar, and how they name them? Lucille. Sandra. Wicked Pete.

I'm just talking trash. I never met a pool player who named his or her cue. Wouldn't that be something though? Here comes Minnesota Fats carrying Madeleine. But what does the weight of a cue actually command?

Factually, how much does one weigh: most of the pros, yes, handle between seventeen and nineteen ounces, whether they are tall or short, thick muscled or thin. Cues can be light as fifteen ounces, heavy as twenty-one. No one I ever met played with one that heavy or light. I watched Carmen, who has been known as Junior since he was born, a two-decades-time-long-done-ex-con, cooled out white man in his fifties—dark-haired, complacent, quiet, with a radar eye, six feet, and solid built—lift his eighteen-ounce cue and sink so many shots I forgot to count. I was so hypnotized, it was only when he finally missed that I realized what I'd just witnessed. Junior was once PA State Nine-Ball Champion. He won, I'm told, by running seven tables of nine-ball in a row. After losing the lag, his opponent never even had a shot. How many stories like Junior's floating in pool halls from coast to coast? Every hall has its local boast, its best brag. And what does it matter where you play? What city, town, big league, or dusty hamlet. Even the table doesn't have to matter if the mojo is right.

Once, at a bar league game at Otis's on 26th Street in Erie, we watched Kory's Young Guns, these sharp-shooting young white kids, lose to the best black team in town. When both teams arrived, they noticed one table didn't have lights. No one wanted to play on it, when Paul himself, who owns the pool hall and runs the league, called them all out—*a real player can play in a parking lot shooting with a broom handle if he needs to.*

The cue though is another matter. Treat your cue like she is your lover. Never leave her in a cold car alone. Your man. Never treat him bad. But don't go buying a cue if you don't have weight. Don't go walking around with a 300-dollar Joss that you think is going to save your game. Remember Ornette Coleman, the great experimental jazz musician, played all that never-before-imagined-sound on a yellow plastic toy saxophone. Lisa says it best: *You see these boys with their 500-dollar cues and they can't shoot their dick into a drain pipe.*

She leans over the table looking tough and lovely, a tough and lovely little thing. Eighteen ounces in her hands. Nineteen ounces fill my palms. I need the extra ounce to weigh me down. I am light lately. I am floating away. Heavy enough to save a man's life. I've learned this, edging the balls forward, watching them glance and miss and sometimes fall. Heavy enough to stand down the deepest blues. Rack the balls up until the sun drops another quarter into the jukebox. Does it matter who wins? Lisa just shakes her head. I turn to watch Johnny B, the king of trash talking, racking up a game of nine-ball.

What do you say, fellas, twenty dollars a game?