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THESIS TITLE: The Role of the Aesthetic in Literature and the Connectivity of Poetics in Creative Non-Fiction

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Thesis Abstract

This work consists of an academic introduction that addresses hegemonic influences within the field of Literature as it pertains to Literary Theory, and its predominant paradigm of Cultural Studies. The work inquires as to the whereabouts of the aesthetic as a theoretical discourse within the field. Literature, as art, is presumed to exhibit the quality of beauty, and yet there exists almost no dialogue on the topic of how a work achieves beauty, and sustains it trans-contextually. The work also puts forth the thesis that creative non-fiction is no less of a reservoir for capturing the aesthetic than our fictions. By combining aspects of both Platonic and Aristotelian modes of conception concerning the function of literature as revelatory, we can assert the notion that even the most mundane of events can be constructed, via poetics, into an intuitive meaning-making occurrence. As Burke suggests, it is connectivity that we seek, and by upholding this claim there manifests an opportunity for each of us to consider the stories of our lives emblematic of the story of humanity.

The academic portion is followed by a work of creative non-fiction that is intended to act as a demonstration of the above claim. Enabling the concept of the “Disclosure of the Mundane,” the piece attempts to use a variety of literary devices to translate a personal history into a general commentary, a particular set of circumstances into a template for circumstances of its kind, a subjective experience into evidence of an essential truth.

Key Words: Aesthetics in Literature, Creative Non-Fiction, Existentialism, New Formalism, Philosophy of Literature, Poetics.
Academic Introduction
The Disclosure of the Mundane

Poets who are of the more venturesome kind are under way on the track of the holy because they experience the unholy as such—Heidegger

* * *

I have chosen, for the purpose of this thesis, to write a creative piece. But it is not my ambition to be an artist or to express myself in an artistic fashion per se. The goal of my creative endeavor is the same as that of a scientist; I aim to prove a theory by enacting an experiment that serves to demonstrate the implications of my governing hypothesis. The side effect is that I have the opportunity to creatively express whatever I choose as my experimental topic. To that end I will kill two birds by using my foray into literature as a mode of entry into my original field of philosophy. This becomes quite pragmatic in the sense that my main theoretical point has to do with the role of literature in the dissemination of truths about the world and the human condition. And because we know that the fundamental goal of philosophy is to gain wisdom, the creative venture marks a landscape by which the relationship of these two crafts can be mapped and explicated in the process.
My hypothesis goes as follows:

- Generally speaking, the idea of the aesthetic has been either removed from, or quarantined by, many literature programs as they have moved more in the direction of a type of social science and further away from a type of art form.

- While I understand, and agree on some levels, with the need to be more scientific in our approach to the field, it seems as though the trend is threatening the place of the aesthetic not only as a central component of what qualifies a work as literary, but even as a peripheral defining aspect.

- For this reason, I will attempt to defend a few propositions:

  1. Poetic language enacts a kind of metaphorical logic that appeals to intuition via the aesthetic experience.

  2. Plato and Aristotle, though often thought to be representative of opposing paradigms concerning the aesthetic as it is manifested in poetics, can be fused to create a more holistic approach to literature and its privileged role in human connectivity.

  3. Every life story can be poetically told and thereby transformed into an allegorical tale.
The argument, if these three premises are found to be true, is that, because of the role of metaphorical logic in the aesthetic, and because of the bridge between the absolute and poetry, and because every life is a source of wisdom, literature in the form of creative nonfiction marks the aesthetic translation of the particular into the general creating a seemingly infinite source for revelatory human interconnectedness.

The final point being that given the role of the aesthetic as the connective power of poetics in literature, it should be resurrected as a more central focus of literary theory in the future allowing for students to explore the nature of how language becomes a revelatory act through metaphor, thus providing the opportunity for a literature student to learn why they are so moved towards greater humanity and humility by language artistically arranged.

I'll start by acknowledging that, again, much like science, the logic attempting to explain and defend the premises is inductive in nature, meaning, if well defended they will still be only probably true. Meanwhile, if they are proven likely, then the logic that would ensue from assuming these statements true by induction would result in a deductive argument. In other words, my claim is that, assuming 1, 2 & 3 are true, my conclusion regarding the function of creative nonfiction would necessarily follow. To be honest, I am not overly interested in this defense because I find it to be
intuitively the case, and so not in need of defense. Nevertheless, I will take some
time to elaborate for those who find the subject, or my approach to it, less than easily
accessible. After all, part of what is being argued for is that language, poetically
forged, allows for greater clarity. With that in mind, I will proceed in a slightly less
pedantic manner as I build in the direction of an example, rather than the exception,
that proves the rule.

*   *   *

Those of us who have been drawn to literature know that it is the power to
connect people on an intimate level by just the plotting of symbols on the page that
has caused us to take pause and pay homage. Such a simple, rudimentary task, can
somehow resurrect spirit, and traverse time. Language presents us with an
opportunity. What we do with it depends on both our aspirations and our skill. We
are capable of imagining well beyond our experiences, and because of this questions
about the world and our place in it push past the boundaries of observational
curiosity. The human condition is such that it is designed for empirically prompted
micro-evolutionary rites of passage, one of the most critical being the suffering of
existential angst at the hands of disenchantment. The onset of this condition can vary
greatly, but the results are limited to a pass or fail status. It is not until we encounter
authenticating events in our lives that we begin to truly seek our place in the world.
It is one thing to tell someone what happened to you, it is something else to tell your story. Therein lies the difference between history and allegory. While each of us has come to our own cliff’s edge at times in our lives, and each view has been uniquely its own, each has also been indicative of a kind of experience, the kind that alters paths and rewrites history.

She stares at a picture on the floor, framed by broken glass, the result of the most recent episode. She sees a descendant, smiling a reserved smile half looking away from the camera as if not wanting to be placed into evidence. And as blood drips from her mouth onto the glossy reflection, she begins to wonder how long her life has been a fiction.

We relate, whether or not we’ve ever been beaten, or delusional, or a woman. Of course, what I’ve written above is a fiction, but it is connective because it could easily have happened, and in fact has, give or take a detail or two, on almost countless occasions. For Aristotle, it is the power of the Poet, or Artist, to fictionalize a particular event and cast it into the light of general humanity. It requires the creativity and foresight of a craftsman to manufacture something that appears unique, and yet, has the intuitive power to forge correlations across time and place. Aristotle says:

The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse...it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars (Hofstadter 106).

Because the poet writes of something inherently universal, it goes beyond description in that it has the intention of not recounting an event, but of causing contemplation on events of its kind. It is this special province, set into language, which privileges literature. It is our tool for articulation, used unconventionally, metaphorically, to
accomplish the task of revelation that the literal use of language can only remotely begin to ascertain. Heidegger explains, “Projective saying is poetry: the saying of the world and earth, the saying of the arena of their conflict and thus the place of all nearness and remoteness of the gods” (Taylor 275).

When we consider Plato’s position, we have to take into account his metaphysical perspective. His Forms represent essences of beingness, and our existence, as a subjective being, separates us from pure form but is nevertheless made in its image. We are copies of original form and so is our world, but the pattern it mimics is real and true. For Plato, the closer to the Forms, the more true, the more holy, the more beautiful. And so, contrary to Aristotle, Plato does not privilege literature above history, in fact, its distortion from the literal can be considered a further departure from the Forms, and therefore falling even further from grace. For this reason he sees the status of Art as somewhat lowly. After all, the painting is not a tree, nor a picture of one, but a rendition of one. Even further removed is poetry, which further deadens the experience because it lacks the actual perception involved and plays only with the language of the idea: a copy of a copy of a copy.

Because Plato holds truth and reason in the highest regard for its nearness to the Forms, and therefore our rational nature as most worthy of emulation, he considers poetry somewhat detrimental to society because it thrives on the imitating of our weaknesses rather than our strengths. Art, in general, focuses on human frailty, emotion, fear and hope. It is always the caricature of humanity that is most
entertaining: our tragedies and comedies, not our rational temperaments. Plato has
Socrates explain to us:

So the imitative poet is clearly not naturally suited to imitate this part of the soul, and
his skill is not set upon adapting itself to it, if he is to be popular with the multitude,
but rather to imitate the resentful and complex character, because that can be
imitated well... for he is like the painter in making things which are inferior in point
of reality; he is also like him in being intimate with an inferior part of the soul, not
the best part. (405).

What is interesting is that Plato also believes that a poet is divinely inspired
and does not create so much by craft as by revelation. Socrates says, “For the poet is
an airy thing, a winged and a holy thing; and he cannot make poetry until he becomes
inspired and goes out of his senses and no mind is left in him; so long as he keeps
possession of this, no man is able to make poetry and chant oracles” (18).

This can come across as possibly contradictory in parts. The poet is in one
sense a kind of proclaimer of lesser attributes of humanity, and in another sense the
mouthpiece of the Gods. Plato does not, at any point, deny the enchanting power of
poetics, and in fact considers its ability to evoke great intimacy and emotion
something worthy of rescue from its otherwise petty status. Plato lets Socrates
indulge, “And perhaps we may allow those other champions of hers who are not poets
but poet-lovers to plead for her in prose, that she is not only delightful but helpful for
constitutions and human life, and we will hear them with favor” (408).

Plato’s tone is obviously one of endearment as he does consider literature to
be something special. But he devalues something very real by his subordinate
classification: the experience of awe, pure and questionless, that is generated by
aesthetic revelation. Baruch Spinoza, in his work, Theologico-Political Treatise,
explains, "Prophecy, or revelation, is sure knowledge revealed by God to man. A prophet is one who interprets the revelations of God to those who are unable to attain to sure knowledge of the matters revealed, and therefore can only apprehend them by simple faith" (13). While Plato recognizes poetry as divine in nature he does not then connect it to truth accessed in a way other than through reason. Plato sees philosophy and poetry at odds because one seeks rational understanding and the other seeks to avoid it. It is then up to us students of literature, "poet-lovers," to make her case. It is up to us to demonstrate why poetry is the yin to philosophy’s yang.

So much eludes us, literally, that we need a more connective mode of communication to demonstrate the kinds of truth that our experiences testify to and our language fails to make sense of. This is what allows the logic of the metaphor to make meaning beyond what our language is typically limited to. Aristotle, recognizing something like poetry for its abstraction of the actual experience of say love, also admits that the imitation still has a residue of that original form it represents. It has an essential component that accounts for its aesthetic quality. There exists a lineage that a work of art brings to consciousness and confirms in our souls.

I think (taken together then) we can create a category that presents us with a meaningful, understandable and justifiable approach to truth regarding the human condition. By combining the skill of literature to the already outlined canvas of ordinary life, we have an endless bounty of allegorical tales to be told. It maintains Plato’s nearness to Forms in its historical value of being the telling of actual events in
the world, while making use of the vastly more connective force of poetic language
by creatively accessing the more universal aspects of a particular event. Both Plato
and Aristotle were guilty of an underestimation. On the one hand, Aristotle did not
believe that history could become poetry. And on the other, Plato did not believe that
poetry moved in the direction of objectivity. On a general level they were both right.
Typically history is just facts, and poetry is just subjective. But when we talk about
what makes a work a Work of Art, we are no longer talking about the typical.

This, of course, all assumes a privileged ground for what Kenneth Burke
refers to as “poetics.” Our normal use of semantics needs to be distinguished from its
aesthetic use. Of the distinction Burke, in The Philosophy of Literary Form, writes,
“While attempting to uphold the thesis that there is no basic opposition between the
ideals of semantic and poetic naming, that they are different rather than antithetical in
their ultimate realistic aims, I do grant that there is a ‘dialectical process’ whereby a
difference becomes converted into an antithesis” (139). Burke is on a mission to
explicate rhetoric as a tool for human identification. As such, while recognizing the
importance of semantics as a technical methodology, he opts to explore poetics for its
metonymical power. As he says, they are not directly antithetical, since they are both
intended to bring clarity, but they almost become so in that their dialectical
methodology functions on fundamentally opposing principles. In other words,
regular semantics works directly, while poetics works indirectly.

“Why does it matter?” someone might ask, if they were to happen by this
piece. At this point it may not be clear as to why I find it necessary to bother
with such distinctions—beyond the fact that such distinctions can be made. As I suggested before, those of us who are drawn to Literature are lured. Though most, as a reflexive response, would consider beauty subjective, it is my contention that it is not, that when translated properly, something rightfully called a “Work of Literature” will produce an aesthetic experience. Some will say, “I don’t feel anything tingly inside when I read this poem.” To which I would simply respond, “Your tingly faculty must not be working as well as it could be.” After all, for those of us who believe in such a thing as intuition, all any of us can say to those who don’t experience it is, “I’m sorry.”

At various points in all of our lives, providing we live long enough to think mortal thoughts, we will experience moments of clarity, revelation, connectivity, that will be properly categorized as ineffable. Literature does not allow for those moments, but rather, allows for those moments to become shared and to become our source of moral responsibility in a universe that often appears indifferent to the antics of clever little factory building rodents such as ourselves. It is the aesthetic, encapsulated in a metaphor, which testifies against solipsism, makes meaning and generates purpose.

It is easy, for someone who has ventured along the existential path with due diligence, to reach the point of anguish, where reality seems to be a hazy outline. Whether or not there is intuition, experience is our manner of function. So, searching our experience for meaning and truth leads us to the realization that ideas about reality have to be articulated—translated into a symbology that cements understanding. Furthermore, we discover that our language is crude and is marginally equipped to make clear the most rudimentary facts. Yet, we know that our lives admit of more complexity than words can encapsulate, and we are forced to consider
the possibility that we may not be able to demystify our existence without turning it into child’s play, into checkers, into arithmetic, and thereby doing it an injustice.

A model like this is disconcerting; it makes us cogs in a wheel. Perhaps there is interconnectedness, in that we play our part, but we are faceless in this regard, equations being worked out. The inaccessibility to truth beyond the facts of our daily experience wrenches us inward. The failure to describe what we intuitively feel to be the case leaves us as impotent as witnesses who are only capable of a vague description and thus, are no help to the proper authorities in nailing the assailant. Meaning dissipates into a nihilistic realm, and as the shadow of forlornness creeps in threatening to blot out the light of optimism, something happens (if we’re lucky): satori! Words declare themselves true:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them pressed me suddenly to his heart: I’d be consumed in his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure, and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying (Rilke 5).

It is the aesthetic experience that rescues us, the immediacy of the event—of an intuition being enlivened. This is our evidence: that we take in a work of art, that there is beauty in a symbol’s ability to convey what literal statements can only barely suggest. The metaphor is the window to the soul reminding us that we are not alone, that this reality is shared, and that meaning exists outside our conscious construction because someone, as Rainer Maria Rilke would say, has brought us to a “portal of freedom” where world is, and we are, in unity.

It is this sort of connectivity that Burke sought to demonstrate as crucial to our humanity. Poetic language is the clearest, cleanest expression of objectivity that we
have as subjective beings (outside of math perhaps). Each aesthetic moment is a unitary phenomenon that can only be understood as the experience it is. Though each of us experiences an aesthetic moment as our own, each of us who participates shares the same basic moment of clarity, and with that comes the acknowledgement of the other as joined in the process of originating meaning and seeking self-discovery. James Herrick, in discussing Burke’s analysis of rhetoric, describes it thus, “Symbolic interaction is possible,...precisely because it recognizes and appropriates the hidden sources of identification among human beings as symbol users...By recognizing and building on our consubstantiality, identification among people—and thus healing from the wound of our separation—becomes a rhetorical possibility.” (224)

The existential quest, which looms in the crevices of our consciousness, is not just a search for meaning, but a search for connection, for unity through identification. It is one thing to feel your efforts are meaningless, it is quite another to feel alone in your meaninglessness. This is where my thoughts on literature reside, in this realm of deriving value and appreciation through the intuitive connections made via the aesthetic experience.

Moving in the direction of literary theory for a moment, the issue at hand, that needles away at my curiosity, has to do with the path that it has forged for itself. The movement through structural and post-structural forms, through critical studies, into the post-modern and eventually cultural studies, and all the splinter cells in between, has been as impassioned as it has been non-committal. I understand the force by which empirical tendency travels, that given our nature, perception rules our
judgment. And, philosophically, I understand the difficulty in creating dogmatic modes of interpretation. We want truth badly, but we fear false idolatry even more. And so, as the pyrrhonist might, we offer only speculation as such, and refrain from casting judgment. Believe me when I tell you that I appreciate this approach. Humility serves us well. But I would argue that, even the pyrrhonist takes sides. For what is ataraxia if not the freedom to choose an interpretation that one deems fit for the soul.

My concern is related to a movement within the field of literature known as New Formalism. While the movement itself, like all controversial dogmatic claims, has its own varieties, Normative New Formalism is where my concerns are a bit more directly addressed. Marjorie Levinson, in describing this faction of literary thought, says:

Predictably, normative new formalism assigns to literature a special kind or concept of form, one that is responsible for its accession to literary status in the first place and that remains an integral property of the work. As Rooney explains, “a call to honor form” is the “vehicle of a narrower project, a defense of the literary” (25), taken by normative formalists to be an endangered species. Through its formal address, literature is said to solicit a set of responses that work to enhance and sustain our humanness, which, in these essays, is equated with our susceptibility to pleasure, our somatic self-awareness, our sense of shared humanness, our sense of wonder, our awareness of “the non-centrality of the subject-position” (Koppen 802), and so forth, achievements said to be under siege by the collective forces of modernity and by the more restricted ranks of new historicists (560).

Levinson acknowledges New Historicism as being a type of catchall categorization of the more recent socio-cultural deconstructive literary theories. I will reference Cultural Studies specifically, but much like Levinson I am referencing the larger, more conceptually metaphysical, implications of the thinking that informs theories of its kind.
I look to reseat the aesthetic much like the Normative New Formalist because it is an essential defining feature, but more importantly, because I consider our acknowledgment of it as the essence of what we call a Work to be fundamental to experiencing a work of art as such in the first place. Without the intuitive connectivity of the aesthetic experience, works would never become Works, and we would not spend so much time conceiving of endless modes of theorizing in an attempt at the articulation of purpose to postulate about, so that we may enter into our lively, somewhat anaerobic, manner of healthy, heterogeneous debate.

Stuart Hall, representing one such mode, talks of articulation in his precising sense, as a form of connectivity. For Hall articulation is not used so much in the sense of bringing meaning through linguistic clarity, as it is in demonstrating and linking potential areas of interrogation. He explains, “An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time.” (141) There is a pragmatism to this approach, as I mentioned, and a humility; but I am a little apprehensive about the form it takes.

Hall says things in the vein of protecting his kind, like, “I am not interested in Theory, I am interested in going on theorizing” (150) The problem I have is that only when we settle into a theory can the real interrogation begin. The idea used in scientific method called falsification is implemented for just this reason. We understand that science is theory, and at best highly probable, but no doubt uncertain. So with falsification we are not humble in the sense of knowing our place and not
venturing too far from it, but rather, we choose a theory, that which floats best, and, mindful of our limits, of the fact that we know we may be wrong, we continue to test out theory daily, rigorously. As a result, we sleep at night with as much confidence that a humble creature is allowed within the parameters of subjectivity and reason. In philosophy we call this justified true belief, and it is how we can invest in ideology while retaining our prudence.

This distinction regarding humility within our approach to knowledge is one that Spinoza drew upon. While such an attribute is considered a virtue to most moral theories, Spinoza recognizes a pattern of self-loathing in much of the way that humility is employed spiritually. In his work, *Ethics*, he tells us:

> Humility is the pain arising from a man's contemplation of his own weakness. Now in so far as a man knows himself by true reason, to that extent he is assumed to understand his own essence, that is, his own power. Therefore if a man, in contemplating himself, perceives some weakness in himself, this does not arise from his understanding himself but from the checking of his power of activity. Now if we suppose that a man conceives his own weakness from understanding something more powerful than himself, by the knowledge of which he measures his own power of activity, we are conceiving only that the man understands himself distinctly; that is, that his power of activity is assisted. (183)

I believe this to be an important aside because I get the feeling that our world, and by that I mean, the western world, is turning increasingly towards its weaknesses, its vices, and becoming masochistic in the process. It seems that, according to an almost habituated cynicism, white America has ruled for far too long, so that now we take great pleasure in blaming it. To that end, any form of categorization becomes a tool of the regime, an attempt to stereotype, and therefore demean. To relate it directly to our topic, I believe that Hall's approach to cultural studies has its importance because we should not be presumptuous about our interpretations. It
serves us well to consider the different associations that exist and explore the synapses across which distinctive links are fired upon. Nevertheless, we should not fear taking up residence on those plateaus that reason, or intuition for our purposes, has brought to bear. A categorical claim regarding the aesthetics of literature allows for the testing of implications and the progress of knowledge. To only hypothesize, on the other hand, is to create a conditional statement that waits for a confirmation that will never be sought; e.g. if we are only to theorize for the sake of “going on theorizing,” then we will only ever circle truth and not approach it. We hypothesize so that we may categorize.

I understand that, perhaps, Hall is motivated by the humility our own naturally fallible subjectivity displays when we theorize and articulate the way he speaks of. We will be slower to judge, and more open to interpretation and less likely to fall into transitory paradigms. And I am for all that. But at what expense when the desire to keep us from being judgmental, prevents us from participating in the aesthetic experience. When the subject of “literature” is less about the magic it creates and the truth it reveals, and more about the speculative angles, it ceases to be art. I am not suggesting that cultural studies is to blame, so much as I am suggesting that it has overcorrected.

James Berlin, coming from a similar position as Hall, writes:

The aesthetic is not a universal characteristic of the best literary texts, always and everywhere the same. The aesthetic is a coded feature of reading and writing practices that must be considered in relation to the other codes with which it customarily appears. Its purport will vary across time, even during a single moment, as its function is created and construed along a variety of lines (99-100).
I do not entirely disagree with this description; I believe it is a coded feature, and that it is also a universal characteristic. The question is whether that is a contradiction in terms. My contention is that the most compelling literary texts have codes which when broken open will display a universalistic bloodline. Whether it be a ritual that is connected to humanity as something all humane culture ritualizes in one form or another, or a response that is indicative of a coping method that all compassionate people will attempt to employ in their own way. The subjectivity of the particular method does not completely disengage itself from the ancestry of the general mode. The expression is unique—its need to be expressed is not.

