

**This Digital Dance (Personal Essay) - Dylan Fisk**

When I first entered high school, I was sure of one thing: I would not begin a romantic relationship. When I graduated high school, I was engaged to marry the love of my life.

Now, let me stop your imagination before it grows too fantastically inaccurate: I did not meet her in the hallways walking between classes. I did not see a cute girl during my first day of class and slowly work up the courage to place myself next to her. I did not even fall in love with someone in my own high school, or my town, or my state. I fell in love with Julia, a girl who just so happened to live all the way across the continental United States.

I'll spare you the details on the how, for I think there is so much more to glean from what happened next. Just know that this Julia was someone who, even before we began our romance, I knew was worth the gruesome, stabbing pain of long-distance.

It was the middle of my junior year when this digital dance of ours had begun. And at the time, I didn't know if there was a better feeling in the world than to be loved. This way we began: youthful, holding to hope, clinging to the butterflies that flooded our stomachs (which I thought were strictly metaphorical, but she lived on only these butterflies for *three whole days* before eating anything else). I was enraptured by her, and everyday we hoped that this dream state would never end.

And then, it did. Reality has a tendency to do those kinds of things: brutally ripping away the joy brought about by rejecting the future. But I can't blame Reality: it's just the messenger of news we'd have to face eventually. And so, it set in like a serpent who'd come to ruin our paradise, feeding us the fruit which opened our eyes to the knowledge of promised joys, and with it, the grueling pain of waiting. For when there is unspeakable bliss in each other's presence, there is infinite despair in our separation.

Yet separated we remained for months upon months of wringing each other's hearts. And this brings me to an interesting point of wisdom that I now have the hindsight to be able to see and share here: It is incredibly difficult when all you can do with the person you love the most is talk over a phone, but it is also incredibly rewarding. For every hour spent talking with one another about how much we wished we could hug, kiss, and watch movies snuggled up on her couch, we grew closer and closer. We turned each other's hearts inside out before we ever even embraced. And perhaps more than any of these, we learned how to communicate before we could ever do anything else. If only we'd known this before...

But we didn't, and how hopelessly we danced those first five months! We moved to the slow, somber rhythm of lament, unsure when it would change to a brief burst of energy: a much-needed tango. Our tears flowed down from the uncertainty of when we could finally wipe each other's cheek. We dreamed together in the dark, unknowing night, hoping one day to bask together underneath a sunny sky. And our dreams were made manifest in May.

Yes, May. Days before our junior years concluded, I flew seven hours to see her. I will never forget how my heart felt moments before laying eyes on my Julia for the first time without the pixels of cheap laptop cameras in the way. Our first meeting was... everything. It was the start of our wonderful, four-day tango. And we spent every single one of those days absolutely enthralled with one another. Her arms and lips became my home away from home until inevitably, I was forced to return to the life I knew.

Yet the life I knew had changed; the music was no longer what it was before. No longer were we in lament, for there were now pockets of light spread throughout the tunnel. Every two months from there forward, we made it a point—no, a necessity—to have a date planned out for our reunion to bliss. There's my second little piece of wisdom: if you care about your sanity and

you love them enough to brave the storm of long-distance, *please* have dates for meetings planned out or you might end up swept away in the blustering winds.

This seems all fine and good, right? But how long can this last? Truly, how long can “once every two months” and hundreds of dollars of plane tickets last a couple so deeply entranced with one another as we? So I could have just told you that our story proceeded like you might have told it: months turned to years of this monotonous cycle of waiting followed by joy. Maybe the couple made it to the end of their college careers and came together, or maybe they thought it too much to bear and called it quits. But I—we—refused to have our story told like so many others. And here’s my final piece of wisdom: don’t let your life be run by the social clock.

After a year and four months of dating Julia, I proposed to her on a beach in Rhode Island during her first visit to my hometown. Many a late night’s conversation led to that decision. But ultimately, we found this irrevocable knowledge that would forever alter our lives: God never told us to wait until twenty-five to get married, the world did. And oh, how flimsy is the logic of an ever changing world compared to a never changing God! So, we did it God’s way. I pose this question to anyone still in doubt: why wait? Why let long-distance last a second longer than it reasonably needs to? Why let it stay a digital dance when you could be face-to-face and hand-in-hand, engaged in a passionate slow dance forevermore?

After nearly two and a half years, long-distance for me is almost done, as I prepare to be wed and forever united to Julia, my other half, but for many, it is an ongoing struggle. Might I leave with one piece of parting wisdom: don’t let long-distance be anything more than a vessel to a destination; a means to an end. Don’t let it *be* your relationship or it will consume your hope and leave nothing left. And if you see land along the way much closer than you thought, don’t hesitate to dock that ship of yours and make a home of your new world.

### **The Last Goodbye**

We didn't cry this time.

Our tears must have sensed a difference in our words  
And decided this time wasn't worth the strain it takes to fall.

Perhaps the countdown on my whiteboard kept them at bay,  
Or the not-so-distant wedding bells.  
Or maybe it was that new word in our vocabulary:  
“Last”.  
The last goodbye.

