

Dear God,
Please let me write for money.
But more importantly:

To Whom It May Concern,
Please, for the love of God, let me write for money.

Now:

My name is Antonio DelVecchio, and this is a selection of some of my favorite pieces. They are complete, but they are delicate. They, like the fragile tufts of the late summer dandelion, have reached the end of their short lifecycles and are now ready to cast their seeds into the eyes and under the noses of innocent people who were trying to mind their business, trying not to breathe in any seeds, trying to keep their eyes bright and clear of stray pollen. But here I am, the gentle dandelion, casting my writing under your nose, into your eyes, hoping to be noticed amongst the seas of shedding dandelions.

I, like the precious, delicate dandelion have fought hard for my seeds to survive. I have been sprayed by weed killer, trampled by uncaredful feet, told I was “just not that funny, I don’t get what you kids are talking about, like really, it’s not that funny,” by this one workshop professor, but she was seventy-two and hadn’t seen a movie in theaters since *The Graduate*, and she hated the ending so she stopped watching movies altogether, so who cares what she thinks? *The Graduate* is great and so is Simon and Garfunkel, even though Simon was a jerk and Garfunkel was Garfunkel, and both the movie and the music got ruined for me by this one girl who loved it and not me after we watched it.

Anyways, where was I? Oh, right, the crap about the dandelion. Something, something...something about being resilient, etc. Forget it. I hope you like my writing more than you like dandelions.

My selected works are as follows:

- I. *Ascent*
- II. *Washington Square*
- III. *Brighton*
- IV. *Helicopter Leaves*
- V. *London Fox*

Ascent

Plane's taking off. The loudest silence. Keep your forearms on the armrests, fists around the ends. Pick something on the ground to watch. Watch it as you ascend. Watch it get smaller, and smaller. Your girlfriend told you that she always tries to find a bicyclist as she's taking off, how they look like Lego people from up in the sky. She flies a lot. She landed in London almost a week ago. You'll be there soon if you make it. Stop thinking like that. Watch the bicyclist before you disappear.

Mouth "thanks" for the plastic cup placed in front of you, nod your head and press your lips together. Twist closer to the window when a stranger's arm brushes yours. Reach for your phone. Thumb the home button, then slide it back into your pocket without looking at it. Remember it's on airplane mode, that you're cut off. Take a sip of water with one hand, clench the armrest with the other. Rattling. Clench tighter. Twitch toward the phone. Silence.

Take out your notebook. Flip through the coded messages she sent you before her flight. Blank dashes filled in with letters, scrambled then unscrambled, written in black pen. The light bounces off the pages and blinds you for a second. Close the shade half way, making the cabin around you a little darker, yellower. Open it back up. You can't decide if it's worse looking down at the ground or not knowing why the plane shakes.

The worst is seeing the cars on the streets. They look so safe on the ground. They flow and glide on asphalt arteries. They all know exactly where they're going. The people are all so small that they don't even matter anymore. It all looks like one of those old plastic Christmas decorations, the magnetic skating pond that plays electronic carols. The people's feet are stuck to magnets that twirl them around in circles on the plastic ice. You liked to imagine myself skating with them when you were little, but now thinking about it hurts. Thinking about it too much makes it less. Some memories are better left in the past where they felt real — more than plastic. How do plastic windows keep all of that sky out?

Shaking again. Close your eyes. That only makes it worse. Open them. Look out the plastic window. What would it look like to look down without windows? That'd be good to write about. Flip past the codes and dashes and grab your pen. Careful though, don't lose your balance. If you move the wrong way or too fast in your chair you feel like you might fall, like falling off of a high branch.

Stab the paper with your pen. Try to articulate the mountains, the rivers, the oceans, the sky. Jesus, the sky. It's all sky. There's so much sky. Christ, you shouldn't worry about falling to the ground, you should worry about falling into the sky. Slide the notebook into your phone pocket.

But then the plane banks, and you feel like you're being poured out of a cup. You're forced to look out the plastic, but the angle is new. This time it's more ground than sky. The mountains, the rivers, the oceans, all of that green. There's so much green,

so many greens. All of those people, they don't know you're watching. You don't know they're watching you. Somehow you're conscious of them and they're conscious of you. The world is conscious of itself. It keeps ticking and flowing and rolling, and you get to watch it. You get to watch it. The world is living and you get to watch it. The plane shakes and screams, but you're still, and you're still watching. The cars drive and the rivers flow and the skaters spin and the bicyclists pedal whether you're watching them or not. But right now, you're watching, and you've completed your ascent.