When the aesthetic is attached to the existential, rather than the political (as is often the case with cultural studies), then there is less fear of totalitarian thought and more potential for what cultural studies is after in the first place: tolerance. In this way, we can see that in the attempt to avoid categorical conclusions, in order to foster openness, the field of literature has closed off certain interpretations as destructive to the cause, and has thereby made itself guilty of a similar destruction.

*I don’t read literature because of the many ways it can be deconstructed (though that aspect is often challenging and fruitful). I read literature because of the existential value it has, because of the meaning it gives my life, because it found a way to express what I knew but could not say. The logic of the metaphor, the ability to paint ideas with words, is what makes literature a defining aspect of what it means to be human. It’s not just the ability to communicate, inspire, and relate this way—but our need to—that is at stake.*
There is an Eastern premise that orbits my mind with seasonal regularity, “You can’t know it, but you can be it.” (Lao Tzu 14) We are constantly trying to know things, understand them fully (By we I refer to those who frequent the existential struggle, “Dasein,” as Heidegger might say.). But as I have suggested, as philosophy suggests, there is little room for certainty in our heads. Not in any conventional sense that is. Reason works at its governing of knowledge. It manages, compartmentalizes, sorts and files to no avail. We still don’t know the answers to those metaphysical concerns that haunt us. Nevertheless, our hearts naturally seek understanding, if not, identification—something to anchor ourselves to, something to prevent us from being ever adrift. This is where intuition arrives like a messenger pigeon from amidst the fog. It is through intuition that we come to know, because we come to be—connected with. To know about suggests something other, but to intuit is to recognize truth in itself, as it is linked to the essence of being in general, and can therefore be reduced to being in particular.

Spinoza, in describing what he calls the “highest conatus” of our being, gives us an idea of the nature of intuition and how it is conceived. (Note, that for Spinoza, God is the singular Substance of the Universe, Nature itself, the entirety of beingness.) He writes, “The third kind of knowledge proceeds from the adequate idea of certain of God’s attributes to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things, and the more we understand things in this way, the more we understand God. Therefore the highest virtue of the mind, or its highest conatus is to understand things by this third kind of knowledge” (Ethics 214) Anyone who has lived a considerable time on
this earth has experienced a kind of intuition, and knows quite well that moment of clarity of which we speak. There is no great description for it, or grand defense for its phenomenological status. There is only certainty. There is only the revelatory moment and the resounding “yes” that affirms it.

What is of interest to me is how that phenomenon takes shape in the aesthetic realm, and more precisely, in literature. The poet becomes prophet, and through beauty and metaphor, resurrects something essential in our being that is immediately received, remembered and returned to its origin within us. All truth, as in the Platonic sense, is already to be had. Our thought, language, communication, is all articulation of what we come to discover to be so about the world and ourselves. I take articulation to its more conventional definition, that of clear and distinct facility of meaning. But as we forge semantically onward we discover that literal uses are cumbersome. We cannot carry all the weight of meaningful experience in the technical application of a term. There is more to the experience of a thing than its description. And so poetics becomes necessary; it is the language of the prophet.

Ralph Waldo Emerson says:

If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men. The metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables oracles, and all poetic forms. (276)

Now, reconsidering Hall and his ilk, and the idea that there shall be no reduction made with regard to literary theory and interpretation, we need to consider the absurd, that which frequents the existential process: the constant reminder that the
world is, quite probably, beyond our mental grasp. Lawrence Grossberg, in investigating some of Hall’s notions, touches on something only peripherally, but important. He notices that, “We can deconstruct any text, disseminating and fragmenting its meaning into its different contexts and codes, displacing any claim it makes to ‘have’ meaning. Yet, particular texts are consistently read with the same meanings, located within the same codes, as if they were written there for all to see.” (Hall 157)

Here again is our phenomenological mind set at work. This happens. People read texts from different cultures, and different eras, translated or not, and are moved by the same aesthetic force of meaning. How is it that something so contextually different than my own, seemingly, can still relate so poignantly as to generate genuine inspiration? There are factors that transcend time and place because they can be reduced to essences of being-in-the-world. It is a matter of humanity’s truth having no language barrier once elevated to the status of metaphor and poetics.

Taken to the level of paradoxical speak, Burke, in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, discusses identification in the sense of its affirmation of division and sameness simultaneously. We have the need to identify because we are separate and different beings, but we can identify because we are *consubstantially* the same kind of being. We are cut from the same cloth and therefore share essential properties that make identification and a unity of spirit possible. (21-23) So when Lao Tzu says, “The name that can be named, is not the eternal Name” (1), the paradoxical nature of the statement is a non-issue to those who receive the meaning. It speaks directly to the
truth that our language is ill equipped to house many of the greater, more connective imaginations of the mind. And so, while the statement announces the separateness between language and meaning, thereby acknowledging a cavity in communication, the recognition of truth, and the immediacy with which it is brought to consciousness, simultaneously establishes an identifiable thread of unity that allows the chasm to be crossed.

*It is not just that there exists the aesthetic moment (Call it divine. Call it revelation. Call it what it is: the crescendo of awe.), but that an aesthetic moment can potentially exist for each and every moment of being. The mystics go this way, talking about the meditative process, and how our reconnection with the interconnection can create a state of perpetual joy. Such is the nature of heaven, and of almost every eschatology ever invented, that our search ends in bliss. Bliss is truth; Nirvana is truth; Blessedness is truth. I need not travel that far to make my point, and I won’t bother arguing a spiritual cause here. That is not my aim; I only draw correlations because, like Hall, I can.*

If we take this premise I’ve been expounding, the premise concerning the aesthetic as meaning-making (a premise I call The Disclosure of the Mundane), and consider its implications, I think we have something promising. Heidegger sets it up for us when he says, “At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary, uncanny. The nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by denial.” (270) We pass by and ignore, and prevent truth’s happening daily. And daily it returns to its post that we may be unassuming long enough to recognize ourselves in it.
Rilke also discusses our objectification of world that stands in opposition to our acquisition of objective knowledge. It is a self-imposed affliction that has become an impoverished tradition. He writes, “What’s outside we only know from the animal’s countenance; for almost from the first we take a child and twist him round and force him to gaze backwards and take in structure, not the Open that lies so deep in the animal’s face” (47).

Like Rilke, Walt Whitman sees the reservoir of beauty all around us and reflects on the majesty of the ordinary:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is chef-d’oeuvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,  
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statue,  
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels,  
And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the farmer’s girl boiling her iron tea-kettle and baking shortcake (55).

They don’t write for themselves, for the record of their internal discourse, they write because they seek to share a discovery, because there is something that should rightfully be shared, something that belongs to all of us.

And see here, we have the poetics of prophecy in the lines of these two “Language-makers,” as Emerson would say. Who could not acknowledge the intuitive force with which the truths they enliven come to consciousness? So long as your head is atop your shoulders their words claim certainty. “What then,” one might ask, “happens when one sees beauty, and another does not?” It is no different than when one applies arithmetic correctly, and another does not. In that case, our answer would be, “Someone is not reasoning properly.” Likewise, in the case of beauty, we answer, “Someone is not intuiting properly.” There are many causes for the failure: naivety,
distraction, confusion, in other words, headlessness (and not in the egoless Buddhist sense so much, as in the not quite presently or fully aware sense).

Yet, some may argue that beauty is relative, and intuition a myth; and that, even if there existed such things, they remain on the other side of being, on the plane of forms beyond mental grasp. To that, all we shall do is remind them of the power of metaphor, of how when the literal fails us, analogy saves us. When cultural boundaries halt communication, we simply move into a reduction of humanity to its most fundamental modes of being. We get primitive, moving in the direction of brevity through gesture and mimicry, and whole ideas are shared, and confirmed in each other’s eyes—because we are separate and the same.

Consider, for example, that in science we categorize, we reduce into classes, genus, species, etc. Because we discover essential components by which lines can be drawn we are able to codify in a sensible fashion. Philosophy will testify to the fact that those lines are very subjective in the sense that lines can be moved, but objective in the sense that the attributes exist and are shared. Why is that different in terms of psychology? A monism vs. dualism debate aside, do not our various forms of communication, including art, speak to attributes in common, and is that not a kind of reduction being evidenced by not only how we communicate, but what we feel the need to communicate about?

I don’t claim to have put forth an exhaustive argument, but I think the claim is, for the time being, well defended. In the meanwhile, I will just take a moment to add a note about certainty, which according to reason, lies in the logic of deduction.
Empirical method relies on basic inference rules for its deductions, but those rules are intuitively so, since we have no proofs for their truth value other than to say that the world can only make sense to us if these are true, which amounts to saying that we can’t imagine the world without them. So to deny intuition is to deny the validity of the basic rules of logic on which all of our science and math relies. To go further, all that we apply to empirical method is based either in experience or abstraction. Those that come from experience are necessarily doubtful, because experience is, by design, susceptible to misjudgment. And those that come from abstraction are still framed by experience in that without a posteriori knowledge, a priori-ness would be inaccessible and insensible. In other words, experience provides symbols, and without symbols abstractions cannot take on a form for inspection. And here we are, back to metonymy and the central role it plays in the dissemination of knowledge.

This aesthetic principle is based on the idea that the experience of beauty is none other than the experience of truth given elegantly to the mind and its senses, in a form that demands immediate apprehension and reflection. Because it is truth, and because there is consensus, it fertilizes the ground for connectivity in being. This gives us the hope that the existential pursuit had been after, because each aesthetic moment is an act of gravity that brings us towards each other. There is meaning and purpose in our action because there is something essential in our action, something which lexical definitions fail to reveal, but that poetic language somehow does.

Knowledge is beautiful, and therefore aesthetic. And though some knowledge appears tragic, it is only our ignorance as to its necessity for our being that colors it
this way. We conclude that, theoretically, the knowledge contained in every historical moment can be accessed aesthetically. And, considering our consubstantiality, every life, even the most typical, should, according to this theory, be able to reveal the essential truths of inhabiting this earth in this form.

* * * 

I am left with my two goals: one lofty and the other presumably achieved. What we have succeeded in establishing, or re-establishing, is the need for the aesthetic moment to reclaim a primary role in literary theory. The reason we even bother with literature is because it is beautiful. So, to enter into an academic pursuit, motivated by revelations made textual, and to come to find that academia is not very interested in examining that quality that makes a work a Work, is disheartening to say the least and disenchating to be sure. To discover that so many hours will be spent posturing angles of interpretation, primarily for the sake of posturing, is to consider surrender. What is implied by the current dictum in place is that the wizard we longed to meet has no magic for us, only vague words of advice, like fortune cookies.

Once again, I understand the intentions of the field as it stands, and its desire to promote diversity of thought and openness to possibility. I just find that, much like the separation of church and state, academia should provide the boundaries but not the path. Perhaps it will be said that the purpose of purely theorizing is just that, to provide guidance and not dogma. But we cannot, in the process of academic
investigation, proceed without first presuming. We cannot be afraid to classify incorrectly in an effort to access more clearly. So let us presume that the aesthetic is the closest the agnostic will come to the holy, and we can move cautiously in the direction of a reduction to terms that might proclaim our connectivity. At worst, we will have investigated a metaphysical corridor and noted its futility. At best, we will have become alchemists.

My other goal is what we are now leading into. Assuming I have argued well enough to convince you of not only the centrality of the aesthetic in literature as an important existential platform, but in its ever present potential to be revealed from the ordinary, or mundane, I will set my efforts towards providing an example of my own. I liken the process to translation theory and the difference between literal translation and paraphrasing.

One of my causes includes the privileging of creative nonfiction. To me, the transferring of an event from its historical place to the elevated status of its aesthetic place is a mode of translation. The literal telling is a history, while the figurative telling is a narrative. I find John Dryden’s internal debate between the literal and the figurative modes of translation to be apropos of what the transition from history to creative nonfiction requires. He says:

A translator that would write with any force or spirit of an original must never dwell on the words of his author. He ought to possess himself entirely and perfectly comprehend the genius and sense of his author, the nature of the subject, and the terms of the art or subject treated of. And then he will express himself as justly, and with as much life, as if he wrote an original: whereas he who copies word for word loses all the spirit in the tedious transfusion (31).
Along those lines, I would consider empathy to be that which allows us to connect to another’s history. When we create a work of art we are admitting by its very nature, going back to Plato, that it is a rendition, but we are also acknowledging that it is worthy of being rendered in that it is both a testimony and an homage. The simple retelling of a life’s story lacks the force of the actual experience. Depending on how well it is told, how much we can relate, how much we care about the life in question, the story’s affect may or may not be felt beyond the particular. But when we are not hampered by the literal, and we are free to pronounce the story’s essence—its reductive metaphorical properties—the history becomes parable. And while many of the facts may become somewhat blurred, an equally important truth can be clarified. While focusing on the particular, only our person can be seen, but by panning outward lines dissolve away and humanity comes into view. Herein lies the disclosure: that all life is allegory, that every life is a scripture, a testament waiting to be revealed.

With that laid bare, I set down to perform my experiment, to take my own otherwise mundane history and translate its truth. Not its facts, not its particulars, not those things which makes it mine, but its insinuations, its generealities, those things that make us we. Looking again to Dryden’s comments concerning translation, my endeavor is in accordance with this summation:

For, after all, a translator is to make his author appear as charming as possibly he can, provided he maintains his character, and makes him not unlike himself. Translation is a kind of drawing after the life; where everyone will acknowledge there is a double sort of likeness, a good one and a bad. ’Tis one thing to draw the outlines true, the features like, the proportions exact, the colouring itself perhaps tolerable; and another thing to make all these graceful, by the posture, the shadowings, and, chiefly, by the spirit which animates the whole (23).
Ironically, one would be doing an injustice to simply recount an existence without using whatever tools available to breathe life into a faithful rendition. How much would be lost if the choice of words, or their arrangement, or their implications could not invoke a resurrection of the person’s spirit at those crucial moments when their very humanity was at stake? Is it not mimicry, translation, art as metonymy, as metaphorical logic that provides for the reduction of personhood to a person, housing it in a communicative manner, a manner of symbol-making that allows for the intuitive discovery of our consubstantiality, of our unity of being-in-the-world, and of our intrinsic responsibility as compassionate moral agents?

*(If my life were a vegetable, then it would be a head of lettuce.)*

*Mine is no epic. It is no mind-bending suspense thriller. It is no fairytale ripe with its cleverly conceived archetypal cast members. There have been no great pains, nor great triumphs. It is what it is: a microcosm, an analogy whose correlation to the lives of others should signify its status as another lens by which the truth we share can be brought into focus. May only good come from recognizing ourselves in each other; no matter how clouded the ancestry, or fragmented the lineage, that we might stop looking elsewhere for the meaning that orbits our everyday ontology.*

*(For even if it is just mostly water, lettuce is still a vegetable.)*

While there is reason to fear homogenization, let us not be fooled into thinking that life is not circular, that too far in one direction will not eventually land us in that very spot we desperately sought to avoid. The answer to not over-
simplifying, then, is not to over-stratify. Again, I think that we can defer to intuition. I think that those whose compassion and good sense are well aligned will find it easy to accept that distinctions are pragmatic, and yet indicative of larger truths—that there is no contradiction in acknowledging that we are separate and the same. Derrida writes:

If we consider the survival of a text that is a legacy, the narrative or the myth of the tower of Babel, it does not constitute just one figure among others. Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another, of one place in the encyclopedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us (218).

I only want that we ask ourselves, “How?” How we get by, how we make sense, how we connect, how we let ourselves disconnect. “Why” is the epitome of uncertainty, and yet if we allow ourselves to contemplate how (to indulge our heart’s curiosities concerning such phenomena as the aesthetic), the reconciliation of, or at least, the acquiescence to why can be achieved.

And we: Spectators, always, everywhere, looking at, never out of, everything! It overfills us. We arrange it. It falls apart. We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves.

Who has turned us around like this, so that always, no matter what we do, we’re in the stance of someone just departing? As he, on the last hill that shows him all his valley one last time, turns, stops, lingers—, we live our lives forever taking leave. (Rilke 51)
The Tightrope Walker
A Story of Alchemy and Gravity
Prologue:
A Turtle's Tail

Clever talk can confound the workings of moral force, just as small impatiences can confound great projects—Confucius

* * *

Life is a phenomenon. It is a strange dream that we eventually get used to and lost in. We move forward in time, in search, in flight, but memories tug like reigns on our soul, keeping us from getting too far from home. Our experiences shape us. But our memories keep us. Like shelters from the long, cold seasons of forlornness that accompany our existential impulse towards self-discovery, reflecting on the experiences we've lived keeps us warm and safe from the perils of uncertainty.

We trudge through the landscape of our lives in pursuit of something we've only heard of, following an amalgam of signs and landmarks that legends have sustained. And as we grow weary—because we always grow weary—it is our memories, these winter asylums that we stumble upon in the wild, these feral igloos that provide us with a much needed rest from the trials that loom impatiently over our daily endeavors. It is, maybe, the most important thing that we do, ever: we remember—and thereby, discover our selves and our kind.

Amen.
I misspelled “tail” in the fourth grade. I’m still not sure how it happened. I had a gift, or, at least, I was in what they called a “gifted” class.

* * *

Could gifted children misspell single syllable words? Maybe I was “special.”

Mrs. Melintock, a leggy, feathered blond, with creamy skin, conservative pumps and strawberry lips, said to me, “Your word is ‘tail.’ The happy dog down the street was always wagging his tail.”


Her face tightened around the mouth and her eyes fell. “Oh my. I’m sorry. I’m afraid that’s wrong. You’re going to have to take a seat.” Her astonishment was only a fraction of my own.

I was knocked out in the first round, before over half of the class had even been given a word to spell. I kept waiting for some very official looking individual to come into the room and escort me out of the gifted program forever. I’d be relocated to a remote bungalow where we ate crayons and tried to capture farts in our hands and share them with our hundred year-old teacher/caregiver who delighted in guessing what we had for dinner the night before.

With my pride firmly tucked between my legs, I dragged myself back to my chair. Careful to keep my chin pinned to my chest, I fought the urge to search out the snickering packs of creatures and destroy them with evil eye.
I spared Mrs. McLintock's hyena cubs that day, not because I was a merciful and benevolent young being, but because, in truth, they were innocent bystanders instinctively attracted to the scent of humiliation. Nobody wants to fail. Nobody wants an audience for their failure. But more than that, nobody wants to admit that they have only themselves to blame.

The memory is a mosquito swirling around my head, a silly mistake by a nine year-old lingering like a juvenile delinquent outside a liquor store. What could it mean?

* * *

I was shopping by the pier in San Francisco looking for novelty gifts. Barton, a college friend of mine, had an appreciation for the obscure. I was checking out some turtles, little Chinese turtles. They were supposed to represent prosperity I think, or luck, or long life.

*I think it's long life. Turtles live long don't they?*

They were carved out of wood and stained a glossy red. I was thumbing through the pile trying to find the perfect one: symmetrical, good detail, no chips or scratches. After some obsessing, I picked the turtle and went to stand in line. My mind wandered off to thoughts about swimming the frigid waters from Alcatraz to
freedom, and what it might be like to bask and bark all afternoon as the seals do. The line shrank, pulling me from my thoughts. I paid for my perfect turtle and a red trolley shot glass that had caught my eye from its strategic location next to the register.

Heading out the storefront I found Hillery peaking out from behind an ice cream cone with guilty, yet unrepenting eyes.

“Busted.” I said.

“I couldn’t help it.”

“Whatever you say, sweet-cheeks.”

“What’s in the bag? You get me something?”

“No baby-doll. Not everything I buy is for you.”

“It should be. If you loved me.”

I felt my eyes roll up under my eyelids reflexively. “Fine. Here.” I handed her the shot glass that was headed for home as a souvenir anyways.

“Thank you.” Her coy graciousness was followed closely by a flirty lick lusciously gathering in a band of chocolaty escapees that rapelled, ever so slowly, down the sides of her sugar cone. “Mmmmmmmm.” She added with a smile.

Blinking out of my tempted imagination, I reached into the bag and pulled out the turtle, displaying the prime specimen in the palm of my hand. “It’s for Barton. It means good health, or something.”

“Oh my. Well, I’m afraid your turtle doesn’t look so healthy. He’s missing his tail.” Her astonishment was only a fraction of my own.
“What! How the hell did I miss that? Son of a bitch.” I flipped around and started towards the gift shop, dejected by my always surprising (yet shouldn’t be) brand of incompetence, when something occurred to me...

* * *

I wouldn’t call Ben a friend, only because I equate friendship with longevity. But, at the time, we were pals and we were heading to Sonoma State to catch a soccer game. I used to be on the team (I had a falling out with the coach) and Ben had always wanted to be.

Ben got to suit up for the team once. In the off-season we had a scrimmage against Humbolt and we were short players. Coach invited him to join us knowing how much it meant to him. Everybody was stoked for the guy. He blushed as he slipped the jersey over his head, grinning like a hyperactive child standing at the gate of an amusement park.

Sonoma was one of Chico’s rivals, so it was always a big game. Ben didn’t have class on Fridays, and I had no qualms about skipping class, especially when Tantalus dangled sweets like a road trip, alcohol, and what promised to be a good match. Ben agreed to drive, but we had to make a stop along the way. I didn’t mind since it meant I could get trashed to and fro.

We climbed into his tired old car. I don’t remember the make and model but if I had to hazard a guess I would say it was a bluish rusty piece of crap. The car fit
Ben, not that he was a piece of crap, but that it was an unassuming creature. It didn't look like much, but it was reliable and it had an oddly welcoming charisma. Both it and Ben were American born and bred with a wide squarish build and a little more under the hood than one would expect.

