dust bunnies
a memoir

by

TOMMY WOMACK
We drag our lives around like screaming children.
— Joe Bolton
introduction:

the things you learn in the back of a car

I always wondered what the world looked like from the back seat of a police cruiser. Now I know. Right now I’m thanking sweet Jesus in Heaven that I have Xanax, marijuana and Wild Turkey in my system, otherwise I don’t think I would tolerate this situation nearly as well as I am right now. What’s lost on me at the moment is the fact that it’s that cocktail of chemicals that has me in this back seat to begin with. If it weren’t for those things, I’d be on the interstate by now, driving home from a great gig. And it WAS a great gig. Standing ovation, the whole nine yards. Moved a lot of merch. Got a cool festival T-shirt. A great night. And it’s still great, in an odd way. It’s great because I have a good buzz, and let’s be frank; that’s all that matters.

My mind isn’t saying, “Ooh, this is really fucked up and I’m really in trouble.” It’s saying, “Hey, this is a new experience that will make a great story; and if I was ever going to be butt-raped by Bubba in a soundproof cell, this is exactly the buzz I’d want to have when it happens.”
It’s Memorial Day Weekend, 2012, and Tennessee is warm and humid even at midnight. We like it that way. We tell Yankees, You think this is hot, come back in August, we’ll show you hot. This? This is nice. My new festival T-shirt isn’t even sweaty, and this cruiser is air-conditioned. What more could a fucked-up musician possibly want?

There’s just one thing I really don’t like. Wait, two things. First are these handcuffs. I’ve seen enough criminals on television complaining that their cuffs are too tight, and how uncomfortable it is to be cuffed behind your back so that you’re essentially sitting on your hands in the back seat of the cruiser and the metal of the cuffs is biting into your wrist bones. I’d always had contempt for those criminals. You deserve it, you piece of shit. What do you expect after killing all those nurses? Now I have a new empathy. It hurts. But, again, I’m lucky: if I weren’t fucked up out of my mind, think how bad it would hurt then. Thank God for chemicals that get me into trouble and make the trouble feel good at the same time. Drugs are great. Everyone should try them.

Secondly, that little piece of paper taped up to the Plexiglas wall between the officers in the front seat and me back here. It’s about two inches tall by three or four inches wide, and it says: “And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee. – Ezekiel 25:17.”

Now that’s not cool, I think. I don’t need to see that. How many perps have seen that, from my vantage right here? The paper is brown and the cellophane tape is yellowed, and no one has been able to rip it down, or lunge forward and eat it, because of the cuffs, and the tightest seat belt ever. I wonder if the cops know about Samuel Jackson reciting that very verse before icing people in Pulp Fiction. I doubt it. The Christian music blaring from the radio tells me they might not even know who Quentin Tarantino is. I believe in God and I believe He hates Christian music as much as I do. I spend a lot of time on the road, and as I’m flipping the radio left of the dial I can tell the Christian station in two notes. It always sounds like Coldplay with a really, really happy lead singer. The radio is all New Testament happy happy joy joy. That piece of paper is Old Testament Yahweh will kick you into the middle of next month, pudknocker! I wonder which side of the fence the cops sit on, liturgically, or if their minds plumb such channels at all.

I’m starting to not like them. They were courteous enough when I was stumbling through their stupid human tricks, but now that I’m in the back seat and they’re up front, it’s like I don’t exist. They don’t make conversation with me, they don’t ask if I’d like anything from Wendy’s; it just puts a guy off. I’m starting to see why mother-rapers
and father-stabbers don’t like the constables that cross their paths. The 
way they treat you like a common criminal. I also don’t like how the guy 
is driving now. He’s violating every speed law in the county, slowing 
down for curves and then gunning it in the straightaways. He’s saying, 
I’m a cop, and I don’t have to follow the laws of the road. Arrogance! If 
I were doing coke right now I’d give him a piece of my mind.

Someday years later I’ll be typing and thinking about how this was 
a turning point, how when I came out of my fog in the morning, wak-
ing up on a cold cement floor in a drunk tank in Bumfuck, Tennessee, 
I thought things might have to change now. I’d lived a great rock ’n’ 
roll life. Almost died once or twice, but you know. Shit happens. I’d al-
ways gotten away with it. Close shaves are the spice of life, right? Well 
this time I didn’t get away with it. And this time I’m going to fork out 
a grand for a lawyer; have more jail hanging over my head, pay fines 
and court costs, and find how all this scuttles my enjoyment of Lockup 
marathons on MSNBC. I’m going to have to stop using a dysfunctional 
upbringing as an excuse to stay numb, going to have to get help, going 
to have to get typing, going to have to spell out this life and let it be 
enough for once.
call to worship

The best thing about Attention Deficit Disorder is it never bothers you too long at any one time. *Badumpum.* Thank you, I’ll be here all week.

