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## Five Fears--A Refrain

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## Stenson: Five Fears--A Refrain

### FIVE FEARS: A REFRAIN

BY

### PETER STENSON

#### Wind

Here's what I picture—wind blowing and blowing with the force of capped volcanoes and sheets of aluminum siding peeling, and then trees, their tops umbrellas, their roots taking clumps of earth with them. Cars next. Maybe vans because of their blocky nature and then maybe little ones because they seem light and then maybe all of them, the freeway going from congested to uncongested with so much as a gust, and we're crashing into ditches and all I hear is shattering windshields or maybe those are breaking bones.

So it was windy the other day here in Northern Colorado. Our grill cover blew off, our trash cans over.

I told my wife I was scared.  
She said, Can you not be such a pussy for once?

I said, Serious.  
Can we not do this right now?

It just freaks me out.  
Will you feed Sniffles? I have to go.

Okay.  
She left.

I fed the cat and I wanted to go watch TV upstairs, but that seemed like a bad idea, being on the second story of our row house while it was so windy, and here are two things I know about myself and wind:

1) I was young and had a giant head and still played with Ninja Turtles so I couldn't have been but five. The sky turned green. I said it looked like Ecto-Cooler Hi-C. My brother

laughed. My mom made us go to the basement. She said a tornado was coming. It was close to dinnertime. This was before cell phones. We waited down there and listened to the radio and the announcer gave us updates on where it touched down, and softball-sized hail, and I could tell my mom was upset so I started to cry. She said, We're fine, we're fine. I didn't believe her because she didn't hug me back.

My older brother seemed to then understand why she was upset. He said, What about dad?

That's when she cried.

I pictured my father blown into a million pieces. I cried, but not any harder than I already was.

2) I was sixteen, camping at Harmony Park for some stupid bluegrass festival. We were into those things, my eighteen-year-old girlfriend, Caitlyn, and I. We thought we were hippies. I wore a patchwork skirt in those days.

So I didn't really give a fuck about the music and found a guy who was selling L and bought ten hits for two bucks apiece. He poured five drops from a Visine bottle into the

hook at the base of my thumb and wrist. I licked them like a kitten. Caitlyn said she only wanted three so I ate two more.

The show was boring and I yawned and was spun really bad and I kept flashing everyone my stupid small penis and this was great fun.

Then it got windy.

Still being spring in flat Minnesota, tornados were a possibility. The sky turned green. I asked if it really was green. Caitlyn said, Yes, isn't it magical? She was so fucking stupid. Then it got really windy and the trees shook and people cheered and I started to freak out and wanted to go to the car and she said that was the worst place to be and when the hail came, she held my hand and guided me to the tent.

The nylon walls sounded like doomed sailboats.

I just kept telling Caitlyn that I was sorry, I'm so fucking sorry.

### Infidelity

Here's what I picture—everyone I've ever loved or cared about or known or passed on the street or seen on TV or heard of, all

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of them are in one big room with couches and beds and red satin pillows with golden trim and they're listening to a mix of my favorite bands—Phish and Blackalicious and Neil Young and MF Doom—and they are fucking and getting fucked and licking and cumming and pissing and every single one of them, these ex's and my mom and dad and brother and friends and enemies and people I wish that I was, all are thinking the same thing—if Peter was here, he'd fucking ruin the whole thing.

So about a month ago, my best friend, Alex, was getting married in Montana. My wife couldn't go. The wedding was in the middle of nowhere and I'm not one for nature, mountains and rivers and the like, but it was pretty nonetheless. It was fun because Alex and another friend of ours, Casoli, a fat Italian pervert, just got to hang out for a few days.

The night of the rehearsal dinner, I met the maid of honor. She was pretty sexy in a didn't-have-time-to-blow-dry-my-hair kind of way and I'd entered the age where I noticed if women wear rings. She did. We talked

about how cute Alex and Nichole were and she smelled like patchouli.

The next night, at the wedding, she looked really good in her deep blue dress and her hair all done up. She said I looked handsome. I wondered if this meant she wanted to have sex. During dinner, she gave a satisfactory toast. Then it was my turn. I killed it. Everyone laughed and clapped and I felt good about life.

When it was time to dance, she came up to me. She put her hand on my back. She said, That was the best toast I've ever heard. Her hand stayed there.

