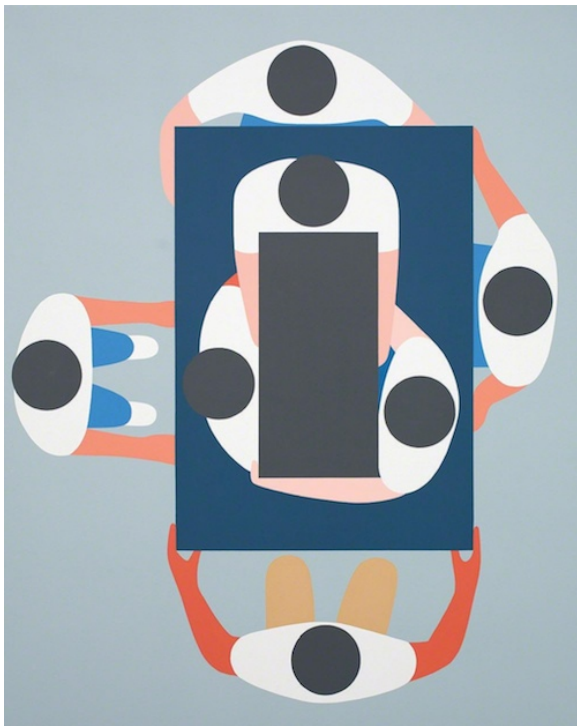


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# Chrissy Smoked

*by Seth Sawyers*

Twice a year, a group of friends gathered in a coal-mining pocket of Pennsylvania—friends in their twenties with fragile identities, who didn't know yet what would happen.



Us From Above Infinitely, 2014, [Geoff McPetridge](#). Courtesy the artist.

It's been a whole year. And maybe I don't yet know what words or numbers get close to outlining the shape or the depth of the hole where Chrissy is supposed to be, but how about this: None of those cigarettes out there, in the past 12 months, though every one of them got smoked by someone, not a single one got smoked by our friend Chrissy.

The funeral was up in Pennsylvania, and most of us made the drive. It was sunny that day, windy, and Chrissy's wife's long blond hair blew all over her shoulders and across her forehead but really what happened was she had bawled so hard and sharp in the funeral home that it moved your heart over in your chest six inches. But if you're going to have a funeral, you may as well do it right, and so because Chrissy wrote songs and sang them, that's what we wanted to do, too. And we wanted to drink, maybe even smoke a cigarette or two. Of course, no one smokes anymore, but all the same, hey, is there a smoke somewhere I could borrow? And so, out in the woods, we made a big fire to chase away the dark, and played the music those guys made, the songs Chrissy sung from back then, those recordings suddenly a decade old. There were guitars. Some of us knew the verses but all of us knew the choruses. We drank until we spun. There was a lot of hugging.

There was food, though I couldn't tell you what it was that we ate because after all there was suddenly the advent of that big black hole and who cares what you're eating when there's a hole like that, just over there, winking. And if it weren't for all those warm, hugging bodies, you might even convince yourself that black hole was, just maybe, winking at you, saying: Hey.

But there was one thing, for sure, not bound for that hole, because he had flown in all the way from the West Coast, because he was a large man, because he was alive, and that was Matty T. Big Matty T., who'd maybe known Chrissy the longest, as boys up in those Pennsylvania hills. He was alive, and he was waiting for us as we made our way back to the woods. And then he laughed, and told us stories, his voice, his bigness filling up the high spaces between those oaks and hickories. Something had to. Matty T. pulled out a big bottle of whiskey, and we drank it. We drank all of it. He sang. We all did. We sang until we couldn't, until Chrissy's words were all slur, until they were just sound, all of it saying, we miss you. We drank, and sang, and held, and held, and held, until the fire had burned

down to glowing coals and it was time, at some late and numb and numberless hour, to try to let go.

But before all of that, years before, there was only life. That's what I really wanted to get at here. For I've been thinking about Matty T., and his house up in the Pennsylvania hills, where he lived when Chrissy was still alive, when there was nothing but life, and no alternative to life but only more life. And though Matty T. hasn't lived there in 10 years, sometimes, maybe not even every six months, but often enough, in my head I gather up all of those people and we make one last trip up to Matty T.'s. They don't complain. They can't.