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It’s hard to think of my mother as a child but she was one once. And one day she was sitting at the table minding her own business. Her father was sitting there minding his own business too, when out of nowhere he just looked at her and said, “You know, you’re about the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

He said just those words to his little daughter, stood up from the table and walked right out the front door of the house.

Mom, not being Mom yet and still a little girl, kind of laughed startled for a second, because surely to God he was kidding. She waited for him to pop his face back around the door with a big smile and then run back to the table and hug on her neck and surely to God he would because surely to frickin’ God he was *kidding.* Apparently he wasn’t kidding, and he didn’t come back in the house.

And whenever he *did* come back there was no explanation or anything—like it had never happened. It happened, believe me. If I heard that story once, I heard it a blue million times.

That incident broke my mother’s little-girl heart. She’s never gotten over that.
Lorene Virginia Waters Womack.  
Rene Womack, to most people.  
Mom.

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I knew Papa Waters; he wasn’t an evil man and Mom’s never had an ugly day in her life, so your guess is as good as mine why he’d say such a thing.

But at least with Mom I have a clue when and why her life became a depressed person’s life. I know what happened. Believe me, I know already.

When and where Dad’s life went to shit—and how and why—I have no clue. What he ever told me of his life I could write down with a Sharpie on the back of a prescription.

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James Carson Womack.  
The Reverend J. C. Womack.  
Dad.

Back in the ’60s when I was a little kid, he wore horn-rimmed glasses like everybody wore in all the Kennedy assassination pictures and Beatle press conferences, and they suited him.

In his prime he preached a sermon every Sunday morning, often two, and sometimes three. He shook hands with every parishioner who came out the front door after the church service.

He’d give everybody his grin. I have his grin, a big wide Joker grin that looks like a comedy mask. When Dad smiled big like that he looked like an idiot. So do I.

When we got back home, he loosened his tie, got into his recliner, kicked it back, fired up a Camel, got Mom to bring him a glass of sweet tea, and you didn’t get between him and the TV if the house was on fire.

Church folks always thought Brother Womack was the funniest, knee-slappingest preacher you ever could meet. They never saw him sitting in that recliner with his glasses reflecting ice-blue television flickers night after night. He was a preacher who moonlighted as a potted plant and nobody knew it but Mom and us three kids.

Dad watched hours of television at a stretch. We all did. You couldn’t blame us. Television was SO much better than our real lives. I’d be watching Mike Brady give his boys warm, fatherly advice. And Dad would fart real loud with no change of facial expression. He’d push
his upper dentures forward with his tongue so as to look momentarily like a Neanderthal tracking Lee Harvey Oswald in '60s horn-rims. Then he’d suck them back in. Then he’d pick his nose like he’d left a goddam nickel up there.

I’d be sitting there watching TV and feeling majorly ripped-off. Little Bobby Brady, played by a boy named Mike, got the warm, congenial Mike Brady for a dad—who was played by a gay guy named Bobby. And that was better than reality. Thanks, God.

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Was he preoccupied? Writing sermons in his head? Spinning lurid thoughts? Quietly convinced he was the King of Spain? I couldn’t tell you. I have no idea.

All I can tell you is he left the Christmas lights up until July one year. We had Christmas lights on the gutter for seven, maybe eight months. He took them down on a steamy July day in Kentucky. I stood in my short pants and flip-flops in the front yard and watched.

It was a red-letter day, like any other of the sporadic occasions when Dad would come out of an antisocial stupor long enough to do something complicated like taking a fucking ladder out of the fucking garage, climbing up in his church pants and taking the goddam Christmas lights down. I think I was eight.

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In fifth grade, I started blinking my eyes a lot. Hard blinks where my eyes would scrunch up and my brow would expand. Then I started weirdly stretching the skin on the front of my neck up to under my chin, over and over. A substitute teacher one day wasn’t hip to how I was and gave me the stink eye because she thought I was making faces at her. It got worse instead of better. I started jerking my head forward spasmodically, often in tandem with a blink. It continued that way my entire middle school, junior high and senior high lives with no one in the world knowing why I was pulling this crazy shit. It was a pain in the ass then. And it’s a pain in the ass now.