Oh, how we've idolized such a word,  
Grafting it into every conversation about my departure.  
The last goodbye.  
The last airport drop off.  
The last “we'll be okay!”  
The last last kiss.

And perhaps there is good reason for our worship.  
Hearts aglow, tear ducts dry,  
The tunnel is not all darkness now,  
As we look towards the imminent end of this digital dance.  
So why do I yet mourn?  
Who made me this twisted romantic,  
Stressing over how,  
For something so final,  
Anticlimactic his own parting was?

Maybe it was the wordless drive,  
Silence filled by the same songs we listen to online.  
Or the lack of desperation in your arms,  
The careless confidence of your lips.  
Or maybe it was the senseless exhaustion,  
Trading yawns on the freeway.  
“Of course I had to leave in the morning,”  
Groans the night owl.

Yet that was our last goodbye,  
And we were too hopeful to cry.  
Too patient to cry.  
Too tired to cry.  
What a pity it is to see the light,  
And throw away the lanterns.

### From Wrists and Walls

“She’s been following me around for as long as I can remember. No, haunting. That word suits *her* far better.

“I wasn’t very old when I first encountered her. No older than six or seven, anyway. Back then, her presence was a lot less loud. In fact, I barely noticed her, and probably wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for that damn roller coaster. Oh man do I remember that roller coaster! Seeing it flip and dip and twist, speeding over that sleek red steel faster than a bullet... it made me mad for a while. Mad when my mother took me over to the measuring pole just to humiliate me! It was never fair that my brothers could ride the coaster—could flip and dip and twist—and I was stuck on the baby helicopters in Kiddie Land! ‘Just wait a little bit longer,’ Mom said. ‘You’ll grow taller, you just have to wait,’ Mom said. And she laughed, but it wasn’t hers.

“I know that now. Did I know that then? I’m not so sure. Whether it was my mother’s laugh or *her* laugh, it didn’t help me get any taller either way. It just mocked me and my small stature. Mocked a boy forced to wait to grow.

“I’ve heard that condescending laugh plenty of times since then. It became a staple of my little childhood, irking me as I crawled out of bed each weekday morning, already eager to see the day’s end. It gave background instrumentals to my failed plans of convincing my mom to show me *any* Marvel movie in the video store. It again added to the chorus of laughter as my older brothers pummeled me in whatever game we were playing. It loved to mock what I wanted the most but couldn’t yet have. The sound grew to be familiar in its strangeness, something I felt like I could recognize from somewhere else, a not-so-far-away memory. It was... almost metallic. As if the gears of a clock were grinding together inside my head, slowly unraveling each second, and with it, this cackling mockery.

“I was too young to question it then. After all, as far as I knew, everyone else heard her laughing too. So I did as any young boy had to do and grew in spite of her.

“Isn’t it strange, though? How everything you care so much about as a kid just up and fades away when you touch high school? That roller coaster? Yeah I had been on that about a dozen times at this point. I was watching every bloody fight scene I could ever care to and no one batted an eye. I was still getting crushed in my brothers’ games, though, those bastards. Yet even as every one of those old dreams I thought I’d never see came true, I needed new things, and I could not get rid of her.

“It was when I found love where *she*—

“Oh, my beloved Dawn! I still remember falling in love with her in bits and pieces day by day in our English class! What an angel, light-brown hair flowing gracefully down, framing her smile in such perfect light; her glasses—which I always argued with her for criticizing—giving such divine shape to her face; her eyes, the—*ahem*.

“I was in love. And love changes everything about a man. Dawn became my everything, first emotionally, then physically, and I began to yearn for what I knew I could not yet have; what I knew I had to wait for. I dreamt about the day we’d be married, united under God and finally able to carry our passions to their natural end. Oh, how the dreams tormented me night after night! I was right under the measuring pole again. And as I wept for my selfish longing, I was not greeted by laughter. This time, it was a hand thrown carelessly over my shoulder.

“A thoughtful gesture with a heartless posture. I could sense it in the way *her* hand limply laid there, cold and unfeeling. I wanted to believe this was her attempt at comforting a poor soul at a measuring pole, but even I could not be so stupid. It was mockery at its core. If she truly cared, she’d say something! But she just left her hand there as I cried. And I looked back to see if

I could find any genuine care in her eyes. But she was gone. I was again alone at the measuring pole, glad my shoulder was relieved of her mocking hand.

“This time, I was conscious of her cruelty. It infuriated me. And in my fury, I sought rebellion. I sought the growth that I could not propel in my past. I was going to get on that roller coaster, no matter what the world said. And so, I began to plan a wedding.

“Dawn was immediately on board. Not surprising, as we were deeply in love and going through the same conflict between passion and promise. After all, we knew we were the ones. Why wait anyway? My parents, on the other hand? It gives me chills just thinking about the way they screamed at me. ‘You can’t get married at eighteen, are you insane?! What about...’ and a list of six hundred reasons came spouting out of two raving mouths, sounding like three.