His Pennsylvania friends called him "Taron," and I'm sure others called him "Matthew" or "Matt," but to us he was Matty T. For a couple of years, he was our home away from home, a bearded, ponytailed, baritone horn of a man, young then, of course, but somehow older, wiser. When everyone else had seen the movie, Matty T. had read the book. He'd taken not only the introductory survey but also the 400-level courses. He had maps in his living room. Of course there was a typewriter in the corner. Of course there was a chess board, an excess of books, a little Christmas tree that never came down. And so, two Fridays a year, after work, tired, we drove from the city to the country, a caravan of sticker-covered sedans headed north from Baltimore into a coal-mining pocket of the world we'd never before heard of. We were supplicants, jaded already by age 24, 25, nonbelievers already, if you can believe it, but ready to believe in something again. And so we went to get filled up.

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Apologies to Matty T., who knows, I am reasonably certain, that I love him, but it was a shitty house. The kitchen linoleum was up at the seams, like old, peeling labels on a cardboard box. There were gaps everywhere, in the walls, the floors. In

the winter, it felt as if his place were heated only by our bodies. But there were many bodies.

We spoke to him by showing up, bottles in hand, at his front door, and Matty T. spoke to us with food. There was fresh pumpkin bread upon arrival. He assembled and browned pans of meat-stuffed dumplings called bierocks. He broiled bacon sprinkled with brown sugar that came out tasting like warm, salty, delicate candy. He stirred and seasoned and then placed hot spoonfuls of things directly into our mouths. We ate it, whatever it was, without question. There were bowls of hummus so garlicky it burned your tongue, crock pots bubbling with stews, with dips, something with artichokes and cream, glazed chicken wings and meatballs for days, bowls of nuts, fruits dipped in chocolate, salt and sugar and fat and crispy and creamy and heavy. We ate all of it. And then there would be more. There were very few vegetables.

Of course we drank in quantity. We could take it. We were yawning chasms, consumers of that which altered us. We yearned for booze, for smoke, for each other, for whatever you had. We wanted to be filled. I'm tempted to try to come up with a phrase that means "vastly more than a lot." I've never been good at math, but the drinking was mathematical. Exponents of Lord Chesterfield straight from the brewery, logarithms of Yuengling lager from cases stacked on Matty T.'s leaning porch. It was vectors of whiskey, parabolas of rum-spiked tea with sticks of cinnamon floating on top like drowned logs, matrices of Bloody Marys that Dickie mixed by the pitcher. We drank with breakfast, while the sun was up, deep into the night, until everybody was talking all at once, until there was nobody left to talk to, until we crashed, maybe spinning, and then certainly snoring, on Matty T.'s floor. There was one night when, just before dawn, I finally fell asleep to Kevin talking about how the Phoenicians were the first to do just about everything and when I woke up a half-hour later, for some water, I discovered that he just had not stopped about the Phoenicians.

We did a lot of not stopping. Even if Matty T. were not, I suspect, a very good high school English teacher, he couldn't have shaken the drive to instruct, and so he led us on tours of the ancient brewery in town, herding us to the parking lot before the part where we got the free sample because who needed free samples when you were staying at Matty T.'s? We listened as he showed us the difference between

hawks and eagles, told us about the local Amish, about how the Pennsylvania Dutch weren't Dutch at all, about how farmers up there sometimes, still, found arrowheads after they plowed. Always, there was music. We consumed Neil Young and Morphine and G. Love and Special Sauce and The Roots, *Exile on Main St.*, all the Bob Dylan we could stomach, *Graceland* and Weezer, *Nighthawks at the Diner* and early Stevie Wonder, too. There was a particular Norman Rockwell coffee-table book that, every time, we flipped through carefully, going round and round about what was really going on in each picture. We did not write blogs about any of this. We did not post photos to Facebook. We did not update our Twitter feeds with the clever things we said to make each other laugh because Twitter feeds did not yet exist.

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Lots of things did not yet exist. Aching joints did not yet exist. Moderate back pain did not yet exist. Nobody had yet been pregnant, at least not all the way through. No one yet needed to jog three miles every other day to keep their middles from hanging out over their belts. Hangovers were gentle little showers, not full-on storms that knocked you back to bed until dinnertime. There were no wrinkles at the corners of the eyes. We were 24, 26 years old, maybe 27. To be 30 was to be ancient, creaky. It was unthinkable. This was three girlfriends ago, five jobs ago. Manny was Manny and Fritz was just Fritz because the advent of Manny and Fritz was still years away. I was with the Asian girl who didn't eat meat. Dickie was single. Kevin was always Kevin, always just as brash, but Geof was so poor back then that hamburgers put his credit card over the limit. And Chrissy was still alive.

Chrissy was still alive. Chrissy, always a part of it but always just a little bit outside, too, would show up to Matty T.'s weekends on Saturday morning, earlier than you thought possible for a human, already on his second big cup of bad coffee and five, six, eight cigarettes deep, jeans caked in dried mud, boots laced up, and for all we know those cigarettes had nothing to do with the cancer that would later

blossom in his blood. He was always ready to move something heavy. He was the kind of deceptively strong that, had he been on the other side in a fight, you would have lost, quickly, all the time thinking: How did that go so badly so fast? Yeah, Chrissy was still alive.

