

2005

## Some Days Hit Like Mack Trucks

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### Recommended Citation

Broderick, Sarah (2005) "Some Days Hit Like Mack Trucks," *Exile*: Vol. 52 : No. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol52/iss2/11>

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## Some Days Hit Like Mack Trucks

On that day, Mack reached for the paper at the opposite end of the table. His fingertips rubbed against the ink and pulp and caught against the rubber band as he slid his hand downward. At the tail of the newspaper, his left index finger followed the saw-toothed edges in a counterclockwise motion until reaching the center knot of paper fiber. Leaving his hand still, he reached for his stained coffee mug. A hairline crack traveled down one side to a little above the base, but nothing ever moved beyond its form besides the coffee tossed from its lip. Bringing it to his own lips, Mack slowly permitted the dark fluid to pass between his teeth and across his tongue. The coffee clung like waterlogged potting soil. Today, he had poured in eight scoops for nine cups. He believed he enjoyed it best when pitchy. Of course, like many things, he was wrong.

The newspaper flew across the room, ricocheting against the wall and rolling across the contents of the lidless trash can until it landed atop a stack of neatly folded papers, tied carefully with string and ready for recycling. Mack raised himself up abruptly, his chair catching against the butcher's block behind him. The microwave on top shifted across the breadcrumbed pine, grazing the toaster. It did not fall with the chain reaction of his impact. Instead, the toaster clung onto the edge, awaiting some additional force. Mack stomped across the room to the trash, grabbed the freshly thrown paper, and pressed it into the top of the garbage, squishing the contents below it.

Turning away, Mack caught his old dog Dudley eying him mournfully from the rim of his shiny-bottomed dog dish. The dog kept his head down, while his back legs hung limply off the grungy couch cushion which served as a bed. The teeth of the zipper faced the wall so Dudley wouldn't catch some of his few remaining dog hairs, especially sparse on his lower back, against the jagged row of metal.

"Hungry, huh boy?" Mack offered in Dudley's direction, as he went to the pantry and pulled aside a fifty pound bag of food. His arm disappeared into the recesses of the bag, scraping a coffee can against the gritty bottom. Folding over the pleasant picture of a broad shouldered hunter and his bird dog which graced the packaging, he advanced toward the bowl. The brown bits cascaded against the metal, clinking like glass marbles. Setting the coffee can aside, he almost forgot to add the water. But even after Mack picked up the can once again, rinsed it, and poured the water over the food, Dudley did not stir. He kept his head tilted on his paws, facing the wall.

Mack sat there for some time studying him and decided to rub at his dog's ears. Dudley closed his eyes in gratitude. Noticing the digital green of the microwave clock, Mack brushed a few stray dog hairs from his uniform pants as he rose. "You went out. You're fed. You should be fine for the few hours until I get back, alright Dud?" His dog twitched an ear, a satisfactory commitment to the spoken contract.

Letting the water warm, he washed his hands and reached for the knotted plastic bag of bread. The slices were a bleached white, a cheaper grocery store brand which tasted the same, and he thought had the same ingredients as the others. Before walking over to the toaster, he methodically folded the bag end under itself and placed it back against the sink.

When the slices landed between the toaster slots, the appliance wavered on its unstable feet. Mack did not notice. He heard a car horn from the highway, but it had sounded much closer echoing through the bare trees guarding his dirt lane. While examining the road for possible trespassers, any strange tire marks or metallic glints, he absently pushed down on the toaster lever. But before the mechanism was locked fully, the toaster toppled to the floor, spraying charred crumbs which had gathered in the belly of the coils.

Mack's fists clenched. But it was only a moment before he snatched up the toaster and placed it firmly back beside the microwave. Dusting the dirt and grimy flecks off of the bread, he shoved them

in, crumpling the brown frames slightly. He went to press the lever again. No lever. Looking at his feet, he saw that the cheaply made plastic handle had landed at the back of the butcher's block. It had broken off when it hit the floor.