Heading west from Chico, there was something liberating about the spontaneity of our quest. The tree covered streets acted as a launch pad firing us out into a bright cloudless day. I'd hung out with Ben before, but never just the two of us. He was the kind of guy you’d call from jail. The windows were rolled all the way down since we had no A.C. and the A.M. sounding radio blared classic rock as we charged the empty back roads leading out of Butte County.

I forget where we stopped, the name of the town anyway. It was a retirement community more than halfway to Sonoma. Ben’s grandfather lived there alone. We had picked up some alcohol along the drive and my buzz was fermenting at the mild but effective stage of development. Walking around the shady complex down winding paths felt adventurous. I remember being fascinated by the shrubs and the ivy—I started feeling like maybe I was high, hiking through the lush surroundings, expecting a parrot to jump out at me, or maybe a lemur, but it was probably the combination of Malt Liquor and the hot mid-day sun that was instigating some light-headedness.

Ben’s grandfather was great. He was funny and warm, and he said things that made me feel like I had a lot to learn, without being preachy. He was Ben fifty some-
odd years from now and I couldn’t help but notice how happy Ben was to have had this visit. I got the feeling that grandpa was not as well as he let on.

Before we left Ben went with Gramps into the back room to get something. I sat in the living room taking in its history and personality. The room was not uncomfortable or stale like old folk’s homes can be. It was cozy, relaxing, contemplative. My eyes hovered around the room like a hummingbird. I began to pick up a prevailing theme. Gramps had a thing for turtles.

There was a collection of figurines inconspicuously dispersed throughout the room. It wasn’t creepy, like collectibles often are. It was endearing. Each piece looked consciously chosen and placed. There were no weird looking ones with bug-eyes or bright coloring. Nothing demanded attention. They were subtle, as all humble creatures should be.

Ben came back with an old shoebox under his arm, “You ready?”

“Yup.”

His grandpa walked us out to the porch and gave me a gentle handshake goodbye. “Nice to meet you.” He said.

“Yes sir, thanks for having me.”

“Any time. A friend of Benny’s is always welcome.”

He turned back into the house after a hug from his grandson. My eyes panned down the length of his slender frame as the door closes behind him. Turning to head down the walk, I noticed one last turtle hidden in the bark. It sat near the waterspout
guarding the hose, quietly blessing all those who came to visit. Something else
cought my attention and I kneeled to take a long look.

Squinting to be sure it wasn’t the alcohol, I reached for an interesting piece of
bark. I lifted it out of the shade into the afternoon sun and stared for a moment.

“What are you doing?” asked Ben, who realized I wasn’t following behind.

I turned and held out the bark in the palm of my hand. “Does this look a little
like a turtle to you?”

He squinted and pondered, “I don’t know.”

“Here, you see? It looks like it’s sitting on a log.” I traced the shape with my
finger and held it at just the right angle.

“Yeah, it kind of does.” He agreed and was only slightly patronizing about it.

“I’m going to carve it, bring out the shape better. Then you can give it to your
gramps for Christmas or something.”

“Cool man.”

“Your Gramps is cool, man.”

“I know. He is isn’t he.” Ben smiled a proud affectionate smile.

We were back on the road. Ben had a pocketknife in his glove compartment.

I got the feeling that just about anything I could ask for, within reason, would be in
his glove compartment, or under the seats, or in the trunk. It was a Swiss Army car.

We had picked up a couple of forties of malt liquor—cheap and strong—and I had
my feet on the dash, whittling away on my sculpture.
Some hours later and we were into the second half of the soccer game. Our team was down by a couple of goals and I was officially drunk. But I wasn’t a complete heckling menace to the opposition as I would normally be in this condition. I was laughing and talking with Ben about the game, the near misses, the bad calls, and carving my turtle.

By this time I’d done it. The suggestive shape of the bark was now made explicit. There was my turtle, resting on a log. I even chiseled polygonal puzzle pieces on the shell adding to its details: a small mouth, a slightly cocked neck, and offset feet.

Ben was impressed, almost as much as I was, but my obsessive nature was magnified by the alcohol. While I inspected it, neatly finished in my hand, I began to spy tiny imperfections. I couldn’t help myself. I started to surgically remove them like little benign tumors. Unfortunately this artist was drunk, and not a surgeon, and tiny imperfections became small. Small ones became complicated. Until finally, a stubborn notch near the rear broke free causing some collateral damage.

“Awwwhh shit.”

“What happened?” Ben enquired.

“There’s been an accident.”

“What kind of accident?”

“Turtle lost his tail.”

“Don’t sweat it man.”

“He has nothing to wag. How will anyone ever know when he’s happy?”
“Gramps has enough turtles with tails. This one will be special.”

“Do not mock the misfortune of others!” I shouted in drunken sarcasm.

“He’ll have to go back under the knife. Pray for a speedy recovery.”

A few nerve racking procedures later and things were looking up for our young accident victim. The cost was a slight disproportion on his back end. It was something many people wouldn’t give a second thought to, like thin lips, but it was something that poisoned my weak, fanatical mind. I was powerless to fight off the urge.

Once again I wielded the pocketknife, ignoring Ben’s kind observation that it was “fine” the way it was. Sure it was fine, it just wasn’t right. This called for one final surgery. It wasn’t to be invasive, just cosmetic, like a chemical peel, or laser tattoo removal. I wanted to regain the symmetry by shaving a layer or two in strategic places. It was to be a simple outpatient procedure. But, at the hands of an inebriated butcher, it was never going to be simple.

I peeled lightly here and there, little by little, and was heading for a surprisingly uncomplicated end, when, not surprisingly, I had a lapse in concentration. With a careless flick of the wrist our turtle was again a victim.

“Fuck.”

“What now?”

“I ruined it.”

“No way.”

“Seriously dude, I fucked it up.”
“What did he lose this time?”
“A leg,” I said mournfully.

Ben laughed.

“Fuck. This was going to be so sweet too. Damn it!”

“It’s all right man. You can just get him something else.”

“But this was perfect, man. This was the one.”

“Dude, there’s always something else.”

I ignored his comforting words and began anxiously cutting away, reducing the creatures stature hoping I could work its stump into something meaningful. But my frustrated temperament dealt a final, fatal blow.

Ben watched intently, baring witness to a tragedy. “Oh shit! Was that his head?”

“Fuuhhh-ck!”

Ben tried to be helpful. “You could cut off the rest of his limbs and say he’s taking a nap.”

“Have you no respect for the differently-able?”

“He’s decapitated.”

“Shhhhh. He’s right here.” I whispered sympathetically.

“He can’t hear me. He’s decapitated…and he’s bark”

Holding the casualty in my gently cupped hand, I tried to make amends. “I’m sorry little log-sitting turtle. I’m not sure what went wrong. I’ll notify your next of kin.” I poured some of my forty onto the grass. “That’s for you, bro. God bless.” I
chucked the bark into some bushes to join, once again, into the samsaric cycle of being.

Ben and I took off after the game. We met up with the team back in Chico and partied all night. That piece of bark faded into the history books. It was filed away somewhere, who knows where, neatly at first, only to be eventually mislabeled and misplaced with time, as is the destiny of all memories. But it would not go meandering off beyond hindsight, not yet, not before fueling some serendipitous reflections.

Ben’s grandfather died within a year of our visit. I had meant to carve him another turtle. I never did. I rarely go back and finish things that I’ve put aside for any length of time. The irony is sad. It was supposed to be a modest gift. It represented good luck and long life, and wisdom. But my lack of modesty killed it, my lack of patience, of wisdom. Haste is a tricky thing, born from an abundance of confidence and a deficiency of forethought. It survives because most days it is applied to inconsequential endeavors. But it is the rare moment of consequence whose sacrifice stays with you. I never got to wish Ben’s grandfather good luck and good health.

That has always bothered me, not because Ben’s grandfather held a special place in my heart, I hardly knew the man, but because my failure in this regard was indicative of human tendency. It seems that, more often than not, we let things go unsaid, and therefore leave them unfinished, and regrettable so. There is nothing more deteriorating to the soul than regret.

* * *
I don’t write enough anymore, letters that is. I don’t know why, because any
time I do I find it rejuvenating, reaffirming. But you have to have someone to write
to. Journals are good to keep, but writing to another body, another bumbling being
out there in space is important. We need to know that there are people who are cut
from the same cloth, whose thoughts loiter the same haunts.

Dear Barton,

I hope everything is going well. We were in San Fran last week. Anytime I
go somewhere interesting I wonder what it would be like to have you around,
commenting strangely, trucking alongside. I picked you up something, a turtle; you
kind of remind me of one—you walk like I imagine a bipedal turtle would walk if
he had somewhere to be. It’s supposed to bring you good luck; I think. I tried to
get you a good one. There was a big batch of them, most of which were pretty
dinged up. So I grabbed this one. It looked just right. It was only afterwards that
I realized his tail was missing. (Did I ever tell you that I misspelled “tail” in the
fourth grade? Is that sad? Of course it is. Stop laughing asshole. We’re trying to
have a moment here.) I was going to take the turtle back, but then something
occurred to me. I didn’t realize, until now, that I had been meaning to give this gift
for some time. I know what it looks like, but he’s not really missing a tale.

You remember Ben don’t you? I met his grandpa once. He collected
turtles...
Chapter I
David the Goliath

*A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it—Camus*

* * *

It's hard to tell the difference sometimes between dreaming and remembering. So hard, in fact, that you wake up the next morning mad at your wife for taking your son out of preschool to go to a Beatles concert (And you’re more mad because you weren’t invited.). Except, the Beatles haven’t been a band in over a quarter century and your son is yet to be conceived.

The problem is that dreams aren’t always so strange, and life often is. The more nonfiction we’ve lived, the more fuel our imaginations have for their fictions. But what we come to find, after enough experiences, is that we couldn’t possibly make up some of this shit. Our lives are epic tales.

*Each and every one of them.*

* * *
I started with David. Not David and Goliath, for he was the goliath of this story and I was the meek. The stories aren’t entirely different, though this one is lacking in the specific moral compass that guides the original.

David was an older brother and a younger brother. He was the third of four boys whose names all began with the letter “D”. The youngest of that bunch, Dylan, was one of the first friends I ever had in this world. David was a nemesis in many ways, as most older brothers of friends tend to be. Such is the nature of that office. On occasion, when action was slow going in the neighborhood, titles were set aside and peace would reign. These brief periods were rare, like lunar eclipses. This story took place during the waning hours of one such period.

*I wish I could describe David so that you could see him as vividly as I do, but there is no way of escaping the generic—though he was far from it.*

He was tall to an eleven year-old, with sandy hair, blue eyes, light skin, a couple of freckles here and there, slim but strong. He had his father’s angular jawline, protruding brow and broad shoulders. What I remember most about David was his laugh and his temper. Both were explosive.

I often felt like another sibling in this household. Each boy was separated by two years, and I was two years younger than Dylan. Except for the fact that I had dark brown hair and eyes and tan skin, I was a comfortable fit—taken in like a wolf pup raised by bears. They all knew I had a bad habit of picking my nose and laughing at the misfortune of others, but somehow that was endearing to them.
Maybe they shared my strangeness, or maybe they knew it was better to befriend a wild moon-howler than to cross one.

This particular afternoon found me in the Lowman residence playing board games and waiting for the midday cartoon lineup to begin. We hung out in their new living room, an addition Mr. Lowman had recently completed. The sliding glass door that once led to the backyard now acted as a partition between the kitchen and this entertainment room. There was a fireplace and a cabinet full of games and a TV. Dylan was making Kool Aid, while David and I played backgammon...peacefully, for the moment.

* * *

“Fruit punch or grape?” Dylan asked from the refrigerator.

“Fruit punch!” I yelled before David could respond.

He looked up at me with disgusted eyes. “Grape!”

“You’re crazy. Fruit punch is way better. FRUIT PUNCH!”

“My house, my choice. GRAPE!” He raised his brow as if the debate had been settled.

“Well I’m a guest in your house and you’re supposed to cater to guests. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners? Fruit punch for your guest, please.” I posted a satisfied smile.
“You’re no guest, you’re a freeloading Mexican Jumping Bean who’s only good for yard work. Fetch me a taco to go with my GRAPE!” He finished with a loud yell that blew my bowl-cut bangs into the air as he leaned over the game board and poured humid breath across my cheeks.

My eyes squinted shut as a defense mechanism and my nose scrunched into my face searching for cover. With my head cocked to one side, I opened one eye to see if the coast was clear.

Dylan walked into the room wearing a pink mustache with a glass of fruit punch in one hand. He tilted it back taking a long swig before pulling it down and announcing, “Ahhhh, yeah! That’s what I’m talkin’ about.”

I turned back to David and sang him a little ditty:

Ha, ha, fruit punch is yummy.  
I love fruit punch for my tum-tum-tummy.  
Grape sucks butt.  
Fruit punch for me, hee-hee-hee.

Dancing my way into the kitchen, my spidey-sense picked something up from the rear, and I ducked as a pillow winged past my head.

“Aye, fix me a glass, beanner.”

“I’m not Mexican.”

David laughed, “You speak Spanish and eat burrrr-itos don’t you? Your Mexi all right, no doubt about it.”

“Ha, ha, real funny dumb-ass.” I turned to the kitchen and fished out a couple of glasses. I grabbed some ice and filled each one to the rim. Feeling like it was my sworn duty to retaliate on behalf of the institution of heritage in general, I took in a
mouthful from one of the glasses and began to gurgle quietly. A little swishing about, front to back, side to side and plop, back in the glass.

“Grape my ass, try gross on for size you big dope.” I whispered to myself.

I walked back into the room smiling like a good kid, “Here you go buddy, enjoy.”

David stared suspiciously, “What’d you do to my drink, beaner?”

“Nothing amigo. Drink up.”

He looked around surveying the glass from several angles. I watched and slowly raised my glass for a sip.

“Hey! Gimme your glass.” He demanded.

“No, this one’s mine.”

“Hand it over pip-squeak, or else.”

“Or else what, tough guy?”

“Or else you’re going to wish you had.” He leaned in pumping his fist in dramatic fashion beneath his chin.

“Fine.” I handed him my glass with a pretend look of dejection and took his. Then I turned towards the kitchen to empty the supposedly tainted glass.

“Hmmph.” He sneers as he threw back a large gulp. “Not Grape, but not bad.”

I turned on the sink and pretended to pour out my glass, fighting the urge to laugh as the old switcher-roo had worked just like in the cartoons.
Hats off to good old Bugs Bunny.

Dylan’s eyes found mine for a moment and I raised my finger to my lips as I mimed what I had done. We exchanged sheepish grins as I headed back in. I noticed as I sat down that his glass was already half gone and a giggle squirted out of me.

“What’s so funny?” David asked.

“Your face.” I gave the standard issue reply.

“Oh, good one, lettuce-picker.” He wasn’t amused, but he turned his attention back to the game at hand and I dodged a bullet. “Let’s go already, it’s my turn.”

“No way, it’s my turn.”

“Nooo, you just went.” He insists.

I responded mockingly, “Noooooo, you just went.”

“You callin’ me a liar.”

“No, just a wacko.” I laid it down for him, “I rolled doubles, you got mad, then you rolled some shitty number and moved these two pieces, then Dylan made fruit punch, you lost your mind, and now it’s my turn.” The matter-of-factness may have been too dry for his brand of humor. Even at eleven, my sarcastic tone was finely tuned.

“Bullshit!”

“You’re a cheater. CHEATER!”

“I’M – NOT – A – CHEATER!” Spit flew from his mouth drenching me.
Again my face contorted reflexively and I replied like Benny Hill doing his impression of an English gentleman. “Could you please try not to spit when you talk. It is really quite rude.”

His face began to fume as a red wave came up through his neck. He hollered inches from my face, “I’ll spit-Tah, any-Tah-ime I wan-Tuh-ew!”

By now I needed a bar of soap and a towel. At least his breath smelled like fruit punch, though I would never say so. Things weren’t going well at this juncture. Still, I could have navigated a path to safety. But that wasn’t really the style of a daring devil. There always existed a coveted combination of buttons that, if pushed, would produce the utmost chaos, while allowing for the slimmest possibility of escape. The aesthetics of such a feat could bring grown men to tears. I chose my path.

Keeping with the English theme, I started in again, “Goodness, I must say, your breath smells like crap. Have you been putting your head up your ass again?”

“What!” David yelled.

“You heard me, shit-breath.”

See now, there would be no turning back after that, simply because it made Dylan shoot fruit punch out of his nose and laugh out loud. At no point is making someone’s sibling point and laugh at him or her a good idea, especially a younger one. From this moment forward a peaceful resolution was not a viable option. Backgammon was over. Fruit punch, forget about it. Afternoon cartoon line up, not today. There was an unscheduled matinee in the works.
David flung the game aside with one paw and shoved me with the other, throwing me backwards tumbling onto a pile of logs in the corner of the room. “I’m gonna kick your ass shithead!”

From my back I responded, “I thought we covered this. You’re the one with the shit-breath, so naturally you’re the shit-head.” I maintained a cordial tone though my heart was beating through my shirt.

I began to stand patting the wood chips off my clothes. I didn’t think he could get any redder, but there it was: beet red. I thought the vein in his forehead would burst and the mess would surely bring this whole incident to an end. No dice.

He lurched up from his chair, “You’re dead, fucker!”

That was more bad news. You see, we might have been potty mouths, as far as kids go, but we were still at the stage where “fuck” was only used as a last resort, like if someone stole your bike, or if your skateboard went into a speed wobble down a steep hill and you suddenly hit a rock. Or, maybe, when your last nerve was being stomped on by a smug, condescending little piece of shit Puerto Rican kid four years your junior.

There was no doubt he meant what he said, and so I answered the only way I knew how, “Touch me and my big brother will kick the shit out of you.”

David paused, ceasing to advance momentarily. This new bit of information had to be taken into consideration.

I had an older brother, eight years older to be exact. Achilles was too old to be seen hanging out with us kids. He had graduated from high school and
was living with his biological dad for the summer. So this move was a bit of a bluff on my part. Certainly, Achilles would kick anybody's ass I asked him to kick, but chances are by the time he returned from visiting with his dad all the swelling would have gone down and I would have gotten over this whole ordeal. Hell, I would have been knee deep in some other predicament by then. All I was really after here was a few seconds to get my wits together and plan an escape.

Frustration burned in David's eyes as he weighed the consequences. But Dylan, delighted by the whole thing, proceeded to stoke the fire.

"He said you have shit breath. Ahhhh-ha-haahh." Dylan laughed himself off the couch and his pounding the carpet floor in joy sealed my fate.

"Your brother can't help you now, fuck-face. I'm gonna to beat your ass."

His eyes studied mine as I glanced over at the sliding glass door that stood half open. My eyes then snapped across the room as I checked the screen door leading to the back yard. I was closer to the screen, but that meant going into the back yard and having to hop a fence, and David would surely snag me before I could make it over. Like in the old west, we held still waiting for the slightest flinch.

Finally, I broke for the kitchen. If I could only make it out the front door I would have the advantage, like a Great Dane chasing a squirrel. No luck though. He cut me off.

"Nice try, asshole." David shoved me as I attempted to leap through the opening. I flew sideways and headlong into the sliding glass door with a crash.
“Ow, shit!” Popped out of my mouth as my shoulder banged up against the glass.

I played possum for a second like I was really hurt.

The sound of me bouncing off the door was loud enough that he might wonder if he had gone too far. I mean he had no problem beating me; he just didn’t want to break any bones because then my parents would talk to his parents.

I writhed a bit longer before scooting into the kitchen and making another go at an escape. He was wise to me though, and another push sent me straight into the dining room table and flipping over a chair before sliding across the linoleum and smashing up against the wall.

As I scrambled to my feet yet again, he lumbered towards me with his paws outstretched. He picked me up, as I attempted to squirm like a trout, and lifted me off the ground. Pulling me in tightly, chest to chest, slowly he began to squeeze the life out of me. A bear hug to finish me off.

He squished and squished, breathing hot angry breath in my face, my legs flopping uselessly a foot off the floor. I wiggled and moaned and wondered if I’d be able to hear my ribs cracking soon.

As the blood spread to my extremities like a water balloon gripped by a clenched fist, I started to think that this battle was sadly anti-climactic. Air squeezed out of every pore. It wouldn’t be long now before I would be too winded to fight back.
There had to be another option. *James Bond* always found a way.

Then, as I dangled helplessly, I became keenly aware of my knee’s relationship to David’s crotch. And as luck would have it, I was a budding soccer star. I could kick the crap out of a ball, and I was about to knee David harder than I’d ever knee anything in my entire life.

*It’s important to note, that much like the “F” word, once uncorked, a kick in the nuts could never be taken back. You’ll always be known as a nut-kicker. They’ll say things like, “Watch out or he’ll kick you in the nads.” Or, “You better cover your balls, he fights dirty.” Of course, there was a certain measure of value that could be gained from such a reputation. I mean, people always thought twice about picking a fight with someone who might go for the ding-dong. One had to really decide whether the risk was worth the reward.*

So there it was, the moment of truth. I looked into David’s demented eyes as he smiled at the thought of victory. I let myself go somewhat limp so as to encourage him to relax a bit. Then, as I felt his grip soften, I pulled my leg back, and POW! Rrrrrright in the pisser.

David’s arms flew apart like a stubborn bag of potato chips exploding open. With cat-like preparedness I landed on my feet and darted to the front door.

*Now...here’s the sadistic part.*
I pulled the door open, moved to the threshold, and then paused. I couldn’t
help but turn around to survey the damage. Like driving past a terrible accident, I had
to look.

There he was, bent over, both hands cupping his groin. He trembled in
place for a long while before attempting any other function. Perhaps sensing my
eyes, more likely realizing the door hadn’t shut behind me, his head rose up slowly.

I remembered hearing something about him having had an operation
recently. I wasn’t sure what it entailed, but I had heard he had trouble going
number one for sometime afterwards. I delighted in that extra bit of trivia,
as that fact, no doubt, magnified the current situation somewhat.