But back then, of course we would never die. We were children, really, only with jobs back home, just beginning to put money every check, for some reason, into retirement plans that were so far off so as to be Saturn. But Matty T.'s place was not the city. Up there, it was all deer and foxes and hawks and rabbits and pickup trucks. It was still just us. We were the only people on earth, and we shouted and laughed and played chess decently and kicked soccer balls poorly and drank alcohol like district champions.

Here's what we did: We made up a game involving a swing set and Frisbees. It was called ER and it lasted for hours. But it didn't matter what we did, because we were in love, with each other, with our bodies, with Matty T., with Kerry, with Mary, with DY, with EVM, with Carlos when he made it up, with Kimmy and Leon, with, against all odds, me. It's been said before, but it's true, we had all the time in the world. And we had so much love inside of us that we didn't know what to call it, or how to let it out. Or, we let it out, explosively, tenderly, all the time. We hugged a lot. No one thought it was strange. Chrissy hugged everybody. He couldn't help it. None of us could.

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And so, warmly supercharged, hands around cold quart bottles of lager, we shouted Hemingway into microphones while our friends banged on drums and guitars and worked effects pedals and drove loud grooves into Matty T.'s musty basement air for as long as it took, for as long as anyone would listen, which was a long time. It went on and on, because we wanted it to. It was like breathing, but better.

Then, in the mornings, some of us would read on the porch, mugs of cream-heavy coffee steaming on the railing. Some of us, up in Matty T.'s big waterbed, probably made love. We waited for the bathroom to open up. We did not take showers. We maybe remembered to brush our teeth. We waited for the third pot of coffee to brew. We hoped Fritz would do the dishes.

And we asked, where was Chrissy? But he was, always, already gone, off to some job on a tug boat, off to help somebody move something heavy, off to laugh and smoke or maybe just read a book somewhere, maybe off to think about a girl he had loved, still loved, a girl who had broken his heart, who would have a song written about her whether she liked it or not. Chrissy was our thick-wristed, scar-chinned poet, and though we didn't know it, wouldn't have known what to do with it had we known, he was on his way to being broken. We didn't quite know it yet, back then, but he was always leaving us. And then, always, after two days, three days at Matty T.'s if we were lucky, we had to leave, too.

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And so it happened that, just days after Chrissy died, we met up in Manny and Fritz's backyard. We built that fire and drank that whiskey until we spun and sang along to the verses and the choruses or maybe just the choruses but in any event that beautiful business went on for a long time until, after a while, somebody thought we should say a word.

Instead, we only watched the fire. Nobody said anything. Matty T., someone said. Why don't you start? He had a pull from that bottle of his. He cleared his throat. "Chrissy," he said after a while, "smoked a lot of cigarettes."

Of course. Chrissy smoked a lot of cigarettes. Of course. That was enough. We loved him. We loved each other. We loved ourselves. And he was one of us, but now he was gone, and there was that hole. And so we drank some more and sang some more and the fire turned to coals, turned to smoke, turned to ash.

I see now that, back then, on that last of those Pennsylvania weekends, we were leaving not just Matty T.'s and a certain kind of twice-a-year home but also our jangly bright twenties, our fragile former selves, our jittery, translucent casings made of smoke gently shooting to the ceiling and nerves and a long list of books we had not yet read but would, for sure, get to one day. We'd sit under a fully

green oak, all of our friends tossing around a ball, someone about to head out for more Yuengling, for one more pack of smokes, for one more whatever the fuck it was. And you can say what you want about getting a little older and how it just happens and how you've got to take it easy when it comes to this sort of thing but I sure don't feel like taking it easy, not tonight.

Because what was sure as sunrise was that those we loved sat just over there, out of reach for now but goddamn there, and maybe even it was Chrissy, guitar in his hands, and in the morning our sandpaper-fingered friend with the strong back and all of those songs in his head would wake up, cough once, twice, reach for a cigarette, and light it. Then he'd breathe in and, of course, he'd breathe back out.

**Seth Sawyers'** work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Baltimore Sun*, *The Morning News*, *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. He is at work on a novel about a 10-foot-tall office worker. He teaches writing classes at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and is an editor at *Baltimore Review*. He has been awarded scholarships to attend the Sewanee Writers' Conference and Writers@Work. He is a former Emerging Writer-in-Residence at Penn State Altoona. [More by Seth Sawyers](#)