Washington Square

The old man sat alone on that old gray bench
Feeding the fat pigeons that pecked at his chest.
Yards away, a man plays Gershwin.
He pounds the keys that startle the birds
That flap to the sky in a cyclone of notes and feathers.
Their wings catch the sun, and the shadows fall
On a little girl popping bubbles blown by her grandmother.
And the player plays on, scaring away the birds
That only just landed back on the old man.
He was covered before, and was covered then,
In a suit of gray.
But with each measure, a bird surrenders to the sun
That is shining down on the little girl.

Brighton

The best picture I have from anywhere in my travels is the picture I took with my once girlfriend in the very beachy town of Brighton. It's an adorable picture. It's a torso-up shot of us standing on the famous Brighton Pier with the famous Brighton shoreline behind us. You can't see the pier under us, so it looks like we're floating six stories above the water. We're both smiling. We're a good-looking couple. We both spent the day miserable in a cloudy town called Brighton.

We'd come in separate groups, both of which consisted of a handful of relative strangers roughly in their early twenties like us, but I decided the coincidence was too opportune for us not to stand together on the shore of the beach on the exact opposite side of the ocean from where we'd come. I wanted to put my feet in the water with her, to feel here with her, to feel here but in some *here* neither of us had ever been to. I wanted to be there with her regardless of whether she wanted to be there with me. I told her to meet me down on the beach by the flapping pirate flag. It was easy enough to recognize.

The rocks on the beach are as big as marbles, and when the tide drags them back to the sea they make a sound like the rain stick you used to play with in elementary school music class. Across the ocean, directly away from me, was the coast I'd left behind. I squinted hard to see what I could see of it. I skipped a couple of flat red rocks toward home. They might as well have been from Mars.

I stood next to my then girlfriend, worlds apart from our home and each other, and skipped another rock. We both had our jeans rolled up to mid-calf. I skipped a third rock. There were nothing but clouds in a town called Brighton, and she cried quietly into swash crashing into her feet. Sometimes your brain doesn't care what side of the ocean it's on.

We were on this side of the ocean because we'd both separately decided to study abroad in London. As far as she was concerned, it was a coincidence, partly convenient, somewhat trivial, mostly not what she had expected. She'd imagined dancing with British boys and drinking tea with British girls. She wanted to live the life she'd seen in the movies. She wanted a fairytale abroad story. I was never really part of that plan, I'd been told. I was told before we left home but it was reiterated on the beach in Brighton.

I skipped rocks because I didn't have to be told again. Every rock I skipped was an admission that I knew this wasn't what she'd expected. Every splash and plunk echoed how my stomach felt when I thought about how I wasn't what she expected either, this girl who'd wanted to find her prince in a semester. Opening my mouth to tell her would only make me conscious of my American accent. Anything I could say would come out wrong inherently, so I did less damage by silently throwing stones.

I went into my trip with no expectations, which was all I could do as someone who had never left home. Everything is different than anything you could have imagined, because everything is so similar to what you already know. I grew up in a coastal town. We walked boardwalks and we played carnival games. We ate funnel cakes for dinner and we skipped a thousand stones. The one thing that was different was that none of those stones were red. I tossed another flat one, and I understood why she cried. She went in with expectations. For all of my good judgement in checking my preconceptions at the gate, I had no answer to her cry for help.

We stepped out of the water and we rolled down our jeans. I cocked back to throw my last stone, but I hesitated, and I looked out at the ocean again. A whole ocean away from my little yellow house with the red front door, and I felt like I was home. If you look out to the sea from the shore, you can't tell where you are on Earth. I liked that feeling, and I slid the Mars rock into my pocket.

We rattled up the rocky beach and walked into the town. We passed small shops selling rocks and tea, and we found our way to a bench in the middle of a park. It was a small gray park, and there were geese. We'd seen geese at home. She turned her head into my shoulder. I wondered if I'd seen these geese before.