His expression confirmed my thoughts, as his face unveiled a red so deep, it
was purple. Clenched teeth created a Darth Vador-ish sound, which was made more
evil by a throaty growl that rolled up from his belly. Spit shot out with each forced
exhale. The picture was made complete as he opened his squinting eyes wide and let
out a roar so primitive that I found myself transformed from boy to gazelle.

Time to go.

With one motion I flipped the lock on the knob and whipped the door shut
behind me. As I turned the corner of the walkway in a dead sprint I heard him bang
into the door and pound on it furiously. I snickered at my cleverness. It must have
bought me at least five seconds.
Plenty of time.

I switched from secret agent to ninja mode weaving my way through yards, over hedges, under branches. I knew this route better than anyone. I had run it hundreds of times during games of hide-and-go-seek, cops and robbers, or while hurrying home late for dinner with Dad whistling for me from the backyard.

With expert balance I bounded and cut at a gracefully controlled speed. I navigated the course at a world record pace.

The flawless run would surely go down as the greatest in Olympic history.

I heard a war cry coming from behind me. My focus narrowed. I ran across a neighbor’s lawn jumping through a gap in some rose bushes into the next yard, shaving another second off my time.

The crowd roared.

As I turned the corner and entered the final stretch I dared to look back. I caught a glimpse of David a few houses behind.

See ya, sucka.

Across one last driveway, between a pair of palm trees, I cut the corner of the garage close, and up the walk. Home free. I ran up against the door short of breath.

“Safe!” I proclaimed.
My hand slid down and turned the handle. I leaned into the door sighing in relief.

_Ho-ly-shit!

The door didn’t budge. I pushed up against it a couple more times.

_Locked! Son of a bitch!

Frantic knocking and calling out quickly became pounding and yelling. “Hey! Let me in! Jason, Mom, answer the door! HEY!”

Relief turned to panic as my lead dissolved.

_He’s gotta be passed the rose bushes. It won’t be long now. I’ve had a good run, no real regrets. Probably should have tried to kiss Dusty before she moved away. Wish I hadn’t thrown that rock at the lamp post and shattered it all over Marvin’s dad’s truck. Wish I hadn’t thrown that soccer ball through the Osbourne’s living room window landing it on the couch right next to Mr. Osbourne while he was reading the evening paper. Wish I hadn’t thrown my little brother off mom and dad’s bed into the chest of drawers head first (though it was a sweet judo move). Would have liked to see some teenage years, and some pubic hairs, but what can you do.

And just as I had made my peace with the world, there came a voice.

“What is it?”

“It’s me! Open up, hurry!” My little brother Jason was indeed an angel.
His little hands fidget with the deadbolt and my future. For surely the magnitude of this beating would have sent a wave of repercussions throughout the rest of my life.

CLICK. What a wonderful sound, perfectly timed as David’s footfalls came up the drive. I pushed the door open almost knocking my 5 year-old brother to the floor.

“Geez.” He huffed, as I barged in.

“Watch out!”

“What’s the big deal?”

“Look.” I pointed to the edge of the walkway where David rambled up like a car about to lose all four wheels at once. Still purple-faced, still growling mad.

Jason cowered behind the door, “Whoa.”

“I know. Cool huh? Get ready to lock it.”

Jason put one hand on the door and hovered over the latch with the other.

_The youngest of three troublemakers, Jason was well versed in the art of lock flipping as a tool for survival. Many a times he had to get to the safety of a locked bathroom to avoid the bitter-sweetness of tickle torture._

I stood in the doorway like a matador, chest out, dawning my tongue in place of a red cape. David raged forward.

At the very last moment I stepped back and Jason slammed and locked the door. David blasted into it full speed. Jay’s eyes got huge as he backed into the coat closet door.
“Close one, huh?”

“Yeah.” He marveled back at me and an infectious smile crept onto his small face.

There was a little devil in him too.

“Where’s Mom?”

“Gloria came over.”

She must have run to the market with some of her church friends.

Thank God.

“Come here.” I waved my little brother over to the couch by the window. We climbed up on our knees and pulled the curtains back. There was David, jumping around like a monkey screaming at the door.

We laughed for a while until he eventually calmed down and noticed us perched there. He stood panting, slowly returning to a fleshy color.

I leaned over and whispered into my little brother’s ear. He nodded and we turned our attention back to David. We smiled and let him know he was number one in our book by throwing up four proud little middle fingers.

David blew up again and tried to fight through the hedges to get at the window. He managed to stumble his way close enough to hear us laugh and get a good look at the kissy faces we were making at him. He tried punching the window.

“Ah-ahh, better not break it or my dad will be mad.”
Jason was thoroughly enjoying his corruption and I was happy to have someone to share in this most triumphant event.

A car started to pull in from around the corner and David regained his composure. My mom came up the walk as the car pulled away with a honk goodbye. Mother waved and turned around somewhat startled to find David in the middle of our yard still breathing heavy.

“Can I help you, David?”

“No ma’am.” He panted, “I was just looking for Dylan, but I guess he’s not here.”

“Okay, well...how’s your mother been?”

“She’s fine.”

“Tell her hello for me will you?”

“I will.”

David, like all of us boys on the block, played the role of good kid to perfection.

My mom turned to unlock the front door. We flopped down on the couch and took a proper seat. She walked in closing the door behind her. As she went to set down her purse on the coffee table she looked over at us awkwardly, grocery bag in hand. She knew good and well that the odds of coming home to two young boys sitting side by side on the couch together, not making a sound, with no TV on, and nothing in the house being broken, was slim to none.

“What have you two been up to?”
I put my arm around Jay and pulled him close. “Just hanging out like the best of pals, Ma.”

Jason slipped his arm beneath mine and around my back. “Yeah Mom, best pals.”

People often said Jason and I were twins born six years apart. We flashed matching award-winning smiles and turned up the adorable factor to a dangerously high level.

She rolled her eyes in reply, “Oh brother. There better not be anything broken or your father will hear about it. You understand me?”

“What? Can’t brothers just hang out and love each other without something always being broken?”

Jay chimed in, “Yeah Mom.”

She turned with a smirk, not interested in entertaining us further. Disappearing into the kitchen, we waited a cautionary moment before flipping back around to sneak a peek.

David was walking down the drive when he glanced back and caught the pairs of eyes following him. He stopped and stared. He looked tired. Apparently screaming and chasing after an 11 year-old took a lot out of a person. Then something odd happened. He began to crack what looked like a genuine smile. Could he actually have seen the humor in all this? It was a, “You’ve won this round,” sort of thing.
I thought about it for a second before leaning into my brother’s ear once again. He nodded like a good little soldier and ran over to the hall. Jason looked into the kitchen and then turned back around with a thumbs-up and a grin. I winked in confirmation and proceeded to unbuckle.

David back peddled towards the street keeping his eyes on me long enough to enjoy the rare, breathtaking sight of a full Puerto Rican moon on a So. Cal. mid summer’s afternoon. Needless to say, he lost it for the umpteenth time.

My work was done.

Jason could hear the cursing from where he stood in the hall. He jumped and clapped with amusement.

I threw the curtain closed and pulled up my pants. Perhaps the greatest hour of my young life had just finished, complete with its cherry on top. I beamed with pride in that moment of glory.

_The memory of it fades to black..._

* * *

That’s what I think of when I think of David. That, and the image I have of him lying in his coffin. The image is not so much of him, as it is his nose. What I mean is, I never really looked inside the coffin. I couldn’t bring myself to look at the face of a dead person I once knew. From the back of the church I watched the
procession. Between suits and dresses I could see the half open coffin with David’s nose poking out at one end. It was as close as I could get.

Dylan came over to me after paying his respects. “Did you see David? He looks terrible. He has all this makeup on and a fake smile.”

Dylan was hard to read. He kept smiling and joking. His parents sat down in front. His mother’s slight frame quietly sobbing, while his father’s arm pulled her close, enveloping her with his thick shoulder. I couldn’t understand how Dylan could kid around at a time like this. I knew that everyone coped differently, but it was too much for me to watch. It overwhelmed me to the point that I had to go outside.

I walked out to the parking lot and stood in the dark. It was the first time I had ever mourned someone’s death. It was the first time I had ever feared mortality. David was the epitome of youth: strong willed, excitable, optimistic. He had been murdered, shot by his roommate, before the guy turned the gun on himself.

How are you supposed to prepare for that? He was only twenty-two. I was never particularly religious. I mean, I attended church, I prayed, but I didn’t know what I believed. There I was, standing in a church parking lot at the age of eighteen saying to myself, “This is absolutely fucking ridiculous.”

That was the first time I ever thought back on that day David and I argued over backgammon. As I relived the story in my head I began to laugh out loud. The laughter gradually moved into a chuckle, and before long I was crying.

I hadn’t thought about David much in the years since he graduated and moved away. He was just a friend’s older brother who went off to join the military. He was
more of an acquaintance than a friend. He was the antagonist for many of my childhood theatrics. And here I was, a complete wreck.

*What if it had been Dylan? What if it had been Gabe?*

Just the thought sent me reeling.

*We could go at any time. I could out live my friends and family. I could die tomorrow. My parents could out live me.*

Suddenly, I imagined my mother and father sitting in the church crying and crying. My mother’s poor heart...my father whom I’d never seen cry. My imagination was too much. It turned my stomach as if I were witnessing the speculations before my very eyes. I couldn’t bear it; I got in my car and drove off.

* * *

That was an important night for me, the night of David’s viewing. Life changed colors that night. Its dimensions were no longer the same. Lines became cylinders. Circles became spheres. I felt as though a trap had been set, like I had been lured. But not by a serpent—not this time.

As my mind examined that piece of the puzzle, old emotions, long thought to be buried, started to turn in their graves. But, unlike past encounters with existential
moments, I was no longer driven to rampant questioning. I set the memory down, taking one last affectionate glance.

I lay there in bed, not quite sure of how I floated over to David’s memory, but I was certain that the trip was far from over. I was too awake, at too odd an hour, to believe that slumber could reclaim me. Instead I resigned myself to follow the scent. Something called and I listened intently.

*Where else will my thoughts carry me?*
The originating cause of skepticism is, we say, the hope of attaining quietude—
Sextus Empiricus

I’ve woken up thousands of times. So many thousands that you’d think I’d be
good at it by now. But no, I struggle with gravity, with stiff non-abiding limbs and
encrusted eyes. I limp around like a war beaten soldier, except my battles have been
slap fights in the elementary school cafeteria compared to anything that war might
bring down on a body. Nevertheless, there I am, limping around my room, grumbling
something about how much I wish I were still asleep. Every morning is the same
miserable affair. Not because I’m unhappy or unfulfilled, well…maybe, but mostly
because I’m just so bad at it—waking up that is.

Rarely are we glad to do things that we suck at doing. Sadly, I don’t sleep so
well either, though I do love to sleep. I’ve heard it’s a sign of depression to want to
sleep so much, like you have trouble facing the world or something. That’s not the
case here (I don’t think). I just like the idea of getting up when my body tells me to
as opposed to when my ten-dollar alarm takes pleasure in its purpose. Still, it’s a
little disconcerting to go to bed tired, wake up tired, and be half awake in the interim.
Ah, what are you going to do? Life’s a bitch that pisses all over you until you potty-train the stubborn little whore. And even then, it’ll likely shit behind the couch when you’re not paying attention.

*Jiddu Krishnamurti said something about paying attention, he said,*

"Attention comes when you are deeply interested in something, for then you love to find out all about it; then your whole mind, your whole being is there..." He’s right you know. You can’t force yourself to do something that your heart isn’t in. No, I take that back: you can’t force yourself to enjoy, and therefore, fully appreciate something that your heart isn’t in. But I do believe that your heart can grow, and in doing so, make room for appreciations that seemed distasteful at one time. Life is nothing, if it is not enjoyed.

*How apropos that this aside should come on the heels of “bitch and whore” talk with regard to life. I think this can be used as further evidence in the indictment that I was in the process of laying out before you.*

My sleeping habits aren’t the real issue here, just a symptom. The issue is what I discovered during one of my sleepless bouts of semi-consciousness. I realized, as those dark hours of the night passed into the inane contemplations of grocery lists and screenplays, that I’m all talk, or, more precisely, all thought.

That’s not to say I’m a monist who believes that all of existence is mind, or even that I don’t exist at all except as a thought of someone, or something, else’s. As heavy and plausible as those thoughts might be to your average grassroots skeptic, I had long since parted ways with such non-fruit bearing renditions of existence. (Not
because Idealism is not so, but because whatever substance I am, my experience of my being in the world is no different by virtue of the label being changed. And, more importantly, my fears only change shape rather than disappear.) No, my quaint little understanding—that had become a lucid prick in my ass—was that I was nothing more than a hack.

I was a bullshit artist of the highest order.

*Can bullshitting be an art form?*

Even those words seek to convict me. It seemed proper that I should categorize myself as the “highest” of the low. Satan, I’m sure, has much the same discussion in front of the mirror each day, except he smiles and winks as only the devil can. You would think that it would be a horse of a pill to swallow, but ohhhh did it slide down as smooth as a piña colada on a summer afternoon in San Felipe.

*Revelation, by definition, is clear as day.*

It’s one thing to be a con artist, or even a liar. There is a measure of self-preservation in such practices. As fouled up as that logic might seem, and as self-destructive a life that is supported by such means will prove to be, at least the intent is clear: look out for numero uno. But the depth of my bullshitiness is monumental in its delusional fortitude. It is one thing to fool others, it is another to fool oneself, and yet, something else entirely to have foolishly convinced yourself you’re no fool,
while wearing a post-it on your back that says, “Kick the dumby,” in your own handwriting.

I can’t blame myself entirely I mean, I was trained this way. I can’t help it if I just got really, really good at it. I was always told I was special. My mother seemed convinced. My teachers all nodded along. My coaches, my friends, my grandma (and grandmas don’t lie). All of them seemed in on it. I was taught that you could be “anything” you want to be as long as you put your mind to it.

Whatever that means.

And that wasn’t all. The clichés, they too conspired, and the sitcoms, them too. And the billboards and magazine ads and greeting cards, they all confessed to me the American dream of not working but being rich, of laughing at economy cars, of perfect lawns and teeth that “ding” with whiteness. They were my cartoon-laced lullaby humming the tune as I rocked myself to sleep clutching my pillow to my chest and singing my mantra, “Iiiiiii love the woooorrrld and evvveryboooody iiiinn it.”

I may have lost you; I should go back.

I used to sing that song when nightmares that I couldn’t escape would come. You know the kind that you wake up from and then as soon as you close your eyes you’re right back in the thick of it, clawing and screaming. I would turn my pillow over like it was a cassette tape and pretend that I had recorded another, more pleasant
dream on the other side. Unfortunately, my nightmares evolved beyond my placebo, and required more long-lasting methods.

I enlisted God’s help, who, as is usually the case, never technically agreed to help me, but I trusted his silence on the matter as a vote of approval. Interestingly, only when I attended my first “ethics” course some 18 years later did I realize why my intuition on the matter had been so keen. It appears that when dealing with the truly moral, there is no need to ask them to do the right thing, for the question is rhetorical. I assumed, at seven years old, that if I loved the world and everybody in it, then God would naturally protect me because I shared in his love. We protect what we love.

Don’t we?

As for the drama above over the whole bullshit artist thing, my point is simply this: deluding one self (though it can be used as a mode of self-preservation, say in the case of one who has suffered a tragic loss and unconsciously moves to cloud the event for the purpose of retaining one’s sanity), generally speaking, acts as nothing more than a hindrance to the fulfillment of one’s potential here on Earth. In other words, bullshitting myself has cost me years of my life. Try wrapping your head around that while crawling out of bed one very early morning after little rest and less sleep.
I kicked the leg of my bed as I shuffled my feet towards the bathroom. The pain was of an “oh yeah, that’s just perfect” variety. I hopped about and settled into my rocking chair squeezing my little toe as if that would force the hurt away.

Yes, I own a rocking chair; it was a thirtieth birthday gift. The humor in it was predictable enough, but I liked my chair nonetheless. There is something soulful about a rocking chair.

I did mention I rock myself to sleep didn’t I? I wasn’t kidding. I’ve always done it, not sure why, but I have. It made sleepovers difficult as a youngster since anything a child does out of the ordinary is generally an indication of being retarded.

I feel like I shouldn’t use that word “retarded,” but I can’t think of a good reason not to.

My parents tried to get me to quit. I think they thought it was just a silly habit that they could coax me out of, but I had done this my whole life. I don’t ever remember not rocking myself to sleep. Back and forth in my bed until my mind drifted off so intent on its prize that it forgot the world and my flopping self. They asked, threatened, and offered me rewards to no avail. I could not resist the compulsion to move, to sway, to rock. Instead I learned to mask my habit.

At first I would rock nearly my whole body. My parents said, as a baby, I would rattle the crib to the point that when they came to check on me, it would have traveled to the other side of the room. As I got older my habit relaxed in its
animation. I would only move my torso and a single leg, half bent forming an arrow
towards the ceiling. Eventually, I would move only my head and leg, then only my
head, then only my leg. Finally, on my stomach holding a pillow underneath me, one
leg crossed over the other, I’d lie there with a Samba-like rhythm in my head, kicking
myself to sleep.

As the years went on I got it down to just my big toe, wiggling in time until
consciousness fades to morning. And now, I no longer have to rock. I’m married and
sharing a bed is not conducive to such habits. Occasionally, my wife pokes me in the
middle of the night. “You’re kicking,” she’d say with a tired matter-of-factness. (I’m
being nice actually. She smacks me and says, “Stop it,” in a low growl, as if my life
depended on it.) I’m sure the mental will power it takes to hold back the urge,
however subconscious it has now become, contributes to my lack of sleep. Anytime
I’m away on business, or alone in bed for any reason, I don’t hesitate to get my fix.

There’s obviously something primal about rocking. The ocean rocks,
mothers’ rock, music, the wind, hugs... they all rock.

I sit back in my rocking chair considering my earlier epiphany, not feeling at
all like Muhammad, or Paul, or Arjuna. My enlightenment concerning the depth of
my bullshittiness did not contain any kind of universal truth. It was pure subjectivity,
and it made only one bold, simple, and factual claim: I have yet to become a man.

My bullshit amounted to a veil of illusion. It kept me busy enough that I
would not notice what I had failed to achieve. It kept me talking so much that I
couldn’t hear what I had said. The stench was so encompassing that I did not realize
the source. I couldn’t remember the last time I had looked my reflection in the eye and not turned away from what I saw with uninspired haste.

I looked down at my sore toe, still throbbing from its encounter with the bedpost, “Stupid piece of shit.” My angry whisper did not offend, as my toe was well aware it was not to blame for being in the right place at the wrong time. Sitting back in the rocker my thoughts turned towards Robert. I knew he was the reason this sudden case of self-loathing was upon me. I began to relive our last visit. Rocking quietly, I drifted back.

* * *

We knocked as we entered the foyer where Lenny greeted us. His long phallic nose always arrived ahead of the rest of him. He is much better about his manners than before. No more incessant barking, jumping up on visitors or licking people all over. For a Doberman he did not look the slightest bit menacing. His milk chocolate fur was short to his skin. His long face was topped by eyes that were set too close together and a forehead that looked chronically concerned.

I greeted him the same as always, “What’s the matter boy, constipation got you down?” His furrowed brow never missed a punch line.

Lenny was sick too. A large section of his belly was shaved from the operation. He had some sort of liver disease. His body produces too much copper I think, at least that’s what Stacey told me. He seemed unaffected, except for the
constant peeing, so much so that he no longer bothered to lift his leg. Nothing a drip
dry or a seat on the carpet couldn’t handle.

Stacey greeted us with lingering hugs. She gave a quick briefing. I listened
but paid more attention to her appearance. She had aged over the last two years.
Now 26, she had become a woman over the ordeal. Her thick brown hair was pulled
back and her small mouth smiled less wide than in years past. Her blue eyes looked
dim and deep. There was a sense of motherhood in her, though a condition of her
own made her unable to bear children.

Apparently her uncle was visiting from Manchester and he was a talker. Her
brother would be home soon and Robert was in the living room watching a tape of the
United vs. Arsenal match from a week ago. She said he couldn’t talk much so we’d
have to do most of the talking. We walked into the next room and found Robert on
his recliner in full Manchester United gear. I would say he was their biggest fan, but
those soccer fanatics have reached cult status. He wore an England beanie pulled
down close to his eyes and a beard. I commented as I leaned in for a handshake,
“What’s this? You too lazy to clean yourself up for guests?” I motioned at his facial
fur.

Robert shook my hand lightly with a surprised smile before pointing over my
shoulder at the real culprit. Helen had entered the room behind us from the direction
of the kitchen. She responded to the charges, “He blames me for not shaving him. I
just think he looks so adorable all fuzzy like that.”
Helen too had aged. It was hard to look her in the eyes. For two years she had watched her husband wither and she had withered right along side him. You could tell that her heart was only barely held together and I feared one long look would be too much for that heart to bear. My eyes could not hide my sympathy. I was careful to make eye contact but not stare.

Hillery, my wife, said her hellos and my attention slipped back towards Robert. He looked good. He looked tired, but good. Minding my manners, I introduced myself to Stacey’s uncle. His accent was so thick and he spoke so quickly that I just assumed he said nice to meet you. Hill followed suit. No doubt, small processions like this one had become commonplace these days. We sat and talked, shared some recent stories, tried to sound status quo. But the room was thick with decaying hopes; it almost smelled of sadness. Had someone walked in, just to say hello, unaware of the circumstance, they would grow uncomfortable with the mood before they could find a seat.

During a slight lull in the conversation Hillery decided to share some news, “I’m pregnant.” Her voice stepped nervously into the room.

There was a moment before they reacted, a moment where I stood somewhat shocked by the announcement. She normally shies away from being the center of attention. She embarrasses easily. Her hazel blue eyes hid from contact. I watched the red glow on her cheeks brighten as dimples formed out of the corners of her smile. A wave of adoration poured over me that peaked with a shiver that rolled
through my neck and out my shoulders. I blushed back with pride in awe of the mother of my child.