I told her thanks, that hers was good too, and she kept my gaze, her hand just inching down my tux. And I knew that if I really wanted to, I could fuck this girl, that nobody would know, that she probably had just as much to lose as I did so she wouldn't say anything, and here are two things I know about myself and infidelity:

1) When I was seventeen, my fragile little world broke the fuck apart when I saw Caitlyn kissing another man. We were in San Francisco. Caitlyn was there just traveling between

semesters at UW. I didn't know what I was doing. Both high school and my parents had recently said *thanks, but we've had enough*. We were at the Fillmore for a concert. The ball dropped. It was a new year. I wore a cape or maybe it was an American flag. I couldn't find Caitlyn. Even with the gram of molly I'd eaten, I still knew she was with Sean, her BFF from college at Madison. I knew they were fucking while I pretended to be in AA meetings back in St. Paul. The disco ball spun and it was diamonds and I saw them, their dreads different shades of the same brown. They kissed and it was magical, the desire and tenderness of Caitlyn's caresses.

First loves and we'd planned our kid's names and I'd pushed for Dresser for a boy and Portland for a girl and I wasn't doing well to start with, like just the day before I had locked myself out of the Econo-Lodge and broken in through the window and stripped to nothing and taken a piece of glass and sliced open my stomach and watched the blood drip down my thighs. I'd been trying to cut out my soul.

She was the only thing left, even if it wasn't love.

But I was kind of excited because it was finally a good enough excuse. I left the concert and found a bum named Tibbs and I used his needle, my first, and fell in love with the whirlpool that is heroin.

2) I was twenty and a few months sober and sitting in the Uptown Alano Club in St. Paul. Some chubby girl stared at me when I shared, week after week. Her name was Sarah. Her complexion was dark and so was her curly hair and one night after our meeting, she noticed me looking at the Star of David tattooed on her ring finger. She said it was a wedding ring.

You're married?

Yeah. Have a son, too.

Oh.

A month went by and it was still that stare and I wasn't fucking stupid, like I knew she was in love with me, and after one Tuesday night meeting, she asked if I wanted to grab something to eat. I said sure.

She drove me to the northern suburbs. I was quiet during the drive. She told me that she and her husband were pretty much over. I didn't know what

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to say to that.

I sat on her microfiber couch while she went to retrieve her son from the babysitter down the hall. There were men's shoes and men's jeans all over the apartment. Dinner was a Tombstone pizza, pepperoni. She put her eighteen-month-old son down in the crib thing right next to the TV. We watched Def Comedy Jam and I pretended to think it was funny. Then it was the game of accidental touches—feet, shins, knees, shy pinkies.

And when our fingers finally hooked, I wanted it to mean love.

We kissed. Her breath smelled like hot lunch. Her kid started crying. Maybe he understood I wasn't daddy. Sarah wore Adidas tear-aways and I thought this was trashy and she didn't wear panties and I thought this was even trashier. Her son fucking howled. She kept saying things like *you should leave, I can't be doing this*. I thought it was just part of whatever trip she needed to spin for herself. Then it was tears but I didn't stop and it was all so sensual. I worried about neighbors thinking the child was being abused. She

stopped. She yelled at her son, one quick shout—stop. Then she hid her face in her hands. Her black curls shook. She punched her naked thighs, repeatedly. She said fuck. She got up and walked over to the crib. I looked at the wall above her curls. A picture of the three of them at some lake, husband and wife and baby, fishing poles in hands, smiles. Then I looked where she'd been sitting. The lips of her vagina left a perfect imprint on the couch.

### Sexuality

Here's what I picture—I'm at the gym and I have had a good workout, maybe back and biceps, and I am in the steam room. It's late, fifteen minutes until the gym closes for the night. I'm not wearing a towel. Then the door opens and a plume of steam escapes and in walks an angel-faced boy, no older than twenty, and he has no hair anywhere and the thing I notice about him are his cheekbones, strong enough to build bridges with. And he sheds his towel. I think about leaving, tell myself the reason isn't the blood starting to fill my penis, but rather the

humidity, thick like first generation accents. And I can't stop it, my dick, and I lean forward to try to shroud this betraying part of me, and I'm telling myself that it doesn't mean anything and is a natural reaction and that it's a continuum, always in flux. Maybe this boy notices. Maybe he says, hey. Maybe that's all I need.

So at Casoli's wedding, just ten days after Alex's, this one in Louisiana, we all danced. We were all sober so this was nothing but discomfort but we tried. At some point, the other groomsmen and I formed a nice little circle, gyrating and grinding with one another. We thought this was so funny.

After that particular song, I drank a Diet Coke over by my wife. She used a straw with hers. She spoke with it still in her mouth—you're kind of a faggot, aren't you?