With urgency, he tried to shove the piece back into place. He thought he felt a click. The plastic balanced as it had been before. Mack reached out and delicately touched the toaster lever with his index finger, but it fell with the initial brushing of his fingertips. The broken instrument skittered atop the floorboards, stopping in the middle of the floor. Somewhere where someone could easily step on it.

Mack's chest heaved, but he suppressed it deep as he started to fiddle through a junk drawer to the side of the butcher's block. A large roll of duct tape was wedged at the back behind nails, measuring tape, plastic sporks, and other useful or random items. Picking up the lever again, he taped it down to the toaster. His finger bounced on the lever, and it permitted the pressure. But, he no longer attempted to make toast. The bread he threw away.

Mack glanced around the vacant walls until his scan found Dudley. His one back leg kicked a little, remembering what it was to run only now in sleep. Mack ran his hand through his damp hair, still moist from his early morning shower.

He washed his hands for the second time that morning. The coffee cup shined, a diffused beacon, resting against the olive green countertop. He took one last swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand like a man who just swallowed a good strong drink. Not permitting himself time to enjoy the moment, Mack snapped an under-ripe banana from the fruit bowl, slid some loose change and his badge across the table surface and into his pocket, and headed for his truck.

The mill's sign, newly painted in blue and green because some outsider said that the public responded better to these colors, turned Mack's stomach as he drove through the gate. He ate the last bite of banana, bruised from his grip, and felt it cannonball into the swirling coffee. It had to have been the banana. It was the banana.

Opening the truck door and sliding the keys into his pocket, Mack hesitated before his boot touched the ground. He wiped a smear of mud off the shiny black leather and leaned back into the cab to check his reflection in the rearview mirror. He hesitated, his hand gripping the rectangular glass, and swiveled his head around. Dale and Fox were already there. No one in sight.

The image in the mirror surprised him. It looked rested, healthy, maybe even doing alright. Satisfied, he fixed the top button of his short-sleeved uniform shirt, blue, and checked for the security badge on his left breast pocket. Pretty accurate for attaching it while driving.

Clearing his throat, Mack hopped out and locked the truck. Today, he took to the front door with strides, not steps.

Inside, Mack wiped his feet on the bristles of the door mat. He repeated the action three more times than usual, trying to regain the level of confidence he had seconds before but which seemed to dwindle when the heavy double doors closed behind him. Footsteps echoed down the cement block corridor, yellowish with the discolored light coverings from the years of cigarette smoke.

Looking up from his spotless feet, he immediately recognized the figure. He thought Junej also noticed his frame at the opposite end, but his long-time colleague did not offer a sign of acknowledgment. Instead, his furrowed brows examined the blanched walls of the hall's interior and rested on the snack machines directly across from the guard station.

Noticing Junej deep in thought, Mack wondered what his plan was going to be. He moved forward, the idea of settling on any strategy boosting his confidence. As he turned in front of the door to the guard shack, he caught his friend's eyes examining him. Mack bellowed, "You aren't nervous, are you?"

Juney's smile flickered at the corners of his mouth and then vanished quickly. "It's a big deal. There's a lot at stake here."

"You're telling me that," Mack said, momentarily bearing the tips of his teeth. "So, when's it all going down?"

Two new guys stationed at the large press appeared from beside the candy and snacks, their entrance hidden by the hulking machines. At the sound of their quarters hitting the change return, Juney glanced over his shoulder. He adjusted his thin tie, tightening it up towards his neck, which made the rolls of his already rotund head jut over the collar. Even without the tightening, his head remained incongruous with his body, which, although overweight, could never be considered obese. Examining the guys in the guard house, Juney answered, "Mr. Buchanan is due to arrive at approximately eleven today. The issue with you and the rest of the guards will be settled after lunch. One o'clock, I believe."

"That's what I thought. Just checking if anything had changed," Mack said with a breath outward. "Damn Juney, I didn't think it would come to this."

"Look, no use talking about it now, riling up the guys beforehand. Just wait and see what happens."

Mack pierced his eyes upward but his district rep, which was solely what he felt like to him today, gazed downward. "See what happens, huh? Well, I'll tell you one thing, if he calls us "gate watchers" one more time...I'm telling you I'm not sure what I'll do."