Over my whole life, I’ve kept up my old riffs and expanded to quiet grunting noises in my throat and clicking my tongue against a back molar until I wear a sore on it. The head jerking comes and goes but my neck muscles are tight as hell forever from the stress of it. Old Faithful, the blinking, remains with me all day every day. I’ve had problems with conjunctivitis, my upper eyeballs being inflamed from eyelids rubbing
against them with such consistence and velocity for decades. There has been no one since I was a young child for whom my tics have not made up part of their first impression of me.

No one in Madisonville back then had ever heard of Tourette’s. Mom would harp at me to stop it. Dad didn’t. (Dad might never have frickin’ noticed.) But it defined me. Man, that Womack, he ain’t right. Hell NO I won’t go out on a date with him! Hey, let’s blink back at him!

As I blinked and jerked and tap danced through the minefield of puberty, I thought a lot about how to deal with the most vociferous of the Bund rally sophomores and juniors and seniors, the ones who ran that school and thought I was crazy, and that’s when I started my long trek up the mountain of humor.

I listened to Steve Martin records, and Cheech & Chong and George Carlin records, Bill Cosby records; I recorded entire Monty Python episodes onto audiocassettes, and I listened to them all like they were music. I didn’t just learn the jokes (and recite them obnoxiously at school, like I did too often), I listened for the cadence, the timing, the elements of surprise and incongruity, and the ultimate aim: articulating something everybody thinks about but dares not say. By senior year, my budding comic guise produced humor about 20 percent of the time. To pad my act, I threw in a dollop of Dadaism. I learned that if you don’t have something funny to say to an asshole in the hallway between classes, then say something oblique that makes no sense at all, and walk on. Some will think it’s a joke they didn’t get. Maybe a good joke. And maybe they’re the ignorant ones. That was my goal with the assholes anyway. You fuck with me about my blinking, I’ll fuck you up good like a puppy dressed up for Thanksgiving!

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Depression runs in both my parents’ families, and it ran down to me. I’ve had a joyous life and a bleak, hopeless life. Meds and the love of a good woman have saved me. That and having an audience. I write my little songs and my little books and make my modest-selling records, write my columns and articles, and I have a small but devoted following. I’m an acquired taste. You have to love insanity and honesty. I lay it all out there and it makes some people uncomfortable. Not everybody wants that in music, and I understand, but love songs are not my forte. Nor dance ditties. I write songs about religion, the Replacements, therapists, fish sticks, yellow cling peaches, camping on acid, cheap sex, overdosing, Cheetah Chrome, my family, Jesus, alcoholism, Kentucky, Martin Luther slinging his own shit at a vision of Satan, and an all-consuming fear of
dying poor. It saves the live show that a lot of the songs are funny, if you like what I think is funny.

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Everybody loses his or her emotional virginity, usually in childhood, when life hits you hard; and if you don’t bounce back, you become a new person. Mom had it at the table with Papa Waters; I had it in high school, the worst four years of my life. Forty years later I’m still pissed off and there’s nobody to sue. I worked at a car wash in my twenties and came in one day on acid with big black eyes like a great white shark. I was laughing my ass off in customers’ faces and whacking drumbeats on seat cushions with the vacuum wand, bent over in a blind mental hernia wondering what the hell I was doing with my life, and that was a pleasant, well-adjusted day compared to high school.

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Rednecks are like dogs. You either smell like family or they’ll keep pissing on you ’til you do.

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I live life like a pinball, four or five paragraphs at a time. It’s like the Vonnegut story where every five minutes a big bell rings very loudly and scrambles everybody’s thoughts. Forty years ago in Kentucky we didn’t have Ritalin. We didn’t even have ADHD. You just “weren’t right.”

What you might call ADHD, I call growing up when sugar was cool, when kids like me ate repeated bowls of Sugar Crisp, Sugar Smacks, Sugar Pops, and my favorite, Cheerios with four heaping teaspoons of sugar. Now they sell Super Golden Crisp and Super Golden Pops, and my whole life’s a disorder there’s a drug for, as if I’m not already doing enough as it is. Not to mention that “Super Golden Crisp” is a pussy-ass name.

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Christianity is a religion named after its founder, Jesus Christ, a man whose name was neither Jesus nor Christ, who never founded a religion and don’t get me started.

But if you’re Christian from the dirt up, you won’t kill yourself. No matter how bad things ever get you won’t take that route, because to do
so is to fry in a lake of fire for eternity like a slice of country ham. Nasty image. Negative reinforcement with hair on it. But in a world without antidepressants it’ll keep your ass alive.

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Madisonville, Kentucky.

“The Best Town on Earth.”