I laughed and told her not to hate and pecked her cheek and this is the only fucking thing I know about myself and sexuality:

1) I have had five sexual experiences with men. These resulted in sucking two dicks, having mine sucked twice, and a

hand job. Three of these experiences were for money, a grand total of ninety dollars in my pocket. One of these was part of a threesome. One of these was molestation.

And I know that I only came from receiving the hand job, my first time whoring when I was seventeen. We were in the bushes of Port Townsend, Washington. He was handsome enough in a son-of-an-apple-picker kind of way. He assured me all he wanted to do was touch. His fingernails were long and yellow like eagle talons. I didn't come from any of the others because it was either me giving or me being too high or me being ten-years-old.

### Relapse

Here's what I picture—a few years from now, I'm working some shitty job that I hate, selling insurance or something. Maybe we have a kid. I'm getting fatter. And maybe life is changing diapers and watching sitcoms and maybe we are out to eat and it's not a great place, maybe Olive Garden for our once-a-month date night. We spring for a babysitter. I see

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the shitty house wine and it's been ten years of not drinking and I look around and it's drab couples having stilted conversation and then I realize this is us, and I say fuck it, one glass can't hurt. One glass can never hurt.

So a few weeks ago, I went to go see Phish. According to the sobriety calculator app on my iPhone, this was my first show in 7.27 years or 87.12 months or 2,652 days or 63,642 hours. I went alone. I was excited. I bought a Five Hour Energy at the gas station. This was to be my little secret, my little upper gift to myself.

I made my way to the front of the floor on Fishman's side. I started talking with an older guy, maybe forty, fat with a Jersey ponytail. We talked about hockey and what songs they would play that night. Then he pulled out a film canister and I watched him dip his finger into it and rub a white powder around his gums. It was too white for heroin, probably coke or molly. He offered it to me. I dipped my finger in the canister without even a second thought. And then I brought it to my mouth and the thoughts came like what the fuck are you doing

and Jesus Christ and I was afforded the briefest of pauses, this guy looking away, and I wiped the residue on my pants. A few seconds later, I put my finger in my mouth, just a few grains still clinging to my skin. It was molly and I wanted to ask for more and the lights dimmed and here are two things I know about myself and relapse:

1) Frank was my best friend and had red hair and an explosion of freckles and dated Bridget, the girl I was in love with. This was in my early twenties, the three of us sober and working at a travel agency in downtown Minneapolis.

I was pretty into AA then and my parents talked to me and shit was all second chances and then one afternoon Frank and I walked around downtown trying to feel cool. A brother stopped us. He told us a story about being on a run from St. Louis and needing a hundred dollars for a locksmith, that his keys were locked in his car right there, that he couldn't have the police impounding it because he had the good shit--*not that stomped on tar comin' from out west*--and that he'd make it so worth our while.



I felt nervous.

This man slipped two purple balloons out from between his gums and said, Here's two tenths, got more in the car, clean rigs too, Starbucks over there got lockable stalls, this shit will get you so fuckin' straight.

And it was that moment of being outside of yourself, seeing yourself having choices, the proverbial forked path, taking the same fucking route and knowing that nothing will be the same and you're fucking everything up, but maybe that's bullshit because I said okay and we walked to the ATM and I withdrew a hundred dollars. Frank spun his lip ring with his front teeth. I wasn't sure if this was nervousness or excitement. We went to Starbucks. We blasted our veins full of pure fucking love.

I stopped using two days later because I still lived in a sober house and had piss tests and I didn't even get sick.

Frank didn't.

Two weeks later, he didn't show up for work.

Then there was the day when I came into the office and logged onto my computer and

put on my headset and I saw my boss come over and I was thinking I'd fucked something up, sent somebody to LAX instead of LAS, but she just sat down next to me. She was crying. She told me Frank passed away.

I didn't know what to say and I felt like I was supposed to be crying too and I thought about Frank and his giggle and this is what I kept hearing inside my head. I couldn't figure out how to make this not my fault.

I got up.

My boss touched my arm.

I walked to the windows that overlooked the first floor.

I saw Bridget, Frank's girlfriend. She was chubby and beautiful with her crowded lower teeth and she sat at a desk. Three other women knelt at her side, rubbing her back. Bridget wasn't crying. She stared at her monitor. I wanted to say something, to go down there and tell her it was all my fault, my money that got Frank using again, that I was able to quit and he wasn't, that I had just wanted it to stop—the crippling refrain of you stupid fucking piece of shit—that Frank is dead because of this.

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She didn't move.