“I cried again that night, alone in my room, scared to ever leave. And *she* had the nerve to come back and try to ‘comfort’ me. Her hand fell again on that same shoulder with less care than I felt the last time. This was my last straw. Truly, the world was against me, clawing at my legs to slow me down, to force me to wait. But things were already so damn slow! In that moment, I believe I would have given everything I had to fast forward my life.

“But *slowly*, God did lead the way, to my parents’ dismay—oh how I love rhymes—and we were on track to marry out of high school. But first, I had a different mountain to climb: the obligation of college. It was almost time for me to be done with high school. I never thought I’d see the day. Oh yes, I remember this night well. I was told to go research some schools and fill out some applications or something, so I remember sitting there alone in my room at my desk running through some options of schools, having zero clue what I planned to do at them. The first school I looked at was a small little local one that I figured would save me some money over the bigger, *fancier* ones I couldn’t care less about. I liked the look of it, so I rushed together an

application and got ready to submit it. Yet as I was right over the ‘submit’ button, I felt a pinch on the back of my neck.

“It had hurt enough to get my attention, and I immediately whipped around and rubbed my neck to check whether it had been person or bug. Yet nothing was there. Trying to recall the sensation, I realized it had felt distinctly like human fingernails. The coldness is what told me it must have been *her*. And though annoyed by the initial pain, a wave of sadness set in to take its place. It felt like grief, a weird feeling I now know quite well but had never met until that day. The years of school that I was leaving behind flooded my mind, and I grieved them. The days of my childhood, where the only thing I ever wanted was to ride the roller coaster, seemed, for the first time, sweet to me. I would take the laughter over this cruel game of mocking comfort and painful remembrance. In that moment, I believe I would have given everything I had to rewind my life.”

“It wasn’t long until I moved on from high school to college, though, and married Dawn, the love of my life, yet each day came with new instances of *her* meddling. It hurt to look either forward or backward, so I thought I would just try to take things day by day as a husband. It took a while, but I eventually got used to that role. And so, I was content... but was I? Things were tough, and I found myself still grieving the days when I could work less and looking impatiently forward to the return of those days. And the kids. Oh what a mix of emotions those little buggers were back then. Bundles of joy and expenses, time and tantrums, I swear. But I can’t say I didn’t love raising them. Or, ‘raising them.’ I have a feeling a lot of it wasn’t really me. Let me tell you why.

“I remember being in the kitchen one afternoon, washing some dishes for dinner that night while Dawn was away at the store. This is back when we had just our first kid, Sophie. Simpler times. Sophie was crawling around in the hallway behind me, last time I had checked. And after a few more dishes, I did a quick glance behind me to check on her. And, behold, there at the end of the hallway with Sophie was none other than *her*: I had never seen her full figure before and yet the moment I saw her, something within me knew. She was there with Sophie, sat on the floor, seeming to talk to her, but I could not make out any words. Just Sophie’s giggling replies. All of a sudden, *she* got up and began slowly and exaggeratedly placing one foot in front of the other in a small section of the hallway. It was clear by her bumbling that Sophie wished to copy the woman, but could not yet follow suit. Just who did she think she was, teaching *my* child to walk and talk? How could I let her? Oh, how I let her! At this point, I concluded this as another act of her spite towards me and my blood boiled. Yet the strange thing was, I could not move. I was powerless in sight of her, and my muscles, including my tongue, refused to stir in retaliation. All I could do was watch in anguish as my child was taught the ways of the world by another. And so I did, for half an hour until Dawn came home. I went over to greet her and urge her to look upon our baby’s secret teacher, but when our eyes peered around the corner down the hallway, *she* was gone, having slipped through my hand like sand into the glass below for the first of oh so many times. There was only Sophie there, loafing around, giggling, and failing to walk.

“Dawn always thought I was a little crazy for that. It’s a good thing she liked my imagination, since she gave my little ‘episode’ a pass. But I know what I saw, and this eyewitness proof just served to piss me off even more. I think the worst part even still is that I had to watch it happen with every single one of our three kids. One by one they grew and *she*

taught them to talk and to walk. And when Dawn was jumping for joy at each milestone, a part of me ached, knowing the truth, and so I faked a smile.

“Even at their birthday parties, when they were a bit older and running around the backyard, I saw glimpses of *her* running behind them, one hand on their backs, pushing them forward. And they smiled. And I shook my head. It was all happening too fast.

“I remember another time when Tommy, my youngest, was about six or seven years old. He was playing a video game with his two older siblings while I watched them from the other room. I couldn’t make out much of their game, but after a few minutes, I saw him burst into tears and throw his controller into the bean bag chair across the room. It was then that I felt an awful pinch on my neck and a stinging in my soul. I remembered being his age and doing the very same thing over the games I played with my brothers. I wanted nothing more than to beat them for the longest time, and it took me until the day before my wedding to finally do that. But it was easy. It was too easy, and I wanted to cry. We haven’t played together since that night. I looked at Tommy and I whispered, ‘Hang in there, Tommy. You’ll beat them one day. But you’ll wish you never had.’