Suddenly, Juney's expression turned. "Hey Mack, you better watch yourself. More people than just Buchanan are going to be at this thing today. You understand? Your jobs are all on the line."

Taken aback from Juney's sudden moment of aggression, Mack hesitated for a moment. Sparks ignited at his temples. "No shit. You think we don't know that? I have to go in there and speak for all these guys," he gestured towards the door. Inside, the guards on duty were all taking notice, listening to their union representative much younger than most of them once again spurting hot. The oldest among them, Fox, hobbled across the door frame, the tufts of his white hair, like duck down, peeking above the window. He opened the door of the shack, staring into his hand instead of at the two men. A quarter, two dimes, and a nickel spotted his papery palms. After mouthing his counting and staring back to the machines, Fox looked up, "Damn, you know, I can never well remember that it's sixty cents instead of fifty anymore." He retreated back, the metal door lock closing soundly behind him, as if to say, "And I won't be paying the extra ten either."

But his action had the opposite effect. It forced Mack to slow his words, calm down. Maybe that's what he had intended all along. Mack planted his feet and spoke directly, "And if they start throwing their numbers around," his finger pointed, "disregarding the fact that we've got..."

"I know, I know." The red in Juney's face began to melt into sweat that sprinkled the nubs at his hairline as he continued to talk. He glanced through the door window, noticing the figures at work inside. "Christ, man, I'm on your side."

Mack rested his hand on the tarnished doorknob, looking blankly through the wired mesh of the glass. "My side. Well, you know us. They don't," he said, opening his way in but not stepping forward. "The least they can do is respect us."

No rebuttal escaped from behind him, and he felt that striding confidence again as the door clicked shut. Fox raised his Styrofoam coffee cup after placing the glass pot back on the burner. He swirled his coffee creamer instead of slowly churning it as usual, watching the gradients of color lighten slowly.

Mack went to the lockers at the back, opened the door to his, number six, and quickly realized he had nothing to set inside. He left the door hanging open and turned toward the monitor deck. Dale, the newbie to the crew and to the day shift, leaned back in his wheeled chair, the balls of his feet



slowly rocking him back and forth. Mack strode up and glanced over Dale's shoulder. He saw the blonde, the naked flesh, and the stamped letters, all equaling a dirty magazine. Permitted but never in excess. Mack tapped the metal wheel with the steel toe of his boot and said, "Yo, how's about clearing away obstructions from the exit doors? We've got inspection soon."

Dale turned but did not immediately close the pages. "I've got it," a great bear shadow boomed from the back corner. Bill, eager to move no matter what the task, slurped down the last of his Diet Pepsi and smashed the can. Dale turned back slowly. Mack followed Bill with his eyes. Bill shrugged, grabbed a clipboard and pen and was off.

Before Mack could say anything else to Dale, Fox coughed on his coffee. "Damn. You won't believe it." He wiped the amber spit from the pages of a *Farm and Dairy*. "They're selling real, live African foxes outta some feed shop down in Salineville. \$2500 a piece. What the hell are you supposed to do with that?"

Mack took the seat beside Dale but pushed it a few feet away while the monitors remained visible. "I suppose sell it to a zoo. What's an African fox look like anyway?"

Dale chirped up behind them, "It doesn't matter. A zoo wouldn't buy one privately." He turned a page, immediately leaving the conversation once again.

Fox pointed down at the corner of his paper. "Now here's something worth your money. A blue tick coon dog. A full litter, mix, but still has the blood in them." He stared off for a moment, picked up his coffee, and leaned against the monitor desk. "You know, I think it's about time I had a dog again." He shook his head to himself then looked to Mack.

After noticing his gaze, Mack nodded in approval. "Why not, as long as you don't drive him away with your non-stop talk-talking." They laughed together.

Dale traced the breasts of a voluptuous centerfold and folded the image down on top of a monitor. He got up, "Anyone want anything?" he asked.