This stillness was violent.

I knew she heard the same grade-schooler giggles. I wondered at what point they'd stop.

2) I was a little boy, eleven, and we were out in Wyoming at a dude ranch my parents owned. We sat in the hot tub, my brother and older cousin and myself. We smoked a joint. My cousin told us halfway through that it was laced with angel dust. The only thing I knew about angel dust was that Rodney King had taken it before he was beaten. We giggled.

I leaned back and watched the stars and I was higher than I'd ever been. The stars made the MTV logo. I told them this. I said, Serious, look. I pointed and they couldn't stop laughing. Then the MTV logo morphed into a pentagram. Like drawn perfectly into the sky and it pulsed and kept getting bigger and I understood in the very core of my preteen-self that I sided with the devil, that drugs were more powerful than God.

### Being Average

Here's what I picture—I will be a less successful version of my

father. I won't be as smart, having received my education at a small university in Minnesota instead of Yale. I will never play professional hockey in Sweden like he did. I will flounder from job to job instead of sticking with something for thirty years. I will raise my children without as much love, always pushing them too hard to do what I could not. I will never publish a book. The only people who will know of me will be friends and family. I will wait for my father to die so I don't have to work and I will not be a good steward of the money, as he has instructed me since I was a boy, but instead, I will squander it on things to make myself feel like I matter. I will die of either lip cancer or lung cancer before I should and it will be a small enough service to be held in the church I grew up in.

So the other weekend, I was back in Minnesota for my grandfather's funeral. After the service, I talked with my brother. He said how the eulogy made him think about how he was living, his attention so focused on work, how his balance between family and career was completely skewed.

It made me think about  
being famous, I said.

What?

Like everyone who would  
be there, you know?

He laughed. He said, That's  
kind of fucked up.

I didn't say anything, and  
we ate cookies from a store-  
bought tray, and I know two  
things about myself and being  
average:

1) My sponsor kept push-  
ing stupid sayings like *the  
miracle of the mundane, a  
worker among workers, finding  
acceptance in your allotment  
in life*. I thought these sayings  
were such bullshit. Like it was  
just blatantly giving up on any  
ambition. It was just a lie that  
people who'd fucked up their  
lives and marriages and careers  
and who stumbled into the  
rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous  
told themselves to keep from  
slitting their wrists. This wasn't  
me. I told my sponsor this when  
we went over my fear inventory  
during my Fifth Step.

He talked about how my  
character defects, the ones we'd  
just highlighted in my resent-  
ment inventory—rampant self-  
pity, selfishness, being judgmental—were basically all about my

refusing to accept the sayings I  
objected to.

I looked at him and his stu-  
pid orange goatee and narrow-  
set eyes. I said, But there can't  
be anything wrong with want-  
ing to be...

Better?

I don't know, I said.

Think about it, he said, the  
source of everything, all of these  
visions of grandeur, all of these  
defects of character, boil down  
to two things—the fear of not  
getting what you want, or losing  
something you have. Everything  
in life revolves around those  
simple things.

And I thought about it.  
About my fears and how wind  
was about dying and that was  
really about both losing some-  
thing I had or not getting what I  
wanted, and the same with infi-  
delity and sexuality and relapse  
and being average, all of them.  
About how I made every deci-  
sion based on these two things.  
How I was capable of hurting  
anyone in my life to protect  
myself from those fears. I hated  
my sponsor for his wisdom and  
I hated myself because it was  
all so fucking clichéd—my fifth  
step illuminating that my life  
was the common tale of a rich

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entitled fuck who can't get over having to keep a secret and the disdain for a loving father and a first love ending and the stasis of marriage and the fact that he is average, just fucking average, that he can't accept these things, I can't, the fact that this life will end without the fanfare I for some reason need, trumpets and tears and my work canonized, like all of this will give me the esteem that only drugs and budding love had once been able to coax me into believing I had.

2) Most nights, I masturbate in the bathroom of my study. I put the computer on the counter of the sink and stand over the toilet. Of course it's all so very sexy and I picture the girls in the video as people I know, and my wife is watching TV in the bedroom and Sniffles is clawing at the door and in those perfect moments when my abs tighten, I am not afraid of wind and I am so loyal and I am completely ignoring the cock in the porn and I am so much happier in sobriety and I will write a book beautiful enough to make somebody cry. And then at the moment of bliss, my lips curl to a grin, sometimes an

audible laugh even escapes, and the truest fucking voice inside of me says the same simple refrain—you deserved it, you will never be famous, you will give your life to heroin.