“This mix of seeing *her* constantly raising my children and her more frequent, more painful pinches is what I remember the most from being a parent.”

“But, as always, I grew older. My birds left the nest, or whatever they like to call it. That hurt like hell. You’ll see what I mean. In fact, once I hit retirement, everything started to hurt like hell. Someone once promised me carefree island getaways for the rest of my life. Look at me now! I had a few weeks of my retirement fun before the pain set in again. And when it set in this time, it hurt far more than ever before.

“The pinching on the back of my neck was replaced with a continuous feeling that rarely let up. The only thing I could possibly liken it to is the sensation of having a knife ever so slowly dragged across your neck in a straight line, over and over and over again. And while that was excruciating, it was accompanied by the most grief I had ever been made to feel. I was old. There was a lot more life behind than ahead; that was a chilling thought, and *she* used every chance she got to remind me. So I spent my days in agony, living in memories as I watched the world grow at the same speed as it had when I used to be angry at a roller coaster.

“I remember this next part very well. It was the night before my granddaughter’s wedding. Just me and Dawn were laying together in our hotel room, staring at the ceiling, laughing, reminiscing. She began to tell of our own wedding. Oh, what a joyous mess that was! Looking back, we may have been a touch too young to get married. The wedding itself was wonderful, oh just wonderful, and Dawn shimmered in that white dress she chose, but the money? Let’s just say our honeymoon was one night in a hotel three miles from the venue.

“And it was during these very same thoughts of ours that something stole my attention. A sound. No, many. Well, two, over and over again. It appeared suddenly, yet not very loudly at all. I had to strain myself to hear it, but I could hear it, and that’s what mattered. The sounds were clear to me right away as the sounds of a knife being sharpened, moved *forward... back...* *forward... back...* along a metal edge, keeping such perfect time between each movement. It did sound quite far away at the time, and I could have convinced myself that someone in one of the other rooms must have just been up to some late night chef work. But I couldn’t shake the sound despite its quietness. It was familiar to me from somewhere else, yet I couldn’t quite place it. It lingered through that entire night and I didn’t get a wink of sleep. I was surprised to see Dawn fall asleep mere minutes after our lights went out, especially since she was the light sleeper of us

two. That's how I decided it was better not to bring up the sounds with her, and just resolved to lie there alone in the dark, listening to the sharpening of a knife.

"Every single night from then on, I heard the same awful, repetitive sounds grow louder and louder. And yet, still did Dawn sleep through each night the same, and still did I lie there next to her, alone, tired, and scared. What was this sound? This cruel, familiar, rhythmic movement? Why did it grow louder and louder? I found out soon after.

"A month after the wedding, we again laid down to sleep next to each other, as we always did. The sounds were absent that evening, to my pleasant surprise, and I looked forward to finding some actual sleep. So I drifted off, Dawn's right hand in my left, and prepared to finally be at peace.

"About an hour later, my sleep was cruelly interrupted. Something was off and I felt a pull to wake up within me, yet I was in such deep sleep that I only managed half-consciousness. I was able to partially open my eyes, and after doing so, I wished I hadn't. There *she* was. I had been free from the sight of that demon since my grandchildren had reached maturity, yet here she was again. It seemed like the neverending cuts she placed on my neck weren't enough for her. She was there kneeling on the bed, hovering over Dawn. In front of her face, *she* awkwardly held a freshly sharpened knife in her two hands. It was clear she intended to hold it above her head, preparing to strike, but one of her arms seemed incapable of reaching that high. Whatever she intended, I hated it. What was she doing with a knife pointed toward *my* Dawn? I wanted to scream. I should have screamed. I wanted to throw her to the ground and flip that knife on her. For all that she's done to me, I should have stabbed her in her hollow chest. But I laid there. Once again, I was powerless in sight of her, and though every muscle desired vengeance, all they got was the anguish of forced inaction. I couldn't move, and *she* didn't move, and we remained

in that idle state until my eyelids couldn't hold themselves any longer. So I was forced to drift again to sleep, to dream of anything but her.

"The next morning, the hand in my left hand was cold. The bright, fiery eyes I fell in love with had been extinguished. *She* had put an end to my Dawn and irreconcilably shattered my heart. Though something wasn't right: not a single drop of blood nor wound nor rip of clothing was present on Dawn's body at all. But I knew it was *her*. I had no proof, but I knew it was her. I know it was her. I can't doubt my own eyes.

"Yet I sat there, reading over Dawn's death certificate, and sure enough, it read 'old age' even after my constant insistence. I was outraged. I wouldn't stand for these lies! I saw it! *She* did it! *She* murdered my Dawn and ruined my life! And she'll kill me too! She'll kill us all!"

You stare at me across the table in silence but your look says it all: you think I'm crazy. They always do. At least you aren't laughing at me. They always do that, too, just to mock me.

Your wordless eyes cut deep into my heart. You don't know this, but I had hoped you would be the one to finally understand. I thought you might see things the way that I do, and break me free from the label of a madman. But it seems that I was wrong. And yet, I am forever bound to this truth, no matter how many times my story is perceived as a fantasy.

