

7 Days in December

by Jax Neal

When I was sixteen years old I tried to take my own life.

If I try to describe it, it was like this: There was a silence that found its way inside me. Silence in my liver, silence in my bones, silence slowing down my blood. Sometimes silence came up next to the steady drum of my own heart, and laid its hand across the head, asking me to play a little softer, softer still, until what was left was just an echo.

On these days when my own voice forgot me, I started performing a small, personal ceremony to keep the quietness at bay. It was a ritual, all my own, belonging to a religion of one. If I ever wanted to take my life, I would go out into the Texas night and start running. I had no path or plan, no limit or direction. I just asked my feet to move me. And I ran, as far and long as my body would let me. I ran for miles underneath the moon, down a backroad slick with dew. Until the rhythm of the living became loud enough in me, to continue. And the hand came off my heart. And I could hear my body singing back to me.

That act: the body, propelling itself forward down the road, into the unknown, a little further into its own life, it is the source of everything I make. That simple steady rhythm of the body trying to make it to the next day.

As a body-based artist, dealing with dance, and performance, and our ability to endure, nearly all of my work is dedicated to movement. Movement, being the thing that testifies that we are living.

So what does it mean to me, to lie down, and perform the very thing that I've been running from? Why am I so afraid of what happens when the body stops?

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When the flood of Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in 2016, my grandparents house took on 17 feet of water. My family and I went to the house, looked around, and gathered, one by one, the collective items of lifetime. We carried them sopping wet: the floral sofa, and postcards from Rome, and love letters from friends who were already dead, diaries kept shut, stuffed dolls, and dad's saxophone. We carried them still dripping into the front yard, underneath the pine trees to be piled up and counted for insurance purposes. My grandmother's wedding dress dropped straight in the mud, with him everything else she ever cherished. Everyone cried, and even our insides were full of rain.

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The shower is the place we go to take the rain, to be drained of what we know, and what we wear, what we fear, and what we believe, and to see what is left of us when it's all been washed away.

When I finally came home dripping sweat, after miles and miles of trying to stay alive, I snuck back inside, and crept upstairs to the bathroom. I kept the lights off, but the moon was still there, sliced thin by the blinds. I kept the shower curtain open, to let the light in, and I ran the shower over me. I don't know how long I'd wait, underneath that water, which was cool and holy, washing mud off of my life.

There is something there, at the end of it. You have your body. You have the stories swirling in your brain. You have a will, maybe, to get up and do it again, to build another life by hand, knowing someday that too will get washed away.

My grandparents lost their home before to a similar flood. When it happened again they said that's just how you learn to measure time: as the things that happen in between disasters.

Artists are known to make, to do, and for me, to move. But in this work I want to do the opposite. To sit down, to undo, to remove. And look at what is left.

The performance is not just the shower, it is also the end of the day, when the faucet turns off, and that lights go away, and the artist gets up, dries off, goes home, and comes back to do it the next day.

A question keeps coming to me in this process, thinking about the floods, and my childhood, coming up against my will to live: "Where do you run when there's nowhere left to go? What comes after disaster?"

My dad says everyone that lives on the Gulf is running from something, and that they just kept running until they hit the coast. And there was nowhere left to go.

I think you do what they did. You sit down, and you take it. And you try to make it anyway.