Both men shook their heads as he retreated. Mack pinched the spine of the magazine and flopped it down onto Dale's seat. Now, he saw a truck was waiting at the gate. He granted the coal clearance and got up once more.

But Fox spoke before he could. "Damn kid needs to find another hobby."

"Yeah, like his job," Mack said, washing down a steaming cup of coffee. "I'll tell you what, you man the monitors and tell him to get his ass moving and check about those late shipments when he gets back from his rendezvous. I need to see about that faulty press."

Fox flexed his curved toes in his boot and looked to Mack. "How's Davidson doing?"

Mack set his used cup aside and peered out the front glass. "I've heard he's doing alright. We got him out in time, enough to save his foot."

"I'm telling you Leon—gate watchers are expendable."

Mack could envision the puffing figure of pure arrogance just beyond the door. Although he wouldn't be chewing on his cigar, since the heart attack, his breath would still permeate that acrid stench of hot detritus and ash tray. Mack swallowed his own spit with difficulty, his esophagus stiff with the memory of Mr. John Jay (J.J. to those company men he wished to take over quickly) Buchanan, a.k.a. Fat Cat.

Lifting his eyes from a bundle of documents he mostly understood, Mack scanned the claustrophobic room. A row of windows were on one wall, but no other furniture existed beyond the table and chairs. Not even a pathetic fern or a bought in bulk piece of art to grace the surroundings. Cement block walls did seem fairly appropriate for this confrontation. Their pock-marked surface, a sea green, smelled freshly painted. All the other reps, some guys Mack barely knew, were seated on his

side of the conference L. The table's opposite right angle housed the other side. Juney sat motionless there. A company is like its own country.

Even though Buchanan was easily overheard through the door, nobody moved. Mack didn't recognize who he was talking to by the name, and when the doors swung wide and Buchanan pushed his way through and to the head of the table, he still could not place the tall, clean-cut man who followed behind.

Silence. Like the prow of a ship, Buchanan jutted his shoulders wide to lean over the table and toward the mill men. With this commanding air of confidence and arrogance, the boss certainly owned the discussion from the beginning. Always good to have a meeting directly before the meeting. A confidence booster. Someone is backing you up. Mack would remember that next time.

The discussion began one-sided from the start. The unidentified man, Leon, had been called in from a neighboring plant, specializing in steel not titanium, which had recently modified its system. Modification meaning extermination of many of its employees for a smaller, less unified, hypothetically cost-efficient production system. Everything Mack's side brought up was pushed down with a quick reference to said document, numbers, and references to higher yield. For the most part, all remained still and numb, a vacuum of quotients and bottom lines. And then, it hit.

"In particular," Buchanan gestured with his hand toward Mack but not addressing the blue side of the conference table, "some of our units, like gate watchers..." Mack heard nothing else. It seemed as though Buchanan's words had been delivered with added emphasis, droplets of spit falling onto the cheap but waxed pine with the force of his teeth.

A bang rang out as Mack's chair struck the wall behind him. Standing up now, he glowered down at Mr. Buchanan. He had no other choice at this point in the game. "What exactly are we doing here?"

Buchanan answered as quickly as a piston cycle. "If you don't know, then I suggest you leave" Buchanan offered amusedly, scanning the partners to his right.

Juney mouthed for Mack to sit down and cautiously looked to the head of the table. Mack saw the gesture and suddenly regretted his temper. It was too late now. You can never back down from a fight. He swallowed and locked his eyes directly on Buchanan in the hopes of keeping the strength of his point intact. "If you can't understand what exactly it is we do, then how can you write us off. Some of those guys have badge numbers of eight and twelve, been around since the place started booming, and even then they didn't just watch the gate. We're in charge of fire control, emergency response--"

"Look, it's nothing personal Mack."

"Goddamn it, it is personal," Mack stated, sitting down after the weight of what he said resonated against the stale walls of the overcrowded conference room. Bodies shifted uncomfortably in this new silence. The electricity of thinking minds seemed to reverse within the air above the table.