Everyone delighted in the news and moved to give congratulatory hugs. Even Robert climbed out of his chair to deliver one personally. Questions fired out one after the other. Naturally the due date came up, “October 10th.”

“Dad’s is on the 9th!” Stacey replied, smiling in the direction of her father, “The baby could be born on the same day. We may have to induce labor.” She was excited about the prospect and the others found it amusing, but the irony was a lot for me to take. Here we were rejoicing over a new birth that may serve as a reminder of this impending death.

I started to think about the ultrasound I saw. Seven weeks old, a blotch of gray, a lima bean with a blip; it had a heart that ticked away. Who could say that an unborn child wasn’t a person? Had those people ever seen this piece of gray matter, this collection of dark and light, this blipping on the screen? There it was. I saw it. I saw its heart. Was there any doubt that a soul was in place?

That image, that cloud of gray, sent me in another direction. There was another blotch and it too grew. But this was no creating that transpired. It was a destroying. In the same room, only a few feet apart, there was Brahma the creator at work in Hillery and Shiva the destroyer at work in Robert, while Vishnu the preserver sat among us bearing witness.

My mind began to run off. Out of fear of looking too introspective, something that would be construed as sad, I went to the kitchen for a drink. I leaned over the
sink and turned on the faucet. Opting not to bother with a glass, I cupped my hand beneath the cool water. A few sips, a splash on the face, and a deep breath of resolve. After a minute I returned. The small talk about the pregnancy continued and I filed back into the fold.

Some time passed before Billy arrived at the house. It was nice to see him. Stacey’s brother wasn’t around as much as before. I think it was too much for him to watch. He went around the room hugging and hand shaking, all the while keeping Robert in the corner of his eye. Billy took a seat on the couch nearest to his father. They looked so much alike, both of them with their oval faces and blue eyes turned down slightly at the corners. He entered into the cordial exchange of stories as we proceeded to catch up.

Robert sat up in his chair attempting to appear interested in the surrounding discussions adding an occasional word or comment, just a syllable or two (from that you would think he was fine). But then he tried a sentence and only managed a few words before he stammered. He started over to no avail. And then once more, before I finished his question for him and proceeded to answer with his nod of approval.

An onlooker might only partially balk at that exchange, but for those of us who knew, it was a painful moment. It wasn’t a nervous twinge or a forgetful instance. It wasn’t the result of a couple of drinks or simply a momentary lapse. It was something very precise. It was a symptom. It was the growth in his brain suffocating his efforts, preventing the most menial of tasks. It was a war that raged in his skull that would ravage the entire topography before it was over. Cancer killing him as he spoke.
Billy’s gaze had trouble leaving Robert. We’d talk, but while I spoke he’d watch his father. Every movement was an indication; every moment could be the beginning of the end. I hesitated to continue the conversation, not sure that Billy was listening. Robert had leaned forward in his chair and buried his face in his hands. His fingers kneaded his temples and I couldn’t help but wonder if he was wishing he could just push the parasite out of his head and go on living his life with his wonderful family, maybe stay long enough to see a grandchild of his own. I fought for composure and continued to talk, afraid of silence.

I turned the focus towards the soccer game. “How ‘bout them Red Devils?”

“What’s the score?” Billy asked, though I’m sure he had already seen the game.

Robert perked up a bit, “United’s up 1-0.”

Talking soccer was about the only time that he was able to formulate bursts of verbal clarity uninterrupted. It came so naturally, so reflexively that I think it bypassed normal brain function. It was in his bloodstream, his pores, his hair follicles, his cuticles. It required no thought, and so it was exempt, immune, out of reach of the strangling hand.

“How’s Forlan doing?” I asked the question knowing how Robert delighted in riding particular players.

His eyes rolled way around in his head as it shook disapprovingly. The display ended with a sigh forced out through pursed lips. “He’s tragic. The lad’s no-footed.”
Billy smiled at one of his dad’s classic remarks and the three of us laughed. I caught a glimpse of Helen watching us. She had a look of somber appreciation. Her bottom lip pushed into her upper lip with a smile creeping out along the edges.

*How many more times would she witness her husband’s discriminating soccer tastes? Every anecdote or comment seemed as though it could be the last of its kind.*

After a short while we decided we should be leaving. Robert was looking tired. I headed for the restroom as Hillery began the goodbyes.

The doctors had predicted eight months. That was two years ago. A couple of surgeries and several rounds of chemo had tripled his time on this planet. But he had reached the end of his rope abruptly. Numbness in his arm a week ago prompted another visit to the doctor. They said it had grown back twice as fast this time and operating was no longer an option.

“Here’s the number for Hospice. We can’t do anything more to help him.”

The doctor was sullen as he spoke, “He’s a got a month to live.”

*How concrete. What the family must have gone through these past two years. Not letting themselves hope. Not wanting to be disillusioned. What conversations Robert must have had with himself. But that butterfly still visited their window each day and they prayed to it, no doubt, as did I, and everyone who knew Robert.*

*The tears begin to well up, and I have no power to stop them this time, nor any desire. It occurs to me that when I walk out of this bathroom and say*
goodbye to Robert I may never see him again. He is not my father. He is my friend’s father. He is not my spouse. He is my friend’s spouse. He is not my child, he is my friend, and he will never be a friend to my child because he will be dead very soon.

I lean forward onto the sink. I watch the drops rolling down one after the other; my wife calls them dinosaur tears because they’re so big she could drown in them. My teeth press firmly against each other. I turn to flush the toilet and run the water in case anyone is waiting outside the door. I proceed to splash water on my face and stare, dripping, into the mirror.

Get your act together. You’ve got to say goodbye, and you’ve got to be stronger than this. They’ve seen, and tasted, enough tears already.

Drying my face and blowing my nose, I take one last glance to check for any remaining evidence of weakness. Out the door and down the hall to the living room towards Robert. There’s so much to say, but I can’t, it’s not my place.

I give some hugs and a couple of pats on the back as I make my way over. Stacey’s uncle gets up from his chair and shakes my hand with an accentuated and slurred farewell. I turn to Robert and lean over to take his hand careful not to seem delicate with him.

For a second, his dark, sunken eyes meet mine. Sorrow squeezes my heart. His smile betrays him. There is so much depth in his face. It looks as if he has been engaged in months of deliberations with Death himself. Bargaining for time, coming
to terms. Exhaustion is apparent as his pleasant expression is labored and makes only a mock attempt at authenticity.

I want to kiss him. I want to pull his hand into my chest and let him know how much he’ll be missed. I want to tell him that he is so loved and that everything will be okay. Instead I just shake his hand a moment longer than I normally would and let my eyes betray me.

The sincerity of that moment is somehow slow and crisp. His look strengthens momentarily, as does his grasp, and his nod farewell seems to whisper, “Everything will be okay.” I hold his eyes in mine for just another breath, wholly moved by his bravery.

* * *

Robert passed away two weeks later. I saw him once more before he died, but his condition was so advanced that he could no longer move or speak. He just gazed out, eyes glazed, struggling to breathe. I couldn’t really look at him because I wanted to stare. I sat across the room and glanced over occasionally, trying not to appear conspicuous.

The wake was a staggering event. Robert had touched so many people. Those who spoke on his behalf said things that everyone could only hope to have said about them when their time has come. I remember a large Aryan-looking man speaking. I think he was German or Dutch. He had a commanding presence. He said
that God chooses people, and that he knew of no other person who could carry such a load so well. His words were dense, leaving his mouth and falling to the floor like stones of truth. I cried hard. I felt embarrassed by my display, but I could not help it. I was moved.

The experience was much different than when David died. No doubt, Robert was the reason David had come to mind. We are forced to take inventory sometimes. Like cleaning an attic, we file through memories trying to distinguish lessons from confetti. And as we thumb through there are always those old pictures that cause us to pause. We can’t help but sit down with them and relive the experience. David was my first glimpse of mortality. I had no inclination at the time that eschatology was the key, that the finality of being must be overcome.

It’s astonishing what ten years lived will do to a person. I understood things differently, life, its rules. Mortality demanded that we look it square in the face before we could live freely. Accepting the parameters of existence was a Socratic prerequisite.

Lenny died less than a week later. The poor animal’s disease got the best of him. Or was his heart broken too? Now what? Father passes away, and then their big goofy lovable pet. Where’s the humor? Stacey and Helen are alone in a quiet house, with their reminders. I can’t help but wonder how much their quiet keeps them up at night.

You begin to ask yourself, when you encounter tragedy, and sorrow, why the world is the way it is. Why it must be this way. You begin to doubt God’s wisdom, or existence. You begin to wonder about meaning in this world, in
its method. And at some point you realize that this is the beginning. That
asking is the beginning of knowing.

* * *

My watering eyes stare forward from my motionless rocking chair as Hillery
begins to stir. “Honey?” her voice seeks out into the dark room.

I stand up and move to the edge of the bed, “Yeah baby, right here.”

“What are you doing up?”

“I needed a glass of water.”

“Are you coming to bed now?”

“Yeah, I’m just gonna go to the bathroom real quick, baby. Be right back.” I
lean in to kiss her forehead but she turns to meet me with her lips. I revel in her
softness and whisper, “Love you, gorgeous.”

“Hurry back,” she says as she turns back into the folds of the comforter and
seems all but lost in sleep once again.

I turn and make my way, more careful this time, over to the bathroom.
Switching on the light and closing the door behind me I turn to the sink resting my
hands on the edge of the counter with my head drooped between my shoulders. I
survey the floor, my sock covered feet, my oriental dragon print pajama pants, my
chewed fingernails and veiny arms, my college t-shirt fraying in too many places.

With nowhere left to look, I crank my head upwards and peer into the
reflection forcing myself to lock horns. Frozen for a time, looking onto deep dark
brown, searching for something. Doomed to a stalemate, I break off the challenge and scan my face for clues. My eyes comb over the sparsely grouped patches of hair along my chin. A single nose hair pokes out of one nostril traversing the gap in an apparent attempt to relocate in the other nostril. A pimple ripens on my earlobe and two barely chipped teeth from a head-butt some years ago smile back at me. A scar under my left eye, the result of a much needed reality check, holds my attention.

*The mirror becomes a window.*
Every art and every enquiry, and similarly every action and every pursuit, is thought to aim at some good. The Good has therefore rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim—Aristotle

* * *

It’s hard to know what to keep with you and what to let go. You figure that a lot of your experiences are parsley, and some of the ones that aren’t, are salmonella. It takes a long time before you start to see fool’s gold for what it is. Some memories keep, others curdle and cause illness if tasted too much after their usefulness has expired. Some have to be kept, and some mustn’t be. Some strengthen your roots, and others rot your core. And some, like this one, you let go, like a stray dog after having fed and bathed it. You shoo it, and swing a broom at it, and pretend it isn’t outside your door begging to be brought back in. But it waits as if it has nothing better to do, no other purpose than to wait. And after a while, though you have never formally taken it back, it becomes a fixture, like the vagrant standing on the median by the stoplight who now seems to belong there and is no longer the subject of your scrutiny, or disgust, or pity, or shame, but a footnote. It remains because even if you don’t pay much mind to it anymore it is still a fundamental truth.

Ugly things are necessary reminders of life’s indiscretion.
I was still a novice drinker at the time. But I was a natural.

I’ve always been timid. As a child, my mother jokes, I was often heard saying, “Stop looking at me!” to overweight women who insisted on pinching my cheeks and tussling my hair with some variety of, “Aren’t you just the cutest thing.” I even tackled one of my brother’s girlfriends to the floor and started whaling on her for insisting on trying to make me smile.

Timid people are susceptible to alcohol. I’m thinking Dionysus was probably a shy Demigod who was thrust into greatness on the courage an empty bottle gave him to be the deity he wished he were.

I knew that less than an hour after my first beer I would be the man. I’d be funny and charming, or at least I would seem so, to myself and fellow thinking-impaired compatriots. As a timid person spent a lot of time thinking about how I would respond without ever actually responding. It was the perpetual state of coming up with clever responses 5 seconds too late. I called it D.W.R. Syndrome (Delayed Witty Retortedness) pronounced “dur” for short, and I was afflicted with the “DWR’S”. Alcohol was one of the only known cures, and severe cases may have been beyond help. I was one of the lucky ones.
The problem was the God Damn Superego always telling me what to think before I talk. Alcohol was a neutralizer for a good conscience. It was a special agent working on behalf of the Id. Alcohol knocked out the enemy’s thought-filtering device, allowing free reign of knee-jerk responses. The results were often mixed, as the line between jester and jackass was a thin one that was always drawn by the audience.

_Mind you, I do not drink to be an asshole—I drink to not worry about whether or not I am one._

When I came through the door I had already had a couple of beers. It was of primary importance to get the chemical reaction going as soon as possible. That usually meant on the car ride over. It was a birthday party for a few people. Someone’s parents were out of town and two girls and a guy were all turning 18 within a week of each other. I nodded and “what’s up’d” my way to the kitchen for a third beer. Some more casual nods and I wormed my way over to the minibar for a double rum and coke.

By now the affects were beginning to numb my lips making smiling effortless and interesting. I found an ottoman only half used and staked my claim to the remainder. Comfortable and buzzing, I proceeded to insert myself into the nearest conversation.

_Sometimes you just want to linger in the shallows. Life doesn’t always have to be about virtue. What is virtue anyway? We have to set it aside to exam_
it. You can’t exam a helmet very well while wearing it, and you can’t know if it is really protecting you unless you exam it well. The problem is that while you have the helmet off, inspecting it, birds are still taking shits, and fuck-faces are still throwing rocks and eggs and such. Our fear of going unprotected even for a moment, keeps us wearing shitty Styrofoam helmets.

I returned from my drifting thoughts to the slurping of watery rum and coke over slippery ice cubes. I wasn’t certain what the conversation was about anymore. It had deteriorated into some sort of debate over song lyrics: what they actually were, what they meant, who wrote them. I didn’t care and I made that clear with a heavy sigh and a, “Whelp, love to stay and chat about who poked who with what, but this camel’s dry.” I wagged my empty cup rattling what was left of the ice and sauntered off like a member of the Rat Pack.

I hadn’t gotten out of my seat for a while, so the effects were not as apparent until now. Navigating the crowd became a fun game. I dipped and swerved and chuckled and winked past oncoming traffic. “Beep, beep.” I tickled a girl I knew on the back of the rib cage causing her to jump with a flirty giggle to one side. I gave her a lingering look. There was no harm in setting the table for what might have been more thirst quenching down the road.

But the move proved costly. I turned back around and bumped into one of the birthday girls, almost knocking her drink out of her hand.

“Hey, what’s up? Happy birthday.”

“Thank you.”
She shrugs off any annoyance that might usually manifest itself. She was already trashed and unsure of who was at fault. Sara was a beautiful girl. Her smile was perfectly straight and white, made all the more outstanding when contrasted with her evenly bronzed skin. You’d think she had a fake tan, but I’d never seen her not look great. Her short brown hair had amber sun streaks that reflected the light and it, along with her sparkling blue eyes, made her smiling shiny head hard to turn away from at first attempt. I never bothered trying to turn away until she did.

“Since it’s your birthday and all, I’m going to go ahead and forgive myself for almost spilling your beer.”

She laughs, “Aw, how nice of you.”

“I know, it’s a silly habit. I’m trying to quit.”

“What?”

“Being nice.” I held up my empty cup, “With the help of modern medicine my chances for a full recovery are looking good.”

“Cheers to medication.” She bumped her cup to mine and spills a little in the process.

“That’s okay. That just means that your medication hasn’t kicked in. You better drink up.”

She took it as a dare and threw her head back pouring half the beer down her throat and half down her chin.

“At a girl.”
She let out a hoot and some celebratory woo-hoos and handed me her cup.

“Fill’er up doc.” She said, with a boyish wipe of her chin that ran from her elbow pit to the back of her hand.

“Aye-aye, cap’m.” I gave her a mock salute and she burped me a farewell.

I snuck off into the backyard.

Smalls tribes had gathered in various places. My sociological tendencies, fairly typical of introverts, began to have a sobering affect. It is hard not to notice how people segregate themselves subconsciously. There was a strange vibe outside that wasn’t noticeable in the house. People were judging. Their minds only half involved in conversations, half busy taking inventory. As I mentioned before, I was a novice drinker, and therefore a novice partier. I made the regulars uneasy because there was no telling what kind of drunk I would be: the funny one, the smart one, the Casanova, the ass-a-nova, the smug one, the chill one, the suck up, the fuck up.

Damn that fucking Superego. Where’s the fucking keg. I don’t want to think tonight. I want to react.

I spotted a small team of budding addicts huddled in a semi-circle in mock prayer.

There she blows. Praise the Lord.

Nestling my way into the group I managed to get my hand on the pump. Everyone knew that you had to fill up the guy working the pump. I learned this rule right away; I was always a quick study. I pumped a couple of times, careful not to get
the tap flowing too fast and too foamy. The crowd began to disperse. “Hook me up,”
I asked the guy working the tap. I used a little more leverage, “I’m on orders from
the birthday girl.”

“It’s all yours.” The guy handed over the tap and turned away blowing foam
from his cup and slurping a sip.

Suddenly, oddly, I found myself alone at the tap. I’m not sure what happened
to everyone. I suppose I came over during the tail end of a wave. I wasn’t
complaining, especially because the alcohol was beginning to work a little more
every minute. I leaned over and began to fill my cup when I was nudged, causing me
to drop the tap. I look over in the direction of the bump.

“Hey, what’s going on Jerry? How you been?” A guy I knew from school
had snuck up on me and given me a masculine shove hello. I turned back to the tap
and picked up from where I left off.

Then another bump came. But this one almost knocked me over. I stumbled
a step to the side, barely catching my balance, and then swung around abruptly.

“Dude, Jerry, what the fuck was that all about? I’m trying to get a beer.”

There are strange moments in a person’s life. Moments when you shed
naivety, when it becomes painfully clear that things aren’t what they seem.
Like when someone tells you they don’t love you, or when you find out that
being an adult has nothing to do with being moral. This guy was not kidding
with me. It was not an accident. He had not had too much to drink. This
was deliberate. When I stood up and looked him in the eyes, I saw a look
that I had never seen, and, for the moment, was beyond comprehension.
Everything went very slow for the next ten seconds as I was in the process of getting my wish: I reacted, and more importantly, I discovered.

The first punch, I could swear, came from two feet behind his back. It was cartoonish; it was a freakin’ haymaker if I’ve ever saw one. I mean who does that? Who literally tries to knock someone’s block off? It was because he threw the punch from last week, that I could dodge it. But it was followed up closely by a left that was equally reckless.

What the fuck is going on? This guy is trying to fucking kill me.

I stepped backwards leaning way back and then to one side. He stalked me and my mind kept questioning rapidly.

Is he for real? He’s not fucking around. What the fuck am I supposed to do?

He lunged with a straight left that forced me straight back. I ran into resistance, a barbeque, and suddenly I was out of room. Again came his overhand right like a club down from the night sky. Jerry was a little taller, a little longer, a little bigger and, apparently, way more angry than I was. That was the strangest thing. What could make a person so angry? He hated me. He threw punches as if ending me would end his problems.

Down came that angry right hand, like an anvil. I had nowhere to go. I was laying back on this barbeque, stretched across it like an animal ready for slaughter. I watched this weapon come flying down, for just a moment, lost in its reality, in its
absurdity, before trying to duck down in a last ditch attempt to avoid the full force of the blow. But all I did was speed up the process meeting his fist with my face probably adding to the impact. My head snapped and the only sensations I experienced were the contact, which was painless, and the sound, which was muffled, like the sound of a rock, wrapped in cloth, banging up against cement. My arms flew up over my face and head reflexively as the next couple of blows fell jarringly upon them. And then it was over.

The crowd overtook us—people pushing him away, people pulling me free. I had been slightly hunched in defense—I believe the position is referred to as “cowering”—though my emotion was not fear, it was more like disbelief. I did not come out of this defense posture trembling, teary-eyed, hyperventilating with high-pitched responses to the enquiring R-U-O-K’s that ensued. I simply stood upright and stared at Jerry from across the rising flood of people that pushed us apart.

“What the fuck was that, asshole?” I shouted as people ushered him into the house. His eyes never left mine, nor mine his. I must have looked genuinely confused and pissed. He looked like an evil genius delighted with his results.

Sara was in front of me asking me something, but I was too involved with searching Jerry’s face for answers.

She tries again, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m fine. That fucker came after me for no reason.”

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m all right, I’m just fucking pissed.”
"No, you’re bleeding."

"What?"

"Bad." Her voice was very matter-of-fact.

For the first time, since the fight began, time resumed its normal pace and I actually looked at Sara. She was concerned. She even looked a little pained in the way that we look at someone who just broke a limb and is the last to know. She inhaled softly through clinched teeth as she motioned towards my face.

I lifted my hand and pressed it to the warm wetness of my left cheek. Pulling it away and taking my eyes from hers to my open palm I stared into what looked like original red. My hand was covered as if I had stuck it in a can of paint. My eyes shifted back to hers and now confusion overrides anger.

_This was all very new to me—but, as it would turn out, all very necessary._

Rolling upwards from Sara’s worried face, my eyes found Jerry’s once again as the crowded house threatens to swallow him up. And as he disappeared into the sea of limbs and heads his expression finally softens. Anger and hate subside, and grim satisfaction washes over his face. The crowd’s undulating mass worked his relaxed angular frame towards the front door, pushing him out like a splinter.

Sara grabbed my hand and dragged me into the house. My focus was now back on my saturated palm. A path opened wide as Sara’s stride is unmistakingly purposeful. Faces floated by like ghosts spooked by the unexpected presence of the living, of a person who could bleed.
Up stairs, around a corner, down a hall, through a door, into a bedroom, then a bathroom, in front of a mirror with cabinets opening and closing abruptly and a faucet running vigorously.