Without another word, I rise up from the table and walk back towards my room, my hands covering my face in shame. Why? Why couldn't you just believe me? After all you've been through, I thought maybe you could see *her*, hear *her*, feel *her*, too. But it's hopeless now.

When I get back to my room, I immediately head towards my bed and cover myself in the freshly washed sheets. At least they take good care of me here, I think with a half smile, trying to distract myself from the excruciating pain on the back of my neck. It always hurts the most, recalling that story, but I must for their sakes and for Dawn's. Or maybe I should just give it up.

At that thought, I began to hear some sounds I recognized. For a moment, I was terrified. It was the sounds of the knife being sharpened. But then, it clicked. And I smiled. I had finally figured out where else I had heard that sound. It was—it has always been—the ticking of a clock. *Tick... tock... tick... tock...* I had known it all along. And I laughed, for the mystery was solved. And I drifted to sleep.

### To Dream or to Die

“To hold on to childish dreams  
Or go forth in living-death?”  
Says Time with a gun to my head.

It was on the precipice of freedom,  
As the sun began to set on all I had known before,  
That Time first revealed this dreadful question,  
And with it, her constant presence;  
A cold, metallic muzzle breathing down my neck.

To dream or to die.  
A binary I never thought to ponder.

The world taught me to dream once,  
Had me scribbling my earliest desires in crayon...  
I wonder where those drawings are now.  
Perhaps they fill the walls of caves,  
As naive and obsolete as what came from early man.  
For then the world taught me a new bedtime story;  
One where the monsters aren't defeated  
And the hero gives up,  
For it costs too much to buy a sword.  
The end.

The world then taught me to grieve for death  
Yet most adults still walk the Earth as ghosts,  
Husks of the children they used to be.  
For they chose not to see the gun to their heads,  
Treating every doubt that brushed their mind as wisdom,  
Salvation from a threat they themselves drew in pen.  
They then worshiped uncertainty in a church of their own,  
Preaching comfort and conformity,  
Their twisted view of normalcy;  
Seeing the Cross and choosing to cling to their chains.  
And all who dare to stray  
Are left alone to play among the stars,  
Outcasts, aliens.

To dream or to die.  
A binary no one seems to ponder.

And Time gets her wish,  
Reaping the souls of those converted to dreamlessness.  
Those who've deafened themselves to the music,  
Blinded themselves to the light,  
Drowned without resistance in her sands,  
Yet they never did so alone,  
For the gate is wide and the way is easy  
Which leads all men to joyless satisfaction:  
A death they can't perceive.

The wide, the narrow.  
Comfort, ambition.  
Belonging, isolation.  
My turn.

“To hold on to childish dreams  
Or go forth in living-death?”  
Again says Time with a gun to my head.  
I turn to her, and in my eyes, a flame.  
“I dream to live;  
I live to dream.”

## Drifting

Dreams of floating freely below the surface,  
Drifting weightlessly in quiet waters,  
Feeling air escape yet paying no mind;  
Dreams of floating freely above the clouds,  
An immobile astronaut amidst the sea of stars,  
Hopeless and helpless in a silent night.  
Yet he was content to simply drift,  
To call outer space his new home,  
To give his soul to the sea.

He didn't know then that he could swim back up,  
Simply by waving his arms and legs.

He didn't understand then that he could traverse the cosmos,  
Simply by throwing something behind him.  
He was ready to let the waves write his story,  
To let the stars choose his fate.  
To be content simply drifting.

And then, he woke up.

The man rose from his place in the sand,  
Stepped away from the spray of the waves,  
Hid in shade from the heat of the sun.

Looking out at the sea, he scoffed at his childish dreams.  
After all, who could be content simply drifting?

### **The Writing Process**

I will write this in one draft.

It will be perfect.

Every choice I make will be precise.

Every line will be worthy of praise.

I will not try to rhyme.

That takes too long and risks too much.

I will not structure this piece.

Those arbitrary limits prompt revision.

I will not attempt ambiguity.

That leads to improper interpretation.

That will not do.

It will be perfect.

Perfectly clear and perfectly concise.

Perfectly beautiful and perfectly true.

It will be the perfect expression of \_\_\_\_\_.

I will submit it as soon as the pen dries.

It will be workshopped and they will love it.

No critiques, no questions.

Every word of theirs will be praise and adoration.

And so, it will have been done.

A single draft, no mistakes, no revisions.

Nothing but flawless reviews from the jury.

My fragile heart will have been preserved.

I will tuck it away on my shelf.

When someone asks to read it, I will fetch it.

They will love it, as everyone does.

I will smile my empty smile.