That’s the town motto and it’s perfect. No other one-syllable words could evoke the crackling wit that runs through that town like cold blood through a flat roadkill possum. “The Best Town on Earth.” Peppy, one-syllable words, and an outrageous lie. Madisonville isn’t even the best town in Kentucky, much less the planet.

About 18,000 short-haired, Christian coal miners lived there when I was a kid, watching television there, sending their kids to school there and working the earth with big shovels biting into the rolling hills of Western Kentucky.

If you haven’t had business there, you’ve never been there. It’s not on the way to anything anyone’s ever judged worth seeing. The land is not quite flat like the western edge where the Ohio and Mississippi meet, and it’s not the dirt-poor batshit hillbilly mountains to the east. It’s not the northern bluegrass horse country; it’s not anything at all.

That motto is actually just the official one. The real one is “Kiss my ass,” and you say “ass” like “aeiss,” halfway between “ace” and “ice” but really neither one. And if you weren’t raised here, you’ll never say it right.

I was delivering ice to a Kwik Pik Market in the summer of 1981, filling the outside box with bags of ice, and as the driver and I got back in the truck to go to our next stop, I noticed the graffiti spray-painted on the cinderblock wall above the ice chest in big letters. AC/CD.

I can understand spelling “there” when you mean “their” and even, God help us, apostrophizing plurals, but fucking up AC/DC? That’s beyond the pale. The Best Town on Earth, and if yew dont lik my speling yew can kiss my aeiss!

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It’s May 23rd, 1990. I’m in the Government Cheese van, slumped in a back seat with four other miscreants who, as often as not, don’t like each other anymore. My hair is long, tangled and greasy, I haven’t showered since Pittsburgh, I’m wearing the same yellow frilly tuxedo shirt I’ve had on for three days, or maybe it’s four days. I have my Peter
Buck black vest on, my jeans with the hole in the crotch, my black Reeboks with holes in both toes and red sock toes peeking out. It’s workable at this point just to wear stage clothes all the time. Cuts down on the thinking.

We’ve stopped in Bowling Green at 11 a.m. after an all-night drive from wherever the fuck, just long enough to put clean underwear in our bags and stop at the Minute Mart to check our PO box and get some beer. Then it’s off to Ruston, Louisiana. I think. The Minute Mart is next to the Tender Touch Auto Wash, where Viva, Billy Mack and I work when we’re home. Successful rock stars. Yay rah.

I got something addressed to me in the mail. It’s an envelope with what feels like a greeting card inside. I hem and haw over whether to open it first or open a beer first. Beer wins. Hiss goes the bottle cap, which I throw forward to hit the windshield and irritate whoever’s up front. I take a hit off my pot pipe, then I have a mind-clearing sip of pre-noon beer and open my mail.

It’s an invitation to my tenth high school reunion. Jesus H. Willy Wonka. I lean back with my beer and think as somebody turns the Replacements up on the cassette deck. I think how only one type of people stage high school reunions: the ones who had a good time then, also known as “assholes.” One thing is cool, though. The Buffy or Biff who addressed this envelope knew to send it c/o Government Cheese. My reputation is spreading.

My nickname in the band is The Acknowledger, because I acknowledge. That means that every once in a while, as we travel, usually after a lung-bursting toke or five, I reach forward, turn the music down and hold forth out of nowhere and apropos of nothing. If the others dig it, they snap their fingers like beatniks in a coffee bar.

“I don’t go to high school reunions,” I intone like Antony burying Caesar, “I don’t go to high school reunions for the same reason Jews don’t go to Auschwitz and make punch. The same reason that Vietnamese Boat People don’t get together in Atlantic City and reminisce about salty sun blisters and eating raw plankton. ‘Ooh! Le Duc! You look great! Lip look much better now!’”

I take a swig and muse for a second, and then before someone can turn the Replacements back up, I start in again.

“Oh now, Tommy. You’re so negative,” I fake moan. “Negative negative negative! It could be a nice evening. Surprisingly so! I might discover these people as they really are now: nice people, grown-up and no longer taking courtesy as a weakness. I might have a wonderful conversation with a sparkling 28-year-old lady who was a self-loading howitzer bitch on wheels ten years ago, and we’ll discover
each other as we are now, and maybe part of my heart will be healed. And maybe Hermann Goering could have had a second career in the ’50s as a wacky sitcom neighbor, if he’d played his cards right at Nuremberg. I wouldn’t get near that evening with tongs. I don’t want to sound bitter.”

Silence. Joe snaps his fingers. Skot turns the ’Mats back up. I slump back. Life goes on.