My hands were forced under warm water and they instinctively rubbed together. The sink swirled in a murky fuchsia as glossy rose-colored droplets landed with rhythmic timing before being subdued by the rushing water.

"Here. Use this soap. And I have some towels for you."

I nodded, and the nodding lasted for no reason.

I leaned over and began to wash my face.

*Still no pain.*

My fingers traced the damaged area. An almond-shaped crater had been born onto the once familiar landscape. I stared at what looked like an empty, mangled eye socket. I stared at this void. My mind hollered questions into it. Only echoes responded.

As the water returned to nearly clear I shut it off and reached for a towel holding my face in its shelter for several deep, slow breaths. Removing the towel I sat it down on the counter and set both my hands on the edge leaning heavily. I hung my head on its hinge for a while and the rhythmic droplets returned at a slower interval. Each hit the stillness of the sink’s ceramic white canvas below, exploding like an asterisk.
My eyes float up from the sink and peer into the reflection. There is only a shadow of what was once there. To this day I don’t know what possessed Jerry to attack me. All I know is that my life changed course that night. Up to that point I was not a humble person. I was like any other teenager: self-absorbed, careless, immortal. But there is something to be said for hate and violence. It was as if the depth of my perception had been expanded a hundredfold. Jerry had snapped off my training wheels.

I remember being very angry for a long time afterwards. Wondering how this could have happened. I was such a good person. I had no enemies, no real faults. This was just some ignorant asshole with nothing better to do and no IQ. But as time passed there were inconsistencies that I could not reconcile. It became more and more apparent that I was the ignorant one. My friends had very little sympathy for me and they seemed surprisingly unsurprised. It was almost as if they were going to go off somewhere and check the board to see who won the “me getting my ass kicked” pool.

This event became a landmark. I know that so many people suffer so much worse. But that isn’t the point. Everyone has different events, different thresholds, and different moments of clarity. Who is to judge what qualifies as worthy of revelation. The fact is that it isn’t until something in your life turns you around, peeling you from your objectification of the world, that you can begin to know the world for what it is.
This guy, this dickhead, forced me out of my comfort zone. I’m sure he did not crack his knuckles and say to himself, “Here comes some God damn intervention.” Nor is that what I’m saying I experienced. Jerry said, “Take that you son-of-a-bitch,” for God knows what selfish reason that he came up with. But the act itself was indicative. It was a metaphor. It turned an act into a fable. The moral of the story was, “None of this has to make sense.”

Where, exactly, does it say that life owes us an explanation?

Suicide bombers walk into mosques and kill people of their own faith. Priests molest young boys. Black people keep the word “nigger” alive. Indians take casino money and become more capitalistic than animistic. Husbands cheat on wives while away on business and then profess love on Valentine’s Day. Parents get in fights over fair play at their kids’ ball games. A woman gets diagnosed with breast cancer in her thirties, a boy gets hit by a drunk driver walking to school, a politician yells, “Yee-haw!” and ruins his presidential bid, a snake and a hamster live together, a rich guy wins the lottery, a hurricane destroys dreams and exposes denial, people believe in “turn the other cheek” and then don’t, a teenager gets punched by an acquaintance for no apparent reason.

It all just is.

Tough shit. That’s life. Don’t take your eye off the ball son, or it will most definitely pop you in the mouth. Self-preservation becomes self-evident. That’s not to say that the result of being kicked in the teeth is that you become a bitter selfish
person, rather, that you become a reflective and cautious individual. You become consciously aware that the world is indifferent to your well-being, and suddenly the game changes.

Admittedly, this is not the life-changing event, though those sorts of things do happen. A guy gets his hand pinned beneath a boulder during a hiking trip and has to cut it off or starve to death. That changes your life. But for most of us, it takes a little while, like a tapping on the shoulder, a "(cough, cough) Pardon me," a "Sir. Yes, you sir," a "Hey asshole, I'm talking to you," until finally you get a "Pay some fucking attention you stupid useless piece of shit or else your life is going to get progressively shittier from here on out."

I suspect Jerry fell somewhere between "pardon me" and "hey asshole."

I crawled deep into a cavernous introversion, sleeping days away, ignoring the phone, spending most of my time taking inventory, wondering where I miscalculated. It would have made more sense if it had been a stranger. Strangers could be insane for no good reason. A stranger could be a weird foreigner who punches people hello. But this had been brewing, fermenting.

Hate needs to fester.

What was truly difficult to take was the transparency of my friendships. I could tell by the way they looked at me, and the way they wouldn't look, that they
could not hide their guilt-laced satisfaction. They looked at me as if I caught them
masturbating to my demise.

*Or was I seeing things?*

I thought friends were supposed to save you from yourself.

*Had they tried? Had they been tapping on my shoulder all along?*

If I had become such a prick, why had they let me get to that “ripe for the ass-
kicking” stage?

*Who needs enemies, right?*

I came out of my cave a yawning, grumpy bear. I went to Oregon for a few
months, Corvallis. I needed to purge. I had to get some distance from Southern
California sun-bleached helloes and gourmet pizza smiles. I needed the rains to wipe
the slate clean.

*Clarity takes time. I took a train.*
We often debate internally, assuming, that is, that we have a conscience, and, generally speaking, moral agency. Internal debates occur when one’s desire and one’s sense of responsibility are at odds. Often times we end the debate abruptly, out of frustration, by giving in. Either by succumbing to the Super Ego’s demands, for fear of the whispering finger-pointers, or we surrender to the Id’s cries, in hopes of pacifying it, at least, temporarily. But in both of those cases our Ego loses, as the self, the soul, the seat of our personhood cowers under the duress of a shameless interrogator’s heat lamps and sophistry.

I often liken the basic difference in person-type to riddles. There are those who like riddles, those who are impartial, and those who scorn them. If you scorn riddles then you are either naive to the benefits of critical thought, or you’re too
consumed with the day to day that taking ten minutes on something unscheduled seems to you a colossal waste despite the fact that a reasonable observer, charged with the task of examining waste, could probably watch any single day of yours and rescue hours of time.

If you are impartial then you are either much like your scornful cousins, with the exception that hating takes too much energy in your mind and you are lazy, or you have never engaged a riddle long enough to muster a real disposition towards it and so, like the masses that attend church because it is what they’ve always done and do not know the depth of their faith because they have never bothered to ask, you look at riddles but have yet to see one.

And of those who enjoy riddles there are some who simply like to think they are smart, who, like game show contestants flexing their trivia-based muscles, are more concerned with looking mentally buff than being mentally strong. It is more about getting the answer for these people, not understanding the answer, or, more properly, understanding what the answer suggests—since answers, to important questions, are usually unattainable. It is these kinds of people who will get slapped by their Roshi when they hurry back with a cleverly conceived explanation to the koan they were given only minutes earlier.

But for those who engage riddles in search of not just answers, but growth, a riddle is an inverse story where the end is given and the plot is yet to be determined. Much like our lives, we already know that death awaits, we just don’t know what’s for dinner or how we’ll pay for it. It is symbolic, because existentially, life, its
meaning and purpose, is the riddle, the utmost concern of our being-in-the-world.
And our anxiety stems from the fact that we have our entire lives to solve it, but that
could mean that we have until tomorrow noon.

To come back to my point, I was discussing internal debates, because, of
course, I was having one. The debate was about whether or not to step out of
character momentarily, taking an aside as an opportunity to invite the reader further
inside—my head that is. It is like a flight captain inviting a passenger into the
cockpit. The passenger may lose some of the romance, which is a risk, but can gain
some perspective, which may incite greater interest. My concern has to do with my
goal, which I find, at this moment, to be something of a riddle to myself. That being
the case, it is hard to know if inviting you into the flight cabin will help or hinder our
chances of arriving safely and on time, or should I say, for my purposes, arriving
effectively and convincingly at our destination.

If I were to indulge my Super Ego, I would not take this time out, because it
might compromise the story-telling, in the conventional sense, for to pull back the
curtain before arriving at Oz is to encounter Rosebud before Kane’s citizenry. Many
critics, whose business it is to tell us what formulas work and which are considered
worthy, artistic and learned, may cast shadowy frowns over such a novice move.

Don’t you love how, for everything in life, there is a critic anointed with the
power to de-legitimize and condemn with the point and wag of a naughty
little finger. I often wonder how one is to come by that job of finger wagger.
Might there be some entrepreneurial opportunities in the field? Can mine be
the story of a magical finger wagger born without affiliation to any parental
unit of paradigm, who goes on to wag a finger at all the finger pointers
casting them into the fifth ring of hell where there are no fingers, only
thumbs, ever fixed, so that those who live to condemn, die to suffer an
eternity of thumbs-upping anything the Devil proposes.

My fear of conformity almost forces me to lash back to my Id’s delight,
compelling me to write any which way I please because I can, because I want to,
because “fuck you” if you don’t like it. Ah, but cooler heads prevail, as is the case
with one who takes joy in the art of riddle solving. Though I feel justified in writing
any fucking thing I please, in any damn well form I fucking feel like, my Ego
mediates with a dim, but nagging reminder.

This is not an exercise in power, but persuasion. This is not a declaration,
but a disclosure. My goal is not to fornicate according to primitive
inclinations, nor is it to yield as the cultural conscience insists, but to lay
bare, so that the truth may rise like a blade of grass to the sun.

So the question remains, “Do I address the reader directly, sharing my secrecy
in an open and temperate manner, or do I allow, as the poets do, for the logic of the
metaphor to tell the fable in an artful spirit, uncompromised?” Unfortunately,
because only through intuition or hindsight can one be certain of any choice ever
made, and because mine, on both counts, are currently clouded with the midst of life
living, I do not know the ideal way to proceed. And so, like any good arbiter, I will
but half indulge each by talking with you only indirectly, that this may appear more
as you eavesdropping than my confessing.
And see here,
my aside is nearly a slumber
now that its hunger
has been assuaged.

"With what?"
you might ask,
since I seem to have gassed
an approach
without having approached.

Well,
"With your moment's notice,"

I say.

As is the often case,
with a trifling's way,
it is not the beans
(I've gathered),
so much as the means
(I've rathered),
of which we beware.

That you paused—
just now—
means you thought—
about how,
not just the what,
or the where.
Chapter IV
The Luster of Time

We, though: never, not for a single day, do we have that pure space ahead of us
into which flowers endlessly open—Rilke

* * *

Youth is like Eden. I think that goes without saying. But the apple is rarely a
single event, an infamous bite that exposes the core of doubt to a virgin mind, which
can never rid the taste from its memory. Usually, it takes a great deal of conditioning
for us to become knowledgeable, civilized, practical, and to unlearn many of our
more primitive inclinations. Guilt and shame do not just bear fruit, they are carefully
nursed by a steady diet of condemnation and humiliation. We learn to fear divergent
thinking; we learn that the norm soothes only the way conformity can—easily. And
E-Z replaces OM as our spiritual mantra.

Once, the amount of adversity overcome was the measure of a person. Now,
the amount of adversity avoided is the measure. I'm not sure what that says
about us. Are we more pragmatic or less courageous?

It is hard to know when ignorance sloughed off of our backs and made us
vulnerable to the coldness that is the result of curiosity’s tendency to deconstruct our
phenomenological shelters. People often long for their youth, for that time when the
self was all that mattered, and rightfully so, when life lacked complexity and
impossibility. We hold onto memories of childhood so dearly, those of us who were not unluckily born into the homes of soul-less pricks, that is. We use those memories as candles at the altar of hope, that our lives may be that simple again. Sadly, we know what is true about Eden; we know that while it is not gone, it will never be the same.

But we cannot dwell on such tragedies. After all, we didn’t realize how good we had it. We didn’t know that it doesn’t get better, per se, it gets crazier—crazy good and crazy bad—and so, we never fully appreciated it. But now we can. And now, we want to find our way back because at some point we recognize that here is just an attempt to live like there. But we mustn’t forget something else, that, at a distance, here looked like Eden to us.

* * *

Pulling my mind away from deeper, non-sleep-conducive, thought patterns, I decided to head down stairs to administer low doses of sitcom sedation. As I reach the bottom of the stairs Charlie begins to whine pathetically.

“Shhhhh. Okay Charlie, okay. Here I come.”

Charlie was about 6 months old at the time, a very small, adorable chocolate Dachshund. I opened his cage and he stepped out, yawning and stretching as only a wiener dog can. First his front paws reached out as his front half dipped down in a
curtsey. Then his back legs sprawled, dragging behind him as he crawled forward like an accident victim exiting a wreckage—each half appearing to go about its business independently of the other.

I grab the remote and click on the soccer channel first, just in case there is a live match, somewhere in the world, I could happen upon. No luck, just a replay of a Bundesliga game from earlier in the week. I begin to surf sports shows and news, then music channels (just in case they decide to play music for a change). Then I run through some of the late shows: who’s on, what bands, which guests, what skits. All of it is unsatisfactory from an entertainment standpoint, but seems to be doing its job of distracting me from my searching thoughts for the time being.

Finally, after patiently scanning the TV guide network, I settle into a channel that has classic TV shows lined up like boxcars all the way up to the morning news hours. The familiarity relaxes me and I curl into a blanket. Charlie whines again at the foot of the couch and I scoop him up. He nestles into the warm pocket my chest and folded arms create. Charlie’s slight frame trembles in irregular intervals for a few minutes before settling into a cozy, enviable sleeping pattern sporadically interrupted by long, tongue-curving yawns. His semi-narcosis is contagious and I find myself yawning and kneading into the sofa. Consciousness starts to give way. *Cheers* blends into *Mash*, which blends into episodes of my own.

* * *
I say, "Pardubsky" and my mind responds as if I have taken a bite of ice cream, or I'm watching puppies galloping awkwardly after a ball. The word brings delight. Two of my best friends growing up, two of the best friends I, or anybody, have ever had were the Pardubsky brothers: John and Michael. Sometimes I look back on my life and certain memories leap out at me and remind me that I live in order to collect moments like those. I live as if my profession was that of a Satori Farmer hurling through time cultivating events for the ripeness of their authenticity, planting seeds according to their ataraxial coordinates, choosing crops by way of synchronicity.

We go through our lives seeking out moments of clarity, experiences that are so joyful that they become ends in themselves. We desire moments that demand our presence, our unity in the phenomenon. We seek to protect ourselves, our selfhood, most of our working lives, such is the practicality of civilization. Yet we are happiest when our sense of self is blurred, lost in experience, absorbed into it—being not observing. When we resign ourselves to a moment because it is so compelling that we find resistance a non-option, is when we are happiest, when we are truly present, when we are whole and the fact of it is not a thought because the question of its non-being doesn't exist.

*Questioning is a reflective act that requires distance from the present in order to inspect the past or ponder the future allowing us to become industrious over the Earth. But because of this ability we are also fragmented, separate from, and therefore incomplete. And so, we long for wholeness. There are two ways to proceed: forwards and backwards. Both*
end the same because it is a loop, one is shorter because it only takes a lifetime: ask all the questions, or stop needing answers. The paradoxical nature of the fact that we have a compulsion to ask, in order to seek fulfillment, but are most fulfilled when the compulsion is subdued by a moment of we-less-ness, when the act of asking dissolves into impossibility, is, perhaps, where irony was birthed.

* * *

I had ridden my bike over to the Pardubsky’s. It was about a mile away, and back then nobody gave any thought to letting a 10 year-old ride off and be gone for most of the day with barely as much as a wave good-bye. We had gone over to Scooter’s house to see if we could play on his computers. His dad was a computer geek in the 80’s who would eventually write a program of some sort that a big company would pay him millions of dollars for. Anyway, they had a converted attic that housed a half dozen or more computers and they always had cutting edge games to play. Unfortunately, Scooter’s mom wouldn’t let us in because the house was a mess, and we looked a little like trouble, so she sent him out with us instead.

It was a hot day, which made us lazy and restless at the same time. So we sat around the cul-de-sac trying to come up with something fun to do that didn’t involve sweat. As we kicked around some ideas, Michael found a razor blade in the street. None of us had really seen or held one before, but we were able to piece together its purpose and use from partial stories and experiences. What made the find particularly interesting was the fact that attributed to a “razor” blade was the illustrious property
of having “crazy-super-sharpness,” which we figured must have been what “razor” meant. So we proceeded to dare each other to touch the blade. As you might guess, this game had nowhere to go but bad.

Rumor had it that simply grazing it could slice a limb straight off. So we picked it up as if we were scientists exploring an ancient planet, having found signs of life. We examined it and held it gingerly. John was the first to go, as was usually the case, he being the oldest and all, six months my elder. He gripped it with one hand and took the index finger of the other and touched the blade lightly. We all, “Eeeewwwwd,” over the bravery. He checked his finger, and then tapped on the blade a few times like a fire-eater touching his tongue to the flame repeatedly.

Then Michael stepped in, and very carefully, slid his finger across the razor’s edge. No blood. So he pressed his finger against it a few times, like ringing a doorbell. Again, no blood. Scooter was enjoying the show. He was not the type to risk anything at all, but he thrilled at getting front row seats to our ill-advised undertakings.

He egged us on, “Press harder, c’mon.” His eager grin widened.

We all smiled, and it was my turn. I had seen nothing to strike fear in me so I took the blade and held out my thumb like a magician demonstrating that there is no trick here, the appendage was real. I then pushed the blade into my thumb with a little more force than my previous colleagues. They cringed, but I felt nothing and I showed the crowd my thumb’s bloodless skin. The onlookers, “Aaaawwwwd,” and with that my confidence grew. Convinced that the term “Razor” was not as menacing
as we had believed, I showed them the blade, smirked and pressed it to my thumb very hard, squeezing as someone might who was trying to stop a bleed. They gasped at my bravado, and then drew in deep breathes of wincing anticipation. I held it there for several seconds before pulling it away. My thumb formed a “V” where the blade had been, and still there was no blood, and no pain. We stared for a while longer while the flesh’s elasticity came back and the shape began to return. I smiled an empowered smile as they hovered over my courageous display. And then it came.

Where the point of the “V” had been at its depth, it began to separate as the skin pushed upward, and red, a deep glossy shade, began to ooze. Still no pain, but that no longer mattered as the skin continued to separate and the blood poured out. My eyes grew as wide as the cut, and the three boys all began cursing, “Fuck-n-A’s,” and “Holyshit’s,” abounded until they saw my expression of terror.

And then, as if we were hooligans startled by headlights that made plain our tomfoolery, we scattered. At first, Michael ran towards some bushes as if to hide from the event. John and I headed off for their house to find something to stop the bleeding. I ran out in front like a man on fire, straight for the garden hose to wash the blood away, as he barged through the front door to rummage through the bathroom medicine cabinet for bandages. Scooter sprinted straight for his house, but when he hit the entry he held his breath, walked quickly and quietly, eyes down, into his bedroom and under the covers to pretend he had been sleeping and hadn’t seen a thing, in case a parent were to call in the ensuing half an hour.
When we really think about it, do we not taste that fabled apple almost every other day of our lives?

* * *

James, Ozzy and I were playing football at the recreation center one afternoon. The sun was beginning to sink and a chill was sweeping over the park. Ozzy was checking his watch neurotically.

“I gotta get home.”

“Yeah, it’s probably past dinner time.” James added.

Summer was great; the days were so long. Most everyone else had gone home already, it must have been around 8 o’clock.

“One more.” I said, as there was always time for one more. “Go long!” And the last one always had to be the longest and most dramatic.

There was a time when every sunset marked the end of a tale.

Ozzy and James took off towards our bikes pushing on each other and waving their hands as if they were open. I waved back, encouraging them to keep going. James begins to break away. The safe bet was on James: he was black and Ozzy was Jewish.

Should I not say that? Probably not, but for reasons that are more cordial than true. James’ last name was White, and his parents were an interracial couple. That was the sort of normalcy I call my youth.
Did I mention within about hundred yard span on the block I grew up on,
there were these two boys' families, my own family, a Puerto Rican/Peruvian
Mutt household, a Japanese family, a white Christian family, a white little
house on the prairie family and a white trash family, an old man who would
give us ice cream one day and shoo us away with a broom handle another,
two Filipino families, and a Muslim family. And that is not counting the
people who didn't have kids and who kept to themselves. It was incredible
looking back on it; a little like I imagine Heaven being, except with fewer
cars parked on the street to interfere with touch football games.

I hucked the ball high and far and James hauled it in with Ozzy stumbling at
his heels. Oz went for the tackle, attempting to force a fumble, but he ran into a well-
placed stiff-arm and falls clumsily to the ground. James spiked the ball on his ass. I
jogged over blowing kisses to the mildly swaying tree-limbed fans that rustled with
excitement over the last second heroics. We grabbed our bikes and pedaled for home.

After cutting across “the field” (an unused lot with wild growth all over it that
served as a bike track/short-cut/hideout for kids and bums alike), we headed on down
a long slightly curved road leading back into our neighborhood. The sun had almost
dropped out of sight and the streetlights were starting to come on creating an eerie
man-made twilight. We were cruising at a medium pace, making bets on what was
for dinner at our various dwellings and talking about what might be on the agenda for
tomorrow: will a pool be involved, what sport should we play, is anyone from the
block going to be gone and how does that affect our options, does anyone have new
toys, guns, skateboards, video games, etc. This was all very pertinent.
And then (because there always is one), Ozzy rode into the back of a Pinto, flying head first over his handle bars cartoonishly sliding down the hatchback window leaving a saliva trail a foot and a half long in his wake. It was so abrupt. One moment Oz was talking to us and we were looking at him, and the next moment, in mid-sentence, his face was mashed up against the back of a car and we were riding on another 15-20 feet with him suddenly yanked out of the picture and us going, “What the hell just happened?”

Since we were all talking and looking at each other, the slight curvature of the street slowly, unnoticeably, came into play. Ozzy’s front tire had hit the bumper of a parked car causing his bike to stop while his momentum continued, throwing his back tire into the air and bucking him over the handlebars. His torso seemed to pause there after impact just so that we could have that mental snapshot of him parallel to the ground, before he slumped into a pile on the street.

James and I hit the brakes after sharing a brief look of astonishment, jumped off of our bikes and ran back to Ozzy.