**Faithful Deliverance**

“Deliver us!” you heard the cry,  
And sent your shepherd from on high.  
A babe, you sent him down the stream,  
To manifest your people’s dream.  
He grew, a prince of foreign land,  
And saw his people, slaves of sand.  
To set them free, that was his call,  
From Elohim, the Lord of All.  
With wrath he came, nine plagues to start,  
Yet hardened was the Pharaoh’s heart.  
Until the tenth, firstborns were slain,  
To end Egypt’s oppressive reign.  
And though the slaves were not yet through,  
Your shepherd cut the sea in two.  
And through this man, curved staff in hand,  
You brought them to the promised land.

“Deliver us!” you heard the cry,  
And sent your shepherd from on high.  
A babe, you sent through virgin womb,  
To break the powers of the tomb.  
He grew, a perfect prince of peace,  
And called the slaves of sin to cease.  
To free us from Creation’s fall,  
You dwelt with us, great Lord of All.  
With love he came, the kingdom’s key,  
Yet love they saw as heresy.  
Condemned to death, a cross to bear,  
A crown of thorns, was forced to wear.  
And though your son on cross had bled,  
Your shepherd crushed the serpent’s head.  
And through whom rose to your right hand,  
You’ll bring us to the promised land.

## Take Up Your Cross

With this new quill, I tell of second birth,  
A lifelong pilgrimage on hallowed earth,  
In which I strive to my Creator reach  
Yet not in splendor, but in heart and speech.

<sup>5</sup>I first appeal to Spirit held inside:

O Holy Spirit, cast away my pride!  
And if it be Thy will for which You've planned,  
Please animate these fingers, guide this hand,  
So through each word, Your love will be in view,

<sup>10</sup> And glory will be found in none but You.

O Lord above, the perfect trinity,  
The Father, Son, and Spirit, one yet three,  
Please sanctify me through the words I write,  
As I recount my journey towards Your light,

<sup>15</sup> My striving for the Son, the bread of life,

Who guides me through the world and all its strife.  
And though this tale may yet be incomplete,  
The rest we'll form together, Paraclete!

Now here, amidst the forest white from cloud,  
<sup>20</sup> My life uncovered from its worldly shroud,  
My tale begins:

Yes, prior, I had lived, but it was death;  
A dead-man walking, without sight or breath.  
Content was I without a single sense,  
<sup>25</sup> Much blinded to my need for recompense.  
Yet our great Lord, in goodness and in grace,  
Had no intent to leave me in that space,  
And brought me out of darkness into sun;  
At once, restored my life and called me “son”.  
<sup>30</sup> His gentle hands then placed me in this glade,  
It’s here it all began, where I was laid.

When I awoke, it felt as though I’d dreamed  
Of all those years which real to me had seemed.  
Yet something deep inside stirred me to wake,  
<sup>35</sup> To leave behind those dreams and thus forsake  
The world I’d known before, and thence arise;  
Discover this new world with virgin eyes.  
Alone I stood then, in that forest glade,  
In awe of everything that He had made:  
<sup>40</sup> The trees, the clouds that kept the air so cool,  
The dirt that marked the paths of wise and fool.  
Then, as I looked around at nature lush,  
Something had caught my eye beside the brush.

It seemed to be a cross of fine-carved wood,

<sup>45</sup> Yet I knew not for what reason it stood.

So as I walked, I drew close to observe,

To see, perhaps, what purpose it could serve.

The search was fruitless, much to my dismay,

But then I heard a noise from down the way.

<sup>50</sup> Behold! there stood a Man with shepherd's staff

Who called to me from someplace on the path.

My ears were opened to receive His voice,

And in His Word, I was given this choice:

"If your wish is to come and follow me,

<sup>55</sup> Take up that cross and walk my path daily."

With what great power was His heartfelt call!

Yet as for miracles, that was not all:

I looked upon His face and saw it glow,

And in that shimmer, knew to Him I'd go,

<sup>60</sup> For who as man could shine ethereal,

But one who, too, is all empyreal?

So in my heart, I knew where lied my fate:

To follow Him with cross through narrow gate.

Though looking at the cross, I grieved the charge,

<sup>65</sup> For it stood tall and hefty, much too large

To carry as a burden and a yoke...

My confidence and spirit this thought broke.

Yet looking back at Him who beckoned me,

I recognized that He had set me free.

<sup>70</sup> And so, I'd have to overcome this pain

For Him who gave me life—in Him was gain.

With this new hope in hand, the cross I took,

And underneath its weight, my weak arms shook,

Yet still, I looked to where my Savior stood,

<sup>75</sup> And knew, with faith, that He would make it good.

Imbued with confidence and my Lord's strength,

I began wayward trek, feared not the length,

For in pursuit of Him whom my heart yearned,

I would, to my Creator, be returned.

<sup>80</sup> The start was slow, each step itself a test,

On rocky road where bare feet felt no rest,

Through forest dense that did eternal seem,

And led my conscience to corrupted dream:

How great to leave the cross and drop its weight,

<sup>85</sup> And drift in comfort through the wider gate!

Yet my heart knew the folly of this thought:

Though promised ease, with darkness was it fraught.

Thus, at the fork between narrow and wide,

My steps aligned me with my blesseèd Guide,  
<sup>90</sup> For though my burden now was surely great,  
I knew true life was found through narrow gate.