She told me about her American friends (most of which she knew from home), how they didn't seem upset to see her leave. She talked about the bars she'd been to and the teachers she didn't like (they were also American). I didn't say anything, but I listened. I thought about how upset I was to feel her leaving me in slow motion. I listened to how her maladies implied, at least in my own mind, my own symptomism, or worse, my being the cause. I felt like the wall between her and her dream, and so I took her back to the boardwalk to meet the people I had come with. They were from all over, and maybe they had made some British friends by now.

She liked them. She cheered up on the Pier, partly because she had to, but partly because she was happy to be with new people. She wiped her mascara stains on her black sleeve.

The day felt like it had turned around. The sun finally did come out. If you don't believe me, you can see it in the picture. That's why we took it, because the sun came out in a town called Brighton. It was the only thing that went as advertised that day.

I found out later that Brighton isn't facing home even a little. It's on the wrong side of Britain. It wasn't even close. But I didn't care. I felt worse about my distance from Sydney, but better about my distance from home. She and I would have some talking to do, some learning about each other, some inspection of ourselves, and some brushing up on geography. But for right then, none of that mattered, because sometimes your brain doesn't care what side of the ocean it's on.

Helicopter Leaves

God, the sun was so warm back in those days. The heat would beat down against the back of your neck while the visor of your adjustable baseball cap would keep the worst of the glare out of your eyes. It never hurt though. Nothing ever hurt back then; not even the occasional practice pitch that got away from coach. Maybe it was just the wind.

Coach was a straight shooter of a pitcher, a thirty year old laser. He had no kids of his own, so we always felt like his twelve adopted sons. He had a friendly but prematurely wrinkled face that creased when he smiled, which was often. Even behind his continuously sunglassed face, you could tell that his eyes were always smiling. He had no hair on his head, so I always imagined that he was so aerodynamic that the wind, no matter how strongly it blew, could never even touch him.

It felt like the wind was always blowing back then, blowing dust, splintered sunflower seeds, and old maple leaves around the baselines and into the dugout, where twelve middle school boys were praying to their personal Gods to let them not be the one to strike out in the sixth. We only played six innings those days. I suppose the officials thought that nine would be too long; maybe they thought we couldn't handle as much as the big-leaguers, but we all knew we could have. Some of us even got called up to play with those older kids. God, they looked like giants back then. At least, that's the way I still remember them.

On that sunny Sunday afternoon, we sat silently on our pew. We were down by one run with a man on second. Two outs. Bottom of six. Our sweat-rimmed caps were flipped inside out and backwards as we stood up in unison to grip the jangling chain-link fence. My best friend Hunter, bearing his Louisville cross, stepped through the cloud of dust and up to the plate. His jaw clenched, his eyes looked to the sky, and he loaded. Whap. Strike one. The other two followed.

The enemy raced to the mound, piling like pigs on top of each other. Hunter sulked back to the dugout, head hung, defeated. One edgy kid threw a helmet against the cement floor. The rest of us slapped the sacrificed on the back.

Coach huddled us up around a shady tree behind the dugout. We knelt around him as he unshouldered his bag of bats and tucked his sunglasses into his collar.

"You know, fellas, that was a damn good game. A hell of a game."

Nobody looked up.

"And that was a hell of a team you played right there." He said with a jab.

The breeze rustled the leaves.

"Listen, fellas, I'm proud of you. No matter what.

He paused for a moment and stroked his bald head.

"We've got practice tomorrow at five, so have a good day at school and then meet here ready to work hard. Sound good?"

A few grumbles. One kid picked some grass and let it fly into the breeze. Hunter and I nodded our heads.

“Good! Go get some hotdogs, troops. You earned it.”

He clapped his hands, shouldered the bag, and slid his glasses back on in one swift motion. The shadow lifted from everyone’s faces as they trotted as a unit to the white snack stand across the park.

Coach didn’t come with us, though. Instead, he trudged to his dirty white station wagon in the parking lot. He popped the trunk with his foot and then heaved the load into the hatch. His phone must have vibrated in his pocket, because he drew it like lightning and listened carefully. He said a few words, tilted his head back, and then slouched as if he were still carrying that bag. He slid the sunglasses from his eyes and slumped onto the rear bumper of the wagon. I saw him from over my hotdog, and it could have been from the dust that his glasses couldn’t keep back, but it looked like he was crying.