“Are you alright?”

Oz stood up crying, “My mouth. Ahhh, my mouth.”

“Let’s see.” I said, as damage always had to be thoroughly investigated for accurate appraisals to be made.

His hands, having been cupped over his mouth, pull away.

“Dude, your teeth.” I said in disbelief.

“What?” His crying stopped long enough to seriously enquire.
“They’re cut in half, dude.”

He felt with his thumb and a look of panic rolled across his face. A long, awkward second passes and he sprinted off crying for home. James and I stood there stunned, listening to his wailing from several houses down. We both stared at him disappearing into the dusk.

“He could have caught that last ball if he had run that fast.” I said matter-of-factly.

“No doubt.” James agreed.

“Dude, that was gnarly.” I said, with the slightest twinge of a smile.

“No shit, dude. That was hilarious.” James added.

“Seriously, he freakin’ flew. That was rad, dude.”

“Seriously, that was one of the coolest things I’ve ever seen.”

“Totally.”

Isn’t this exactly what we all think, but only say in the right company?

I looked back at the hatch back as James and I grabbed Ozzy’s bike to bring it home for him. My eyes followed the path of slobber as the event reenacted itself in my mind, and there they were, two little half-teeth neatly tucked into the rubber seal of the rear window. I pointed the spectacle out to James and his eyes glittered like Indiana Jones discovering the grail. I grabbed the evidence, inspected it for a moment, and dropped it into my pocket (after letting James touch it, of course). The
two of us rode to Ozzy’s house, each of us using one hand to steer and the other to balance Ozzy’s bike between us.

We picked up our discussion about the next day’s plans, making adjustments in our calculations for this new variable that had been introduced. Playing in Ozzy’s backyard, or with his extensive Lego collection was probably no longer an option. But we were accustomed to handling such unpredictabilities, so adjustments were easily made to our perpetually tentative schedules.

Then, after some silence, or at least some quiet snickering, James asked what might be considered, in hindsight, to be an insensitive question, but at the time seemed wholly appropriate, and perhaps even, expected. “If you could choose, would you rather have gold teeth or silver teeth?”

I said, after some serious thought, “Adamantium, like Wolverine.”

“Yeah,” James concurred, “that would be cool.”

“Yeah.”

Yeah. Adamantium—for sure.

*    *    *

The thing about life is that it cannot remain in rest, in peace. Its nature is to move, to evolve. As blissful as any time or place may appear, it can only maintain that state for a period of time as it changes ever so slightly with every passing moment until it becomes noticeably something else. Or sometimes, we are ripped
from our comfortable posts and tossed into thorn bushes. Either way, good times are fated to end. I look back on my life and it is always these episodes, compartmentalized events that present themselves as defining moments. Not every one of them has to be life altering in the sense of, “The world never looked the same from that day forward,” but taken together, in measured groupings, there is a pool that noticeably gathers taking up space in the unconscious waiting for us to cast our reflection on.

What I have found interesting, and reassuring, is that with enough distance all of them, all of the ones that frequent our troubled and reminiscing minds alike, become more than noteworthy—they become precious stones that fortify us. Some are simple, clear as day, yet needed because we often need to be reminded of the obvious. Some take time; they have to simmer and wait for us to come back to them when our palate has grown discriminating enough to appreciate a well-orchestrated concoction. Some, on the other hand, are immediate: they come at you at such a pace, like a dam bursting, washing out your path, and it is all you can do to hold on and wait for it to run its course. You just wonder where you’ll wash up, and if your path has been irrevocably changed.
Chapter V
A Memorial Day

Impermanent are all formations. Observe this carefully, constantly—Buddha

*  *  *

Are we choosing? Are we in charge, or are we spectators? Is it free-will that makes us responsible, or are we simply witnesses, elaborate recording devices, strapped to the hood of a moving vehicle waiting with invested anticipation? Are we a someone, an “I” of some kind, a separate, unique and important something, or are we a point of density, a place where thoughts have gravitated forming a conglomerate affectionately called self?

Siddhartha warned us against metaphysical meanderings. Those sorts of questions are too big. Not to big to be asked, of course, but to be accurately approached, and, as Pandora learned, born of a curiosity too mischievous and multifarious to be put back, to be unasked. It’s not so much that we shouldn’t ask about reality (I think our humility and peace of mind rests on our asking such disconcerting questions), but that our fate does not lie in their answers as much as in the accepting of partial explanations as an indication of our status as purely interpretive creatures for whom certainty is mostly myth, and mortality is certainly burdensome. Only then does an authentic existence have the chance to bathe in the sunlight that cave-dwelling only depicts on shadowed walls.
Only then will we grow appreciative, tolerant and patient.

* * *

My nap was not to be long enjoyed as Charlie’s yipping in his sleep, chasing after some creature (probably smaller than himself, lizard perhaps) in his dreams, woke me. I ran my fingers over his soft, loose-fitting fur and carried his warm little body to bed. I helped to nestle him into the folds of his blanket and closed his kennel door for the night.

I tip-toed up the stairs and quietly slipped into bed, finally tired enough to think that I might get some rest before my life took this most amazing turn. I did my own nestling, sliding my leg between hers and slipping my arm underneath her arm and along the taut, round warmth of her pregnant belly. All these thoughts, snap shots, portals had been flashing across my consciousness as the enormity of parenthood began to further eclipse my sense of self importance.

And still, my mind couldn’t be stopped from boarding that train to Oregon.

“What kind of person are you?” That is a question we should ask ourselves regularly—because we change, because we should know, because it is what matters most in this life. Then, at some point, if you are equally blessed and courageous, the question changes, “What kind of person will you raise?” And an immediate corollary announces itself with the calm force of a massive ocean swell quietly overtaking your access to oxygen, “You cannot protect them from the world.”
Suddenly you are an existentialist and an ethicist and someone who prays.

* * *

I felt a little like I was in a beer commercial. I was in someone’s Jeep, doesn’t matter whose, a friend of a friend. Country music blaring, years before I would come to appreciate it. But I smiled. The wind made the conversation boisterous, or maybe it was the alcohol, or that it was a holiday weekend and summer break was lurking. I had not been to Grant’s Pass before. I had not been anywhere in Oregon before, other than campus. A few girls that I had grown chummy with, the only people I had grown chummy with, that spring at OSU, had invited me home for the weekend.

We were heading to someone’s house for a big Memorial Day get together. It was rumored to be a great time. All the food and beverage you could stand, tunes, games, boats and jet skis on a private lake. This was what I had left San Diego for: to do things I hadn’t done, with people I hadn’t thought about doing things with. Strangers welcomed me into their home simply because I was someone’s new friend. I just smiled.

It was everything they said it would be, mixed drinks, beer, burgers and dogs, volleyball, horseshoes, music and cards, and a lake with people riding around on it, everyone joyous—incredible. I don’t remember what I had just finished doing. I was
satiated (I knew that), sauntering over to a lawn chair in a partially shaded area near a break in the shrubbery where a small strip of shore opened up. And still smiling.

A lot of your life, when you look back at it, is spent waiting for good things to happen. What is most liberating is when you decide to stop spectating and sub yourself into the line-up. I mean here it was: I decided to change things, I decided to leave, to start over, I went to Oregon, I met those girls, I pulled a chair up to the lakeshore, closed my eyes and soaked it all in. I got up and did all that because I just needed to show myself I could. Because sometimes we just need to prove something so that we know it’s there, so that we know if we only had ourselves to count on, we’ll manage.

What is interesting, as I think back on it, is that in the moments before it happened I truly remember a specific procedure. I remember breaking away from the crowd for a few minutes, which is standard for an introvert trying to wing it. I sat down, thought about how I could just fall asleep with a smile on my face, and I looked out across the lake, the noise and hub-bub only peripheral perceptions, as the sun’s dance off the water was enchanting. I remember feeling an internal exhale as I stared an imperturbable stare.

Where does humor come from I wonder? Are things funny because they are unexpected, or because they’re true, or is humor the unexpected truth being coped with? What then is sadness? Truth we have not found the strength to smile about? And tragedy? Truth that we may never understand, or that we may never accept as natural, as needed in this world—truth void of anything that resembles humor.

My view was cliché; it was that view that people reminisce about, misremember as more inspiring than it was, and speak of with genuine fondness because of what it symbolized: better days.
What is most operative about the above statement is the tense—the fact that at one moment it “was” cliché, and at the next it was no longer.

With my eyes open, consciousness began to drift a bit as if it were anchored at sea, never floating too far but always in a subdued state of motion. My eyes were mostly looking, not really watching, and only just barely seeing anything beyond vague shapes atop a glittering blue platter. One shape turned a bit and raced in my direction from a good hundred yards off shore. I began to fixate for some reason, as it appeared to be an arrow, gliding towards me. It continued to speed, skipping on the lake’s surface, and I continued to focus. It looked like fun. The girl held on tight, leaning forward in flight. I watched with envy; I watched as her smile almost came into view; I watched as another jet ski cut across her path, clothes-lining her around the neck and head, ending my envy.

The next little while was a mess. I yelled, “Hey! There was an accident!” My words just dissipated into the celebratory mob.

I yelled again, “Hey! Somebody’s hurt! There was an accident!”

It took some moments for mental gears to grind to a halt, as my voice, though urgent, lacked a certain tragic flare that would have shocked people into action. Some trotted over to where I stood as I pointed like a boy having discovered some new phenomenon curiously sharing with the less ignorant folks around him. All they saw were two jet skis circling quietly, and two girls floating next to them, an otherwise fairly typical scene.
“What happened?” Someone asked.

“One of them ran into the other one.” I said, in a half sedated, half confused voice. “The older girl got run over by the younger one. It looked really bad. I don’t think the older one is moving.”

The little girl splashed around a bit and cried. The older girl just floated there. A man hustled over and asked, and people who knew him recounted, and he reacted so suddenly. While others were yelling from shore trying to get the attention of people on boats out on the lake, the man ran down and dove into the water and swam hard for the two girls.

*He reacted like a father would, and the thought of it pressed hard on my mind.*

He was almost there when a small aluminum boat pulled up to the scene. They helped the little girl into the boat while the man held the other girl in his arms. He lifted her a bit as they hoisted her up, almost pouring her over the edge onto the floor of the boat and sped for shore as a crowd gathered to meet them.

I lingered behind, not really wanting to watch, but being pulled by the gravity of it all. I remember my teeth clinched shut and my uncomfortable breathing and my nervously attending eyes, as the swimmer jumped off the boat before it had fully ran ashore, grabbing the girl and hurrying towards us. She lay, draped across his arms, her hair soaked in blood, her neck nearly perpendicular to her body. Her mother shrieked a real shriek, the kind that launches so much pain into the atmosphere that
anyone who hears it, feels it. They put her in the back of a waiting SUV, covered her in blankets and raced off.

I had never seen a dead person; I had no idea of what death looked like. She was dead—I knew that. There was no life in that body, no spirit, nothing to animate it. That much was clear. Her limbs hung from the man’s arms—like an overripe banana peel void of its purpose.

* * *

Is it wrong to speak of it that way? Is it wrong to compare her to an object like that, to something that doesn’t feel like we feel—even if it’s true? Such is the nature of truth I guess—the fact that a metaphor applies is wholly separate from whether or not we can appreciate it.

The truth is, it was heart-breaking to see a body without its soul. It was heart-breaking. Do you understand that? My heart broke. That woman lost her child on a sunny day full of laughter. Her child was gone and all that was left was the most tragic reminder of what she was: her lifeless body. I’ll tell you what really smarts: the little girl, who survived, who ran into the older girl, was her sister. How does one cope?

I can’t think on it for more than a few moments without feeling a fragment of that mother’s loss and having it reinjure that old fracture that occurred to my spirit that day. I don’t know how one is supposed to recover from such things. I hope she is well. I hope she doesn’t hurt so badly anymore. I hope for that as much for my own peace, as for hers.
How could this be? How could she be almost smiling at me, and then dead? I was the only witness that day, the only one with the perfect seat for testifying to God’s inexcusable behavior. I remember answering questions as a fog started to swallow me up. People didn’t want answers; they wanted explanations. They looked in my eyes searching for them. I looked back apologetically as only a messenger can. And the more they searched my face, the more I withdrew into the fog until they were just noise, static, chatter in between channels.

Someone, I imagine one of the girls I came with, reached in, pulled me out, and led me away. I remember being very quiet for a very long time, not quite sure what I was supposed to feel, just knowing I was supposed to. They took me back, and made me some sort of tea and insisted I drink it. They took me to a room. I can hardly remember it. I think it was a converted attic. It was warm and sun-filled and I laid down on the floor, on my side and stared at the wall for a long time. I sobbed, until I fell into a hard, dreamless sleep.

* * *

I lay very still, not wanting the tears that accompany that memory to disturb her. I observe her silhouette, the line of her shoulder, down along her back, curving into her hip and thigh, and the thought of losing her, or our child-to-be, brings more tears. Empathy is an astonishing attribute of human nature. I understand what Sid means about suffering and why it is the first Noble Truth. Just the thought, the fully,
consciously aware contemplation of loss is enough to make anyone frightened of love.

It is becoming abundantly clear, as they say. The last nine months had been conjecture. Here, on the eve of our child’s birth, all levity is dissipating. Whatever else my life had been about is soon to be a footnote to what my life will now become. I will no longer be measured by anything more meaningful than my fatherhood. I will soon find out more about myself than the last thirty-one years had been remotely capable of establishing.

I don’t know what to think. The mixture of emotions is a strange one. There is a joy, saddled with fear, wrapped in anxiety and doubt, saturated in a nervous excitement that makes me want to puke and laugh at the same time. It’s an emotional jail break. The anticipation is what is most consuming, knowing that the child is the purest expression of the commitment I’ve made to my wife, the purest expression of that, until now, fabled thing called unconditional love. The thought of seeing the child we’ve made starts to win out, joy and excitement begin to set in, and the fear gives way to thoughts of a covenant, “We’re good-hearted, we’re in love, we’re going to do our best, we’ll be fine. We’re having a baby.”

Thoughts flood that internal dialogue, and then the dam breaks, “Holy-fuckin-shit, we’re having a baby. What the fuck am I supposed to do with a baby? It’s going to cry and shit and cry. It’s going to be up all night. It doesn’t speak English. How do I hold it? It’s going to spit up on me, and probably pee on me. And it will get sick and cry some more. And what if it’s sick? It can’t take care of itself. It can’t
tell us what hurts. How will I know what to do? Will it be healthy, in one piece, all of its pretty little toes? What if there are complications? They say that don’t they? They say, ‘I’m sorry, there have been some complications.’ They’re always sorry for it, I’ve seen it on TV. Will it be the doctor’s fault or ours, or God’s? What are we going to do? How will we know what to do? How will we know that we know? Holyshit, we’re having a baby.”

There it was, distress rolling back into shore. That must be what it’s like to be bipolar. I see why one might need drugs to get a handle on this stuff. There must have been some crazy chemical shit going on inside me. (I cannot even imagine what my wife was going through.) Alarms sounding, evacuation procedures being executed, all non-vital apparatuses shut down so power can be rerouted to hotspots. The question was whether this was only the beginning of the end of my sanity?

I ride the wave of emotion and start to get used to the swells. Eventually, the back and forth wears me out and rocks me to sleep. “We’re going to have a baby,” is the last thing I remember thinking.

I can’t wait.
Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear—

*Lao Tzu*

* * *

Who has any idea, really? I mean, let’s face it our ignorance so far outweighs our knowledge it is ludicrous to think we will be able to make sense of it. I think that is where religion gets its strength. As Descartes demonstrated, just about everything we put our mind to can be doubted, and yet here we are, this something, capable of asking incredible questions. And once we ask that’s it, how do we retract it; how do we unask about death and what lies ahead; how do we unask about the meaning and purpose behind action; how do we pretend we don’t want to know if we are accident or invention?

Religion makes it okay to not know these things. Freud called it a crutch, Marx an opiate, I’m not sure it isn’t both—nor am I sure that we are not all in a measure of pain and in need of some support. While I am not religious in any conventional sense of the word, I find it difficult to have lived a considerable amount of time on this Earth without becoming somewhat spiritual. There is too much that goes unanswered, and too much I am capable of contemplating for there not to be explanations worthy of being termed “mystical.” What does mystical mean anyway,
besides being outside of ordinary understanding? Is that not what a majority of being human entails: learning to accept the unexplained truth?

Any way you look at it, going back to the ancients of any philosophy or religion, there seems to be a prerequisite to our enlightenment, to our living authentically. Socrates said it most simply, "Know Thyself." We are human, and therefore share essential properties with all of humanity. Not just genetic markers, but tendencies, preferences, instincts. What is true for one, is somewhat true for all. No good man is without some sin. No criminal is completely devoid of compassion. And there is still bullshit, even in those who are most honest with themselves.

* * *

I had been living in Park City, Utah for a couple of months. Barton, Heinz and Mac had relocated to this winter paradise. Three great peaks surrounded the small ski town and I shared a one bedroom apartment on the bottom floor of a three-story condo in an upscale neighborhood that boasted mansion after mansion. Heinz had guaranteed me work if I came out. When I arrived he quit his job and gave it to me, along with his work clothes and a ski jacket I have to this day.

I was in a holding pattern that winter, waiting for graduate school to start in the fall and looking to focus my efforts on a hedonistic combination of recreational drinking, amateurish boarding, and potentially publishable writing. I worked on an
awful word processor that had yellow screen characters and a quarter-inch box cursor that pulsed on the screen mocking me as it impatiently waited to be actualized.

I didn’t know what I was writing at the time, some sort of philosophical sci-fi morality play hybrid that I thought I could intuit my way through. Instead, I spent most of my time reading Asimov and marveling, making mid-morning board runs, drinking my dinners, and, for some reason, distracting myself any way I could. One instance included a three and half day puzzle-building venture when I stumbled onto a 3D castle puzzle left in an old cupboard.

I get easily absorbed into things, so once the puzzle pieces were dumped onto the coffee table, my schedule cleared up to make room for this project. I would stay up late, and work on it a bit in the mornings, and again during lunch and before we’d go out for a drink. It bordered on obsessive, as I couldn’t walk by the table without putting a piece or two in place. After several days it was complete, or at least, as complete as it could be with a few pieces missing from the old box. While its full splendor could not be achieved, it was still magnificent, or so I thought. I cooed and purred and basked as all self-satisfied animals do.

Barton walked into the room only moments after my mental ribbon-cutting ceremony. He plopped down on the chair next to me. I raised my eyebrows proudly and invited him to share in the glory of my architectural feat.

“Check it out, dude.”

He sat, nodding his head in approval. Without a word, he raised his fist over his head and brought it down like a club delivering a deathblow to my castle. Then
he walked out of the room without a word, though a smile fought the corner of his mouth, and he grabbed a beer from the fridge.

I just sat, my mouth probably open, a gasp probably having occurred, and just like that I laughed. "Holy shit! Dude, that was awesome! That took me like four days, and you just destroyed it in like 2 seconds."

Typically, I would have been livid. I mean common, the guy just disgraced my concentrated efforts. But for some reason it moved right through me. It was like a nun had just smacked me with a ruler for answering a rhetorical question. There was a moment of lucidity that immediately transported me to a parking lot 6 months earlier...

* * *

So I was standing outside a nightclub somewhere in Sacramento. I had been playing for a semi-pro soccer team and we were cruisin’ the nightlife. (Semi-pro means you get beer money and free socks.) Sacramento scared me a little. It was a flat, concrete land of business parks, laundry mats, and buses. I would travel nowhere after dark without a local to vouch for me.

The club was dead, or dying, and the parking lot was full of small huddles of people making after party plans. I ended up leaching on to a group that had a wizard for its leader—at least, that what he said he was.

“My name is Sabu. I am a wizard.” Doesn’t get much more clear than that.

“Wow, really?”
“Yes.”

“He is, seriously.” Someone interjected.

“Sweet.” I patronized him.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I don’t know.”

“When were you born?” He asked.

He was dressed like a drag queen disguised as a pimp. He had long braids, some were colored in blues and reds. His skin was a dark chocolate and his eyes had an intense, but joyful fire in them. I was glad to oblige.

“July 19, 1973.”

“You’re intelligent, a little shy, reserved, cautious, people trust you, and you keep a lot to yourself. You have a very good sense of humor, and you are very sympathetic to others, and that makes you a good friend.” He rattled off.

Okay, so he memorized a few astrology books from the public library, and now he performs party tricks. I had read many of those lines off of your average Chinese Restaurant place mats and used bookstore posters. I was an Ox and a Crab: quiet, but passionate, an introvert, very cerebral, guarded, reliable, yadah-yadah. Nevertheless, it was impressive and I enjoyed meeting eccentric people; they seemed to have found their own religion, a dogma that could take a kaleidoscopic world and make it into an impressionist masterpiece.

He read my eyes and could tell that I was more amused than convinced by his magical display. So he continued, “You’re a new soul, still trying to find your way,
full of questions. You start many things that you never finish. You get distracted, make excuses, and give chase, rarely seeing things through to their completion.”

*The words felt like sticks and stones.*

“You’re right.” I said, as I focused in letting him know he had hit a nerve. In my mind, the parking lot emptied and it was only he and I. My words were sincere, “How do I change that?” I wanted to know.

His kinetic eyes seemed to reach for mine as he spoke, “Next time you’re close to the end of something, you say to yourself, ‘Sabu said, you never finish anything.’ Then you finish it.” And just like that his spell was cast.

*I decided, at the time, I had met my first wizard in the parking lot of a Sacramento nightclub. Upon later reflection, I came to discover several wizards had crossed my path before, and since, Sabu. Wisdom belonged to them, and it was their joy to impart it. I knew the man for ten minutes, but I have never forgotten the simplicity and certainty of his words and what they represented. He said to take ownership, be present, look in the mirror and decide what you want this life to be, and then make it happen. Not in those words, but in those eyes, in they way they testified to the fact that we make our lot in this world.*

*New souls become old souls, kids grow up, individuals become families, and with each metamorphosis the world grows a dimension of vivacity. More known is more to gain, and more to fear losing.*

*And there is our segway: a meaningless castle I built, finished and yet not, still missing pieces, like life, never to be fully realized, but enough of it*
experienced to cast a true likeness, a faithful rendering, a pride-filled metaphor, smashed to bits only seconds after its fruition.