With foot in front of foot, I made my way,  
To beyond forest's edge by end of day,  
Where I caught up to Him paused on the road,  
<sup>95</sup> And, once in sight, He bid my arms unload  
With smile bright, glad to my weight relieve,  
And joyful that, in Him, I'd still believe.

A fire we prepared within the field,  
Its flame and light the perfect warmth and shield,  
<sup>100</sup> Though truly what defenses would I need  
When trusting in this Man so fit to lead?

A shepherd, yes, too was He wise to teach:  
In parables of nature was His speech,  
And pointing out the woods along our route,  
<sup>105</sup> He said to me, "Each tree is as its fruit:  
The good tree must, by nature, good fruit bear,  
While every bad tree sows and reaps despair.  
We recognize a man by what he's done,  
So emulate the actions of the Son."  
<sup>110</sup> How profound was His call to endless love;

To mimic what is only seen above!  
So in my heart I stored His every word,  
Finding new life in all that I had heard,  
Which gave me hope to surpass morrow's test:  
<sup>115</sup> A cloak of comfort as my mind took rest.

In early morn, our journey had resumed,  
And with it, my own zeal had boldly bloomed;  
I was as flower grown through rocky road:  
Miraculous; strange place for petals sowed,  
<sup>120</sup> Yet its contrast revealed a hope so new:

As life thrusts up from stone, was I so too  
Uprooted from the darkness of the night  
And given place to dwell amidst the light.

My thankfulness became my strength and song,  
<sup>125</sup> As over these new plains I trod along.

Yet something in the fields attention caught:  
Another wooden cross, seeming forgot  
Amidst the tallgrass, in the open lay  
Abandoned, without pilgrim to display.

<sup>130</sup> This troubled me, yet as I carried on,  
More crosses did I find with bearers gone.  
They filled the grassy plain, spread here and there,

And led me to such thoughts it hurt to bear:

How many had set out on this same trail,

<sup>135</sup> And left behind their calling in betrayal?

Back to the worldly forests they had fled;

In hopes of more free life, they chased the dead

And ended up among those chained to sin,

Their souls vessels for wretched Death to win.

<sup>140</sup> I looked for reassurance in His face,

Yet too He mourned for those rejecting grace.

Twas clear how greatly He could love and cherish,

Not wanting e'en a single soul to perish

But all to join Him in endless life,

<sup>145</sup> A prize that was much worth each day of strife.

Yet we, in comfort, so oft from Him stray,

For we have preference of our own heart's way

Of fleshly pleasures, carnal joys partake

Our fallen nature, brought low by the snake.

<sup>150</sup> And so, these thoughts of sorrow conscience stained,

Led me to think as those whose faith had waned:

Of all the earthly pleasures from my past,

And more, of what time I indulged them last.

These pleasures whispered doubts that my mind gripped,

<sup>155</sup> In momentary weakness, I then tripped

And tumbled from the path to dirt below,  
The cross thrown from my hand, what great sorrow!  
At this loud sound, my Guide turned back to see  
What tragic fate had then befallen me.

<sup>160</sup> And as I laid there, dazed in my regret,  
He to my side did come, so faithful yet,  
And though I thought His anger I'd provoked,  
He offered me his hand, and tears evoked  
In mine eyes and streaming down my face:

<sup>165</sup> How I, as man, am worthy of His grace?  
For when I fell and strayed in mind and heart,  
He did not from me in those fields depart.

Instead, he offered to me his right hand,  
To forgive my transgressions, help me stand

<sup>170</sup> Again, to look toward the path untread,  
With hope, for I'm no longer of the dead.

He led me by the hand to fallen cross,  
And asked me to reclaim my careless loss,  
Yet right before I took it from its place,

<sup>175</sup> He took the chance, reminding me of grace:  
“Do you remember why you bear this sign?”

All I knew was for some reason divine.

He carried on: “This cross is hope for all,

For on it, I have died to end the Fall;

<sup>180</sup> To forgive sin in future, present, past,

To give you hope that will forever last.

No matter what you've done, I'll always be;

I'll come to you if you will trust in me.

Now claim again this cross, with reason new

<sup>185</sup> To carry with fresh joy my gift to you."

My heart had never been such well appealed

As when, to me, His sacrifice revealed.

Though I'd of His salvation heard before,

I'd lost what I was bearing that cross for,

<sup>190</sup> And having it refreshed from His own word,

Brought strength to arms, my spirit again stirred

To heed the call and bear the weight once more,

And so, I did, much stronger than before.

Yet as I carried on behind my Guide,

<sup>195</sup> My heart still mourned the ones who left His side;

Each unkept cross, expansion of sin's slaves,

A thought which haunted me through field of graves.

And furthermore, I was here on my own,

To hold this cross and pursue Him alone

<sup>200</sup> Though having been encouraged to relate

With others, and thus bear each other's weight.

This thought of mine I did to Him relay,

And this He answered me without delay:

"My son, I know how hard it's been to stride

<sup>205</sup> Without another like you by your side.