I stayed up for a long time that night. It was late spring, so I left the windows cracked in my bedroom. The breeze blew in the cool smell of night dew and the soft chirping of crickets, but my mind wasn’t in that room. I had never seen a man cry before, and it scared me. I stared at the blinking smoke detector and watched the room get darker.

“God...”

Another blink of the smoke detector.

“I think I saw Coach cry after the game today. I’m sorry that I saw. But I just wanted to ask you to help him if you can...”

The breeze blew in a ribbit.

I promised myself that I would ask coach about what upset him, but I knew that I never could. I knew though that I had to try. The swirling popcorn ceiling rocked me into a restless sleep to the beat of the ever-blinking smoke detector. Outside, the crickets chirped on with the breeze.

The next morning I pedaled my bike to Hunter’s house. I always did this on the warm spring days before school let out. It made us feel like we had total freedom, with the wind whipping through the holes in our helmets and the roar of the baseball card stuck in Hunter’s spokes. Even though we could barely ever rough the occasional journey to the other end of town, the mere illusion of freedom kept us pedaling on.

He was waiting for me at the end of his driveway, halfway between my house and the middle school. Halfway between his house and the school, though, was Coach’s house. I struggled to bring up what was bothering me, but he seemed focused on swerving back and forth across the street anyways.

“Come on, you’re gonna get hit by a truck.” I shouted ahead to him.

“No chance. You *know* no cars ever come down here!” He shouted over his shoulder.

The act of turning around made him wobble a little, but he recovered with a jolt. The thing about Hunter was that he always recovered. As long as I had known him, he had never been hurt. He’d been banged up about a million times, from falling out of trees or scraping his leg against asphalt, but he had never been *hurt*. Nobody we knew had ever

been hurt, not back then. Maybe just the fact that we couldn't imagine being hurt was what kept us intact.

Coach's house breezed past us, no car in the driveway. I still didn't say anything to Hunter, partly because I didn't want to shout at him anymore. Any freedom I felt before disappeared as we passed by the yard. My throat clenched up and my cheeks got hot. I gripped the handlebars as tight as I could, and I tried to keep a straight line while Hunter swerved all the way into the school parking lot.

I decided I would knock on Coach's door on my way home. I was angry with Hunter, but I didn't know why. A sort of hatred welled up in my chest seeing him snake back and forth between the notches in the yellow dividing line, back and forth, wobbling a little each time but not falling. I hated myself for hating him, but I couldn't stop myself no matter how tight my hands were clenched. I would have to go see Coach after school alone. I needed to see if he was alright, if not for his sake, then for my own.

The wind blew gently into my face the whole ride there. I gripped the handlebars harder than ever while helicopter leaves fell from the trees that broke up the yellowing sunlight on the road. My brain was pedaling faster than my feet, and in my mind I was already at the house. I was leaning my bike against the telephone pole at the end of the driveway; I was walking up to the door, hands in my pockets, then at my sides, then back in my pockets, sweating; I was knocking on the door, waiting for a man who I worried was still crying. I wouldn't know what to do if he were.

But I never found out. I got up to his door and hesitated. My fist was raised to the door, but I couldn't do anything but touch the maple, gently, knowing that this was as far as I could go. Heat rose up in my cheeks. What could I have done for him? What could an eleven year old have offered to a grown man with adult problems? Maybe I could have done something for him though. Maybe just seeing him would have been enough. Maybe I did the right thing, but, looking back, I don't know if I even had a choice.

London Fox

There's a fox that lived down my street to the left.
He frequented my front door step because
I fed him. He was a London fox,
and he was such pleasant company.
It was nice to have a friend in a strange place.

There are foxes in London, and who knew
Besides the people who feed them. They know
Not to ask strangers for help. They know they
Won't get it. But he knew that
I was no stranger to foxes.

There's fox food in London, if you know where to look.
I gave him corn and tiny Tesco sandwiches.
I didn't know what foxes eat. But he sure did
So he ate, and we were friends.
We shared some pleasant London suppers.

But now we're not neighbors, and I hope he's still eating
Lots of corn and tiny Tesco sandwiches.
Maybe his new neighbor feeds him treats
When he is good. You have to be good —
To live in London, you have to feed the foxes.

There's a fox tattooed on my left arm now, and who knew
That he'd come home with me from London.
But when my friend trotted away in the snow
For the last time, I wanted a reminder
That just like a fox, I could live in London too.