It is the risks we take to create room for magic to happen in our lives that makes this plight of ours both meaningful and shared.

* * *

Hillery had been up for awhile, quietly getting her things together, letting me get some sleep. The odd lighting that always accompanies the mixture of light bulbs and predawn gray slowly brought me to consciousness. I watched her move around the room. She was gorgeous, elliptically so. She looked 10 months pregnant to most, but she was a few days early. I got up and got my act together and we headed out for the hospital on a dark early October morning.

The next several hours were anticlimactic; she progressed slowly. We tried to rest, but hospitals are unnaturally cool and too experientially intermittent, with their constant interruptions, to fully relax. Things began to get moving, and then stalled, moved and stalled, and so on, for too long, until things got out of hand.

* * *

Kirkwood was visiting, I can’t remember why, just passing through I think. We played ball together at Chico and he knew I was from San Diego so he looked me up. We were sitting in my living room, or maybe I was sitting and he was lying on
the floor, either way, he spied some of my neighbors at the pool. I had rented a great little one bedroom apartment across the street from SDSU and some Cross Country girls occupied the apartment across the pool to the right. It was the end of summer so classes were getting set to begin and the athletic programs had already begun their fall workouts. So several of the girls would stop by after practice to take a dip.

Kirkwood grinned as only a horny little ginger could, “Let’s go for a swim.”

I took a peek outside, “Sounds good to me.”

We strutted over to the pool and jumped in. I introduced my buddy to my neighbors, and they introduced us to their running mates. That’s how we met. Hillery wore a modest off-white one piece. She was tanned from running in the summer sun. Her legs were long; she was tall and slender (there was no doubt she was all limbs in her youth before young womanhood found her). She curved nicely from the hips up leading into long chestnut hair that framed her dimpled cheeks and hazel eyes. She smiled a shy tempting way. I was smitten, but I knew this wasn’t going to be storybook by any means, and yet I didn’t hesitate find out about where this young vixen would take me.

_Six years later..._

* * *

Her contractions were less than two minutes apart and they were lasting twice that long. She had wanted to try natural childbirth, but something wasn’t right. She
was in so much pain and that fucking doctor, that fucking deadhead doctor with his tie-dye skullcap and grateful dead socks, just sat there cross-legged as she screamed through each excruciating bout. He would wait for her to finish a contraction to speak because he wanted her to hear what he had to say. But it would take her thirty seconds just to catch her breath, and he would practically start over every time, and before he could get to finish explaining what was happening and what needed to be done, she’d start in again on another round—and he’d wait, like he was waiting for the fucking bus, no, worse, like he was waiting for his god damned to-go order of tofu crusted salmon to get called. I wanted to choke him.

Eventually, after about twenty minutes, he explained that she would be needing an emergency C-section since she had been in labor for so long and had not progressed enough, and the baby was giving signs of distress.

See that only took 10-15 seconds you fucking dip-shit.

Because our doctor had taken so long to spit the news out we had missed the window to have the anesthesiologist give her an epidural, which meant she had to continue with these crazy contractions for another forty minutes before she could get some relief.

I hated that doctor.

When she got her drugs, they whisked her away, and shuttled me off to get prepped for the surgery. I sat in a waiting room, in full sitcom surgical greens: hair
cap, booties, facemask and all. I remember sitting in that room and it all really starting to hit me. They were going to cut my wife open because she was having complications, and pull our child out of her. This is it, in minutes I’m going to be a father—we’re going to be a family.

I took deep breaths and I prayed for my wife and child, “iiliili love the Wooooorrlld and Evvvyboody iiiinn it.”

A nurse came for me and led me into the delivery room. A bevy of medical professionals hustled about in a calm deliberate fashion. There was small talk as if my wife was a water cooler, and they didn’t cut people open for a living. The scene was oddly comforting. I got out the video camera and took my place next to Hillery who smiled a loopy drug-induced smile. The doctors went to work on her lower two-thirds, as she laid there stretched as if she were on a cross. There was a partition that separated her two parts and made for an interesting disconnect. I could touch and talk to her on one side, and watch them slice into a heavily draped, hard to recognize part of her on the other. But it was her belly that was bleeding, and her layers of skin that they were peeling back and tugging on. And it was her insides that the doctor’s hands reached into, and our baby that those hands delivered.

Okay, so I forgave the asshole doctor.

Our boy was born on October 6th 2004, 8lbs 6oz, all head and torso. He was a barrel-chested little man whose noggin looked like it had no shot of coming out the old-fashioned way. He had black curly hair, a gift from his grandpa Wilfredo. I cut
his umbilical cord and cried in disbelief. Whatever apprehension I had experienced was gone. The world was right with him in it; I was already a better person because of him, I could feel it. Bailin, the soldier, the monkey king—our child, had arrived.

* * *

I’m not sure any of it matters, really. We live our lives, dreaming dreams that almost never come true. When it comes down to it we work, we roll the boulder to and fro. We don’t even have time to make sense of it because it keeps coming, one wave after another. I could go weeks sometimes without looking in the mirror, I mean really looking, at myself, questioning or confirming what I see. I usually look for food in my teeth, or a pimple, or a nose hair venturing from the cave. I comb my hair with my fingers, or shave, or inspect for wrinkles. I think that is unavoidable in life. We get busy and we have less time to check under our own hood, top off fluids, adjust the timing and kick the tires.

But a child is like a failsafe against emptiness. It doesn’t matter how long it has been, how preoccupied you’ve become, when they run to you with those eyes that don’t lie, and that smile that couldn’t be more real, and you kneel to meet them, you are reminded why you do everything you do. You look up at your wife, who you haven’t really seen in days, and her eyes welcome you home. A child never let’s you get too far from center, too far from what matters most.
I think about my life, some of what I’ve seen, and I try to make sense of it the way anybody does who wants to get by. But life doesn’t wait for us to have all of our explanations firmly grasped before sending us more to handle. If you wait until you’re ready to be a parent, the truth is, you’ll never be one. There will always be a puzzle piece or two missing from that castle.

But understand, this is not about parenthood, only what events of its kind are capable of illuminating in an open, receptive mind. I think what I’ve learned is that because we are limited, because we are inherently incomplete, the idea of finishing, or of ever being ready, has to be humanized; it has to be abolished as misnomer and redefined as a state of mind. Is there such a thing as being ready to dive into a freezing cold pool, or to administer your first French kiss, or to die with dignity? Are we ever finished living or loving or hoping or playing? Being finished is a designation, a practical marker for the purpose of communicating where one idea meets another. Is the movie finished or is my day only half over? Is my work done here or done for now? Does the story end or give you place to pick up from when you’re ready for more? It is a matter of semantics, of convenience, and of perception. We want to finish, to accomplish, because it announces something; it solidifies the notion that our efforts are not akin to the futile acts of trying to breathe under water, or kicking at the air as we fall. Whatever is accomplished is set, placed in time, historicized as some unit of measurement—of what, I do not know.

I think the distinction falls on the difference between finishing what we’ve started and wanting things just right. So many times I have begun to write, some
story or other, on some grand theme in some creative mold, only to have stopped short, to have resolved myself to begin again some other day. But there is no end to the distractions we are capable of rationalizing as worthy interruptions. At some point, we need to just choose a path and decide that it isn’t about being right, just right, but about seeing where it goes, and how it arrives—that the how defines the what, maps the where, and houses the why.

And yet, what we enjoy most we wish had no end, and we need no proof of completion, nor confirmation of its perfection, because the thought of it being anything other than itself is inconceivable.

I must admit that I don’t understand people for the most part, why they do what they do. I mean I get the pathology; I get that we are statistical creatures, governed by predictable tendencies, but I don’t understand how people don’t see our likeness, our connectedness, how we are separate and the same. While I am not you, I might as well be, for we have both suffered through loss, failed expectations, self-defining triumphs, moments when faith dissipated, evolved, and resurrected itself.

How do we look at another and not see ourselves, some likeness, an ancestral link in their half-assurance, their politeness, their commitment or curiosity? How can one live any sort of contemplative existence, for any reasonable amount of time, and not grow to such heights of empathy and tolerance that one’s presumptions about others become insights into oneself?

I think there is a line that matters, a line between essence and actuality, objective and subjective, truth and experience. It does not separate so much as delineate; it marks that ethereal space where what we experience in particular becomes understandable in terms of what we can infer in general.
Epilogue
Tightrope Walker

I tell you: one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you:
you still have chaos in you—Nietzsche

*   *   *

There is an interesting dichotomy that exists between Eastern and Western thought, but I do not perceive of any contradiction in this distinction. The East asks that we opt to simplify, to return to our better nature, to allow for action to rise up like a blade of grass to the sun. The West calls on us to innovate, to evolve into a greater version of ourselves, to take action as would a predator moving in on its prey. I think they both have merit, and that they both apply to different parts of our humanity. There is courage and there is temperament. There is passion and there is compassion. There is reason and there is intuition.

Nothing can be gained by denying that the best in us implies the worst, or that our destination has many paths leading to and fro, or that happiness is vague, naturally subjective and transient. And yet, our journeys are the same—not in token but in type. We are the same kind, and we so often forget it that we suffer a forlornness despite the fact that everywhere we turn there is another person who also searches for a unity of spirit. All we have to do is look out our windshields and
sliding glass doors to see the world populated with beings whose only wish is to be satisfied with the choices they have made in this life.

* * *

Mac and Heinz were getting ancy, which was typical. They were high energy people, naturally fit, designed well for endurance-based training, not an ounce of fat, never lifted weights and chiseled like statues of Greek Olympians. They made blokes like me (fairly lazy folk) sick with their constant movement, like dogs who wear out a kid’s rotator cup before giving up on a game of fetch.

It was early evening in Park City and the spa was heated up waiting for us to tiptoe across the snow-covered deck and immerse ourselves. Barton and I were having a beer on the couch watching the History Channel.

Heinz plopped down between us, “Jacuzzi time, let’s go.”

Mac sat down on the arm of the couch, grinning as only a guy who doesn’t drink much would grin if he drank much. “Jacuzzi time,” he mimics. “Bring your beers ladies.”

“Alright, gimme me a minute will ya, this show is almost over.” I asked, knowing full well the kind of response I was in for.

“What is it?” Heinz feigned interest.

“It’s about this family of tightrope walkers. The dad is like 70 and still walking ropes like 10 stories high without a net.”
“That’s not safe.” Heinz remarked flippantly.

“Get the fuck out of here and let me watch my show jackass.”

“Fine, let’s go Barton. Pound it.”

Barton tilts his head back on command and chugs the remainder of his beer,

“Done, let’s hit it.”

Mac had gotten absorbed into the program momentarily, “Whoa, check this guy out. He’s crazy.”

“No shit. That’s what I’m talking about.” I said.

The old man was walking a rope between two buildings in Puerto Rico (coincidentally where my father was born, which only acted to draw me closer to what proceeded). The conditions were incredibly windy. He teetered for a few moments. The staff in his hands tilted back and forth rocking him like a pendulum, as he calmly tried to balance. And then he knelt down slowly, lost his footing, and fell to his death.

“Holy shit.” I said as we all looked at the screen for a long moment.

Mac broke the silence, “Sucks for him.”

“Common, shows over, let’s go, hop to it.” Heinz swatted me on the thigh as he popped up and jogged in place, “Look alive soldier.”

Mac followed suit and trotted towards the sliding glass door that led out to the deck. Heinz bounded out of the room. Barton looked over at me, locked eyes, then clapped his hands bounced to his feet and ran after them.
I just shook my head at their silliness and mockery, and sat back on the couch.

"Idiots," I breathed the word into the bottle as I took a swig.

They replayed this man’s demise and some sort of emotion began to well up that I couldn’t quite place. The old man had made this insignificant skill his life, his family’s calling. It was their purpose to walk on a rope many stories high and risk their lives on what amounted to a dare. Who does that? How could people just decide that what they are meant to do is risk their lives because they can? Who does that, seriously?

And then something rang true. I can’t be sure where it came from, or how. I just remember connecting the dots and the image suddenly becoming clear. I lost time for a bit, thinking about how incredibly metaphorical it all was. I was consumed by a realization that started a latent chain-reaction of thinkers I had enshrined and thoughts I had entertained, stored away, packed into the crowded closet of my subconscious. This old man and his sea, his boulder, his crossing over, his elixir, his answer, his peace, his authenticity, his blessedness—his tightrope.

Where one moment I stared in disbelief, the next I knew he did not die in vain. I knew that his family honored him and that there was, perhaps, no other way for him to have gone. Should any of us be so lucky as to make a life of what makes us feel alive? Would we not feel privileged, those of us fortunate enough to have found glory in our livelihood, to leave this world the very way we lived it? Is that not all any person can ask for—to find meaning in what they do and purpose in how they do
it? It is, after all, how we go about our lives that will determine the kind of person we truly are.

I couldn’t help but smile. I shook my head again, but this time in adoration. “Cheers, Tightrope Walker,” I said as I raised my beer to polish it off. “To figuring shit out before we die.”

* * *

It seems like we spend a great deal of our time keeping busy, or trying to keep busy, like sharks we live as if we have to move to keep from going under. There is always something (and always something else too) isn’t there—something for us to chase, to hope for, to ask about, to believe in. There is so much to choose from, so much possibility; it can be overwhelming and suffocating, and oddly enough, liberating.

I don’t understand the Babylon we’ve become, the conflict between diversity and homogenization. Neither aptly describes us, neither is wholly befitting of the kind of creature we are. Is there something fundamentally contradictory about the fact that we have unique ways of expressing the same human tendencies? The West privileges the individual, the East emphasizes interconnectedness, and yet all is a matter of degree, of where the line is drawn—of what part of the circle you inhabit. Does not our own quantum cosmology teach us that our consciousness, while
personal, purely subjective, cannot be removed from the world of experience that houses it, that we are as essential to the universe as it is to us?

I have no desire to ramble off into a foggy dissertation that resembles the untamed meanderings of a wayward soul trying to make sense of the mess their life has become. (Primarily, because mine is no mess, but most importantly, because mine is not the issue—ours is.) My concern is that we fail to notice a few simple, plainly abundant things that are crucial to our flourishing in this world and this life.

We all have our stories. Each is uniquely our own and impenetrable to others in the sense of the matter-of-factness of knowing what it’s like to be another. And yet, each is extraordinarily representative of what every one of our kind has to endure and overcome before one can proceed with the act of living a good and meaningful life. Why is it that we so rarely acknowledge this? Why do we let our different tongues prevent us from accepting our similar dialogues? We all want the same thing, we all want to live a life as free from pain and regret as we can manage. To do that we spend our lives figuring out ourselves, our needs, our aspirations and our idea of happiness. And somehow, we often fail to realize that in trying to discover what comprises our soul, that which defines our being and sense of purpose, we are simultaneously revealing what is true about soulful beings: that as much as we need to know ourselves, we need to know we’re not alone in our search.

Does this require that much thought? Do we really need to work out the math to have it make sense? Is it not self-evident, intuitive, this fact that we need only look
at our lives to understand the lives of others? And is not that moment revelatory? Is it not the seed of compassion, tolerance and benevolence?

We all have stories to tell that encapsulate what it means to be human. All that’s left is to let that truth be absorbed and let our humanity act accordingly. Recognizing ourselves in others will not prevent us from reaching for stars; it will prevent us from stepping on another’s back to do so. Reason and empathy are gifts not to be used at the other’s exclusion. Our stories are memories, and our memories are maps. Forget our stories and we will lose our way. Ignore the stories of others and be both lost and alone.

Mine, like yours, is anecdotal—a metaphor regarding our most basic desire to be a better person, and to remain hopeful in the face of frailty.

* * *

I didn’t get to write about her in time. I call her a her, even though I don’t know if she was a her. My wife kept a journal. She would say, “You still haven’t written. You’d better get going on it.”

She was not happy about what, I think, she construed as laziness on my part. Especially since she knew that I fancied myself as a writer. With my son I was only sparsely motivated to write, not because I wasn’t inspired by the event of our first child growing inside her, but because words always seemed inadequate when I finally heaved the pen to the page.
Nevertheless, I wrote some entries, and I was glad that I had. It isn’t really about eloquence when you write about a phenomenon such as birth; it’s more about sincerity. So to look back and read what I wrote, when words failed me at the doorstep of awe, I am moved to reminiscence and I can’t help but mentally stammer as I read through the images and feelings that my clumsy penmanship resurrects.

That remark seems to hold my attention, so dry, so true. It’s not so much that the penmanship is clumsy, but that it is my own. I often stumble over old pieces I have written, half finished in an old forgotten notebook or maybe just seedlings scribbled on the back of some junk mail, and I look at the page thinking, “When did I write this?” I know I wrote it. It’s in my handwriting. It sounds like me, but I don’t remember it. Then you come across a passage, or a line, or a fragment of a line and suddenly, like a Zen koan realized there is a flash. A whole corridor of self grinds open like an ancient tomb. “Oh yeah,” it all starts coming back and I’m swept off in curiosity like a child rediscovering once favorite toys in the attic. That’s why we keep journals, because they keep us.

But, as I said, I didn’t get to write in hers. She passed away, seven and a half weeks old, in utero. They say miscarriages happen a lot; they often go unnoticed. This one was noticed—mostly by my wife. I am usually an extremely empathetic person, but for some reason something wasn’t registering.

Here I was, my wife had lost a child inside her, and while I cared and felt deeply, I didn’t cry, not even a choked-back tear. She did. She cried herself to sleep for weeks. I know that there is more to the connection between mother and child, but
how could I not suffer this loss in a more animated fashion? I was conflicted. I was glad to be coping so well and I was mad to be coping so well.

She said to me one night as we were cleaning up and she came across the journal she had picked out for our second child, “You never got a chance to write in it.” She caressed the cover and turned to put it away never looking up at me.

We turned out the lights and I laid in bed with those words resounding, “never got a chance…” My wife started to cry again as she rolled towards me and buried her head in my chest.

“What do you think happens?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” She said.

“When babies don’t make it into the world, what do you think happens to them?”

I could feel her sobbing lightly, “They’ll try again.” She said as a tear transferred from her cheek to my neck.

“I think so too.”

She nestled in tighter and quiet took over. My imagination went to work as I considered the possibilities. How much would she have resembled her brother? Whose eyes would she have had, whose mouth. I silently prayed for her return and I promised that I would write about her, about how she tried once and how she would try again. And those tears that had eluded me finally came.

“What more,” I ask, “is belief, beyond a story that helps us to cope. And what more do we need it to be.”
I sense a strange presence hovering over me and my eyes cautiously open. The gray of morning starts to flood my field of vision and a fuzzy image intruding on my personal space begins taking shape. I blink into focus and the smiling round dimpled face of my son whispers a, “Good morning Dad,” into my partially conscious face.

“Good morning son.”

“I want apple juice.”

“In a few minutes Bai. Come lay down.”

He gladly concedes and climbs under the covers. I grab the remote and turn on the TV to kid stuff hoping to get a few more minutes to wake up slowly, more appropriately then face to face with a little cat burglar. He lays there, watching his show, picking his nose like his father. Hillery stirs a bit, but is otherwise dead to the world. We lay uneventfully for a short while. Then I start to hear her and I decide to get up.

“Let’s go bubba. I’ll get you some apple juice. Be quiet okay.”

“Okay, Dad.”

We creep out of the room and I head down the hall to Andy’s room. Bailin waits by the stairs. I open her door and she is standing in her crib whining a bit.
"Hey baby girl, what's the matter? You need your daddy?" She perks up and reaches for me. "Oh yes, I know Andy girl, you need your daddy don't you, yes you do."

She smiles her mother's smile and hugs me around my neck. She leans away for a moment to look at me with her mother's eyes and then leans back in for a kiss. Except she doesn't know how to kiss at a year old, so she puts her lips on my cheeks and blows a "Puh" sound on my face.

"Oh my, thank you for my morning kiss miss Andolynn."

Bailin began down the stairs, "Common Dad, I need my juice."

"Okay, bubba. We're coming."

We go downstairs and I set them up on the floor of the living room with some toys as I go to get Bailin a cup of juice. Naturally, only seconds after I leave the room I hear Andy start to fuss.

"Bailin, you get off of your sister." I demand without even taking my head out of the refrigerator.

Things quiet down momentarily, and then flare up.

"Bailin, leave her alone, I mean it."

I walk the cup over to the kitchen table, and her protests swell up once again as I turn the corner into the living room. "Bailin, what are you doing?"

He is half lying on top of her holding her around the face and neck.

"We're hugging." He explains.

"That's not hugging Bailin, that's choking. Leave her be, or no apple juice."

He pops up and stands at attention, "Okay, Dad."
“Okay monkey, your juice is on the table.” He hustles over to it and I grab Andy.

She smiles big and I watch as a tear rolls down those plump cheeks. The tear was large; she cries like her father. “Oh, you’re okay. Miss Andolynn Rose with your rosy cheeks and your dinosaur tears.”

I sit down on the couch with Andy on my lap and get the kid’s show up and running again. Bailin finishes his juice and nestles in next to me. We sit there watching something that bordered on utterly vacuous—and I couldn’t be more happy.

* * *

Just live. Just plow forward and trust that if you try hard to be better you will be. And know that your purpose is nothing more than to live well, to make discoveries and to treat others kindly, and that meaning is the sense you make of your stories. Our differences are spectacular, and our similarities are uncanny, and both are equally important to cultivating peace of mind in a world that admits of no certainty beyond the fact of our thinking thingness.

If you need to believe in something more, believe in Beauty and Tragedy, in how it binds us, and in how we live through it and what that says about what we are all capable of in this life.
“Sabu said, I never finish anything.”
Bibliography