It's honored me how you alone endured

Yet solitude, for your sake, will be cured.

Yes, soon indeed you will companions meet

And you will each give strength to other's feet.

<sup>210</sup> There's one among them who will catch your eye;

It's her that one day soon you shall rely,

And as one flesh, you'll be together bound

As you pursue me on this sacred ground.

Hold fast to friends, hold closer to your wife,

<sup>215</sup> For they will walk with you through all your strife."

And thus, like-minded gifts were promised me

Among them, one who soon my wife would be.

With what joy did I carry on that day!

My eager eyes set further down the way

<sup>220</sup> In hopes I would encounter soon my friends

And have more joyful passage to my ends.

As sun came down to the horizon kiss,

The One who is my source of endless bliss

Had just prepared to end our daily walk,

<sup>225</sup> When close to us, we heard some joyful talk.

And sure enough, we soon spotted a camp,

Its fire burning as a beacon lamp.

Excitedly, I looked toward my Guide,

Who nodded, His great pleasure to provide.

<sup>230</sup> With eagerness, we hastened to the group,

And many smiles met us from that troupe.

Great their rejoicing was to see their Lord

At work in leading me to path restored.

With open arms, they then with me embraced;

<sup>235</sup> Grateful was I with them to have been placed!

Such fellowship like I had never felt

Was here before me, with whom I now dwelt.

And such as was the subject of His word,

There was a woman whom I thence preferred

<sup>240</sup> Above the rest, though to all I would share

Of my short journey: when, how, and from where.

I spent the night with them in perfect peace,

For those I'd call my family did increase.

From that point forward, walked we all as one,

<sup>245</sup> In burdens and shared strides toward the Son.

Such fellowship did much to my faith lift,

And kept me further from attempts to drift

And fall again from path down righteous mount;

We did to one another keep account.

<sup>250</sup> And faithful was our Guide through every part

Who would not let even one walk apart,

For many times did He chase one who strayed,

While leaving ninety-nine of us who stayed.

To, as good Shepherd, every sheep defend,

<sup>255</sup> He would pursue us to the bitter end.

And to the maiden whom my fate was bound,

So many wondrous qualities we found

In one another, uncovered such love

Brought forth by shared pursuit of Him above.

<sup>260</sup> In tears and laughter through our journeys long,

We learned what joy it was to share one song,

And thus determined our fate to be so:

To one another we would always go.

To marriage we resolved, what joyous news!

<sup>265</sup> Yet for each other, we would have to lose

The depth of fellowship we'd shared with all

To focus more attention on this call.

With family and friends we'd always mesh,  
Though never quite as close as our one flesh.

<sup>270</sup> Yet to this choice we hold and now prepare  
To go from two to one, in all things share,  
And how best to proceed in combined stride  
To Him whose love is endless, side-by-side.

So this is where things stand with my account,  
<sup>275</sup> Though one last part of journey I'll recount  
To demonstrate for what purpose I write  
The words you read. It happened on this night  
As we sat, relishing in fire's heat,  
Which was our custom after day complete,

<sup>280</sup> Our Savior rose and to all, He addressed:  
"My children, I have for each a request;  
To each I shall bestow a unique gift,  
And each shall use it to my message lift."  
And after all He'd given, there was more?

<sup>285</sup> I never lost reasons to thank Him for.  
Then, my mind raced, in wonder of what role  
He'd give to one with such a youthful soul.  
And when it was my turn to gift receive,  
He gave me charge I could hardly believe:

<sup>290</sup> "Now I bestow upon you sheet and quill  
For with your every word, you'll do my will."  
And sure enough, I took paper and pen,  
Thus honored to have been chosen again,  
This time for such a task of bold value:  
<sup>295</sup> To with His praises every word imbue.

And further task He went on to describe:  
"You now, my son, are to me as a scribe.  
With written word for which you are so fond,  
You will help my love reach to those beyond  
<sup>300</sup> This little band of pilgrims, and shine light  
Into surrounding darkness, hopeless night,  
Remembering with every feather stroke,  
The wisdom and new hope that I have spoke.

Recall, son, how I brought you from your death  
<sup>305</sup> And gave you second birth with Spirit's breath.

Now, take the hope that I to you bestowed,  
And show to all my great love overflowed."  
With tears welled in my eyes, I nodded yes,  
Ironically, without words to express  
<sup>310</sup> My utmost joy to this tall task assume  
And bring to all the hope of empty tomb.  
You, my dear reader, witness my first piece

As one whose life belongs to Prince of Peace.

To many more will my quill soon embark

<sup>315</sup> In bringing others like me out of dark.

Yet I thought it quite fitting to start here:

Where everything began, when Hope drew near.

This tale is but the start of a new life,

As I follow the Savior through my strife,

<sup>320</sup> And everyday, I strive to make the choice

To turn from my own sin and hear His voice.

My life will soon evolve, yet through it all,

I dedicate my pen to heed His call.

For I know even when all things seem grim

<sup>325</sup> I will take up my cross and follow Him.