Leaning back in his chair, which unlike the others had a pivot for reclining and wheels, Buchanan rested a moment. "Well, I think we've all said enough." Directing towards the union representative half of the table, "Would you gentleman be so kind as to wait here while we discussed a few details with the district reps outside?"

Something felt wrong, but no was not an option. Mack really didn't know where else to go with the discussion, if it could even be considered that now. He crossed his arms and waited.

There was no talk. Just waiting.

Although Mack wanted to believe it was longer, it only took about twenty minutes for Juney to push back in, spilling booze over his hand as he did so. Lifting the glass to his lips, he took a long swig, some of the spilled droplets which he avoided wiping off before now fell and spotted his tie.

"You sold us out. You goddamn sold us out," Mack flung at him, not waiting for his pathetic

excuses.

Squinting toward Mack, Juney bent over at a degree that should have caused him to lose his balance. "You were done before you got in here."

Most around the table sat speechless, wondering what this meant for their fates. Mack furiously gathered the papers in front of him and stopped abruptly in revelation. "What about Dale?"

"Look, he's my son and--"

"I know that, but we've worked together for pretty damn long. What the hell are guys like Fox and Marten going to do?"

Juney hung his head, placing the glass at the edge of the table. "There was nothing else I could do for you, any of you, Mack."

Although anger erupted once more, Mack felt no relief. They were all dismissed early that day with pay for a full shift. He moved in a daze, and only two distinct images imprinted on his mind. First, it was Bill handing out cans of his remaining Pepsi cube to all the guys around him. And Fox, he knew before he got there and had already called about getting a dog. He smiled as he hobbled to his car.

On Mack's way home, he went through the drive-thru of a MacDonald's he usually ignored. He hadn't had a Big Mac in years. Pulling up to the speaker, he wondered if they would be out of Big Macs. Instead of asking for one, he ordered a Quarter Pounder meal, "make it a large" instead. Then, he asked for a cheeseburger.

"Will there be anything else?"

He thought for a moment. Would there be anything else?

"Sir?" the tinny voice regained its presence.

Mack noticed a green flag with shamrocks at the right of the menu advertising the Shamrock Shake for the month of March. He needed a little bit of liquid luck. "Yeah, I think I'll take one of those green shakes."

Pulling the wheel around made more difficult with standard steering, he fumbled in his pockets for exact change. At the window, an elderly woman, with a nametag which read Marjorie, accepted his money. She retreated back to pick up his order. He looked around for signs of teenagers working hard to enjoy themselves, but there weren't any. She returned quickly and handed him the bag. Then, she reached for the cups, and as she passed them through the window, she smiled and said, "You know, I just love these things," directing towards the shake. "I wait all year for them." Before Mack could reply, she put her hand up to the headset to listen to another order.

"Thanks Marjorie," he said with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. She didn't actually hear him.

At home, Mack carefully unfolded the cheeseburger from its wrapper and broke it up into bits. He put one small bite within the cup of his palm and presented it to Dudley's nose. He sniffed and chewed carefully from the side of his mouth. Dudley wagged his tail and started eating more. Mack breathed now and got up to wash his hands.

After, Mack prepared his own dinner. He cleaned a glass from a pile in the kitchen sink. Never caring for straws, he poured the shake into the freshly cleaned cup. Then, after placing his burger and fries on a plate and grabbing a napkin from the holder, he sat down with his back to the blinking light of the answering machine.

After wiping his mouth with a napkin, Mack peered around his shoulder to the phone again. It pulsed still. Rising up, Mack wiped the crumbs from his work pants and plodded over to the portable black and white television resting on the countertop. After the knob twisted to on, the pinpoint at



the center of the television expanded until light and sound filtered throughout the now darkening room. Deep shadows embedded themselves at every angle in this new glow. And, Mack's own outline deepened as he stepped away from the pointing weatherman to sit back again.

But the silence was overwhelming now. Mack shuffled the undercooked fries along his plate, some snagging into the pool of ketchup. As he continued to circle his hand around the plate, Mack listened to Dudley breathing, the puff of his cheeks smacking against worn teeth and gum with one large breath. The entire sandwich was gone from atop the full dog food bowl. One stray fry fell from the plate and onto the wooden floorboards. Instead of bending to pick it up, Mack pivoted his boot until it hovered over the soggy food. The fry was mashed into the wood like a cigarette butt. Lifting his foot to examine the kill, like a child who purposefully steps on a slug for the first time, he remained neutral.

Wiping the squashed food up from the floor and the bottom of his shoe, Mack leaned his chair back on two legs, stretching until he could press against the message button of the machine. He waited, the buzz of silence tapping against his eardrums.

A breath from the recording. He held his breath. "Hello, Mr. Walters..." Mack continued to stare at the first message wondering what the news would be. And the answer began, "Is there water in your basement? Is a damp basement an uncomfortable basement? Certainly. And what better to slowly erode your foundation than the earth's natural eroder, water. If you have these problems or concerns, please call me, Chuck Lee, toll-free at 800-929-SEAL for a free estimate on your home.

Mack ripped a hunk from his own burger, letting the oozing cheese and meat to slide down his throat. It was good. "Hi Mack." He almost choked, and the shake only crawled down the glass, unable to quench his thirst.

This moment of panic past though, and Myrea's voice filled the room. Her presence blocked out the low muffle of the television news, and Mack could not bring himself to turn and glance at the machine once again.

"I found some of your things, bank statements and things like that, mixed in with my own. I can mail those out to you tomorrow." Her words did not stitch themselves into the air as he remembered but meandered softly like water over a creek bed. "But anyway, I just wanted to call and see how everything went at work today. I'm sorry. I really am." And then a moment of dead space, slight hesitation, but Mack jumped up and deleted it before the click of the phone, the finality of the call, could escape from her end.

His eyes traveled downward and fell onto the pile of neatly stacked newspapers and the unopened one he threw that morning. Now, nobody used the sports section for a coffee coaster, too busy delicately erasing answers from the crossword puzzle. She, Myrea, the one who should have been given the right to be called his "wife" always used a pencil and meticulously rubbed her eraser in one direction, entirely within the squares until the row or column was flawless again. If he ever did a puzzle, he used ink.

Mack trudged back to the remains of his dinner but held himself above his seat. He realized that he should have just ordered the Big Mac. He gave in, let her situation win. Myrea had always ordered a Big Mac and laughed about how it wasn't as big as her real Mack. She would bring them to work when they were first in love, and they would sit outside by the dirty river, never noticing the slicks of oil that flitted at the top. If they did, it was somehow sad and beautiful at the same time. He would skip stones, finished much earlier than her, but she would continue to take small bites around the bun and gaze at Mack over the sesame seeds. He could have sworn she would love him forever.

Mack stood there motionless for a few additional moments, unable to pin down any thought. These had turned into a black, writhing mass inside his brain. Realizing the now looming night, he



flipped the light switch at the back of the wall behind the butcher block. The toaster with its duct taped handle rested safely on all four legs. Pressing down, the tape held, but he only pressed harder, until the toaster did a somersault into the air toward Mack. Ripping it from the wall in mid-air, Mack smashed the appliance into the brimming trash and heaved the bag out, tying it as he did so.

The screen door slammed against the house siding as Mack hyperextended its spring, but it compensated and wasn't fully closed before Mack grabbed it again and returned to the kitchen. He would miss her.

After quickly cracking his neck from one side to the other, Mack strode over to the olive green Frigidaire. The warm light from the ceiling fan, which now churned slowly, filled in the shadows as he crossed the room. Swinging the fridge door open, he grabbed for the bottom shelf. A pop and crack sounded behind the still open door, and the can of Budweiser was soon empty. He tossed it toward the sink and watched it half-spin across the counter until the can, lip still wet, clanked down against the dirty dishes. He reached for another, stood and cracked it, and drank this one much slower, closing the door of the fridge with his left hand. Half gone, he drew the can away from his tight lips to breathe. His lungs filled and then attempted to expand some more. He pulled the next breath through his nostrils but stopped suddenly and looked toward Dudley.

The air had changed. Dudley sensed it. His groggy head lifted up from the pillow and pointed toward his owner. His tail thumped once. But after meeting Mack's stern eyes, he lowered his head back down and silenced himself. Mack's can softly hit the table top. Walking a few steps to his left, he was directly beside his dog. The puddle, more of a stain now that it had seeped into the cracks and material of the wood, stretched from a space beside the dog bed across the floor and underneath the black plastic vent at the bottom of the fridge. The floors had always slanted westward to a slight degree, but only at these moments did this seem significant. From the looks of it, the dog had attempted to get up, partially made it, and missed the pillow which would have absorbed the urine.

Mack's fists jutted out from the sharp arrows of his arms. They clenched and re-clenched in time with his pulse making the blue ridges of his veins protrude from the flesh beneath. The disinfectant spray still rested on the countertop where he left it the night before. Grabbing that and the roll of paper towels from the holder, he bent down and wiped at the moist wood furiously. "You stupid dog." Each syllable was accented and prolonged by his movements across the wood. "I'm sick of this shit. You hear me? Sick of it." He looked at the ashamed dog, which seemed to be turning away from him as much as it could. Mack brandished the wad of soiled paper towels and shoved it in the dog's face. He continued, "Look at this. Look!" And Mack shoved harder, remembering every night which had been the same for so long. No matter how often he took him out, carried him out to pee, the dog still peed on the floor. He had never done it, even as a puppy, and had been so much better than other dogs, right from the beginning. Mack had been so proud.

Dudley flashed his rotten mouth toward the wad, snapping at Mack's hand. Mack stumbled backward, landing on his lower back but quickly getting to his feet. His boot, now a foggy black, retreated back and almost connected with the dog's boney belly. But Mack held himself back. Dudley did not make a sound, only shifted on the bed. He threw the stained towel down, and it landed on Dudley's head accidentally, shrouding his eyes. But the dog remained where he was in his downcast position.

When Mack looked down at Dudley he almost laughed at the sight. This light humor quickly descended into his stomach, gaining weight as it went. The yarn of the day knotted there, tying everything else with it.

Suppressing the contortions of his face, Mack scooped up the limp dog. Some urine soaked into his own shirt as he carried Dudley outside to the front yard. He followed the footprints in the snow,

now icy molds.

Dudley mostly used the overgrown and intermixed clump of Lamb's Ear and Mint at the edges of the herb garden in his prime. Crossing over the patchwork snow, Mack brought Dudley down to his favorite spot. He held him up, positioned his legs wide for a sturdy stance. After the dog felt solid, he slowly removed his arms. Dudley stood there for a moment. "Go on boy," Mack said, remembering Myrea shooing him off repeatedly while he never did anything about it. Even let her work alone all those days while he addressed things he could no longer remember. Her fingers stained green with mint in the spring and summer from pinching and rubbing. She loved that smell, fresher than the freshest fresh from a bottle she would say. Dudley tottered forth a bit on his own but quickly crumpled down to the wet ground.

It was time, beyond time, for his old friend. Mack scooped him up again, pressed himself close. He mentally gathered what he would need as he walked back to the empty house—a clean sheet from the bathroom shelves and a blanket, the striped afghan that collected dog hair from the back of the couch, a shovel, thrown somewhere in the recesses of the garage, a gun, the M9 9mm semiautomatic behind the camping first aid kit in the coat closet, and another beer.

The ground broke free easier than Mack had expected. The unanticipated thaw in early March had softened the soil, ridding it of the deep frost, even though this layer of snow covered it now. Sweat clung to his temples, reflecting the glow of the waning moon. He shivered against the chill of the night and wiped the perspiration off with the sleeve of his browned Carhartt jacket. It was almost done, a good resting place for any dog, especially a worthy one. Beyond the lawn surrounding the house through the remnants of the summer garden and past the old corn field, this spot always seemed quaint to Mack. Nice mixture of deciduous trees, mostly maple and sassafras, with a little blossoming cherry tree standing central to the wood. That was definitely the spot, a perfect marker. Also, it had a nice view of the creek. He liked that about it and gazed his own eyes down for a bit while he continued to catch his breath.

Dudley curled up on top of the blanket and sheet behind him. Mack felt he watched his back while he worked, but Dudley only continued to rest his head. Mack couldn't turn to look at him until he finished his task. He realized he was probably digging deeper than necessary. The last stab of the shovel reminded him of his own anger, how he had come close to severely injuring Dudley. This thought triggered a paroxysm which shuddered stomach acid up to the back of his throat. He swallowed, but nothing was there. Tossing the shovel to the side, he squinted up, searching for the stars, but only found branches shredding the brilliant moon.

Mack turned and crossed his arms. He talked for awhile. Finally, Mack said goodbye. Taking off his right-hand glove, he kneeled and scratched Dudley's ears and head softly, rubbed down his back a few times, and patted his balding rear. He took off the other glove. Pulling the gun out, he turned off the safety and pressed the shiny barrel, vivid against the snow, to the back of Dudley's head. He continued to pet his front paws, so the dog wouldn't know. Dudley would understand; he would forgive him.

Mack knew he complained a lot, about everything, but mostly about work. But Myrea had always tolerated it. One day, she surprised him at work, her car packed up to the brim for camping and Dudley stretching from the front seat. He had jumped out to see Mack before the car stopped. He had seemed fine then. Maybe it was then that something happened that would only later affect him.

Mack had left his truck there, and they had rented a canoe. He caught a beautiful small-mouth bass. Dudley chomped at the small lake ripples. And Myrea smiled over her book on the reedy beach.

Mack patted the dirt and wiped a tear from his eye. The damp earth clung to the lines on his palms, a map of a river and its tributaries. His hands were stiff as he roughly rubbed them together. The deepest lines remained. He had forgotten his gloves which were tucked in his back pocket. Grabbing the shovel, Mack turned away to follow his tracks, now pointing the wrong way, in the snow. He tried to fit into their molds, but even his stride had changed now that he was alone. The house loomed ahead as he cleared the woods and entered the hillocks of the corn field. The fallen stalks he left to fertilize the dirt crunched and snapped as he past over their hollow shells. The brittle breaking of their frames seemed to echo across the valley and ricochet against the house's frame. He stood for a moment, imagining the trail of chimney smoke in the moonlight. He wouldn't go a step further.

Mack turned to his right, down the slanted field outside of his tracks. Here, the snow was untouched, but small rows of tilled earth, mounded up for spring planting, jutted out toward his brisk footfalls. He bounded over them to the edges of the field. But once he reached this seemingly untouched earth, he kept going. He lunged down the steep hill avoided on the tractor, where the incline always tempted the heavy machinery to tip. Long blackberry briars and multiflora rose with tendrils the purple of dried blood gripped at his jacket, as he entered that uncut area. He descended, bounding through the mass of foliage, using the shovel like a machete. Tendrils bent and curled back, allowing him to pass. The moon disappeared behind the hill.

Mack's foot caught. It was something like a trip wire. One briar arched over the ground but decided to delve into the earth again. The shovel went first, skidded down atop the icy crust and rested in the fork of two small trees. But he continued down the snowy hill, tumbling over himself. The hooks of the briars kissed his face as he went. He wished he had put his gloves back on and tried to reach for his back pocket. A shot echoed out. He felt the force and knew this is how he would die.

Mack found himself face down at the base of the icy slope. The barrel of the handgun still pointed toward him but not in reach. He spit blood and snow crystals from his mouth and realized that it tasted wonderful, like childhood. He put his face down to the ground again and ate some more. Then, a pain in his back reminded him of his wounds. He felt with his hand, not wanting to set his eyes on it just yet. There was some blood.

The tree limbs quivered in a small stir of wind. A twig fell. He started to pant, and the briar marks spotting his hands and face bled like leech bites. Mack tried to control his breathing, closed his eyes, and lay back against the snow, allowing himself to rest into the contours of the land, to trace the arching world above and below him.

But he did not die.

*Sarah Broderick, '06*