Love is my Project

For everyone I love.

I am Afraid to Write

I am afraid to write.
I am afraid.

I fear that collecting, organizing,
And presenting my thoughts is too daunting.
I fear exposing myself to unwanted criticism.
I fear my own criticism.
I fear that my voice will not be compelling.

I worry about cadence.
I worry about flow.
I worry about word placement and tonality.
I worry about the subjective reader.

I fear being wrong.
I fear being right!
I fear making hard stances
Which fail under broader systems of thought.
I fear I have no business writing at all.
Who granted me the authority?
What school, institution, agency?

Might I tell myself that my opinion matters
And believe it?
Aren't we all competing in the economy of attention?

I fear that my prose will not compare to Proust's (it won't)
or my philosophy to Kant's (it won't)

I fear that I will never play a significant part in dismantling any system
or in reconstructing one
I fear that nothing I say will hold relevance
Like passages from Thoreau, or Baldwin, or Kafka have for me.
I fear that I will never make anything of writing.

I worry about conveying ideas simply.
I worry about omitting alternate points of view.
I worry about organizational and structural points.
I worry about stating something that has previously been
stated succinctly by someone else.

I fear conflict.
I fear resolution.
I fear my experience and my inexperience.
I desperately fear being drab.

I am afraid to tell stories.
I am afraid not to tell them.
I am afraid for every reason imaginable.
I am afraid for no good reason at all.

It was June of 2021. I was sitting alone at a picnic bench in New Orleans' Audubon Park. The shade from the nearby oak tree, possessing aesthetic completion with its complementary Spanish moss, had shifted to my right, and the sun had become unforgiving. I placed myself at this bench in the hopes of absorbing some of the serene offerings of the park, that they might lead me beyond my writer's block. Instead, I found myself squinting into my laptop screen at its maximum brightness, hands placed on my furrowed brow line for shade, with beads of sweat accumulating on my scalp.

At the time I was feeling the rumblings of a story needing to be told—my story—and I was determined not to let these physical elements deter me from conjuring the words. The desire for the words to commit themselves to the page had become overbearing, for I was weighted with an awareness of the totality of their emotion which I was unable to give voice to. The problem with my "story" was that I found myself unable to fashion the strong causal nexus required to create narrative out of my recollections. My recollections were suspended in an inordinate nebula of emotion. I had come to retreat in New Orleans because this puzzle—this *Who am I?*—required a renewed, aggravated focus of my mental efforts. I had quit my job in order to take the words to task. I decided I would become a writer, for by mastering the words I would become the master of myself. When I could read my story back to myself, I would know who I had become. Then, by familiarizing myself with my character, I would know how to advance my life forward.

In my peripheral vision, I witnessed a man approaching my bench, negotiating his business confidently into a classic Motorola headset. His voice was booming, his laugh was rich, and he engaged over the phone with a tone of familiarity only the best salesman can achieve. I was curious enough to glance up as he passed a mere foot behind me. Here was a man who had tucked his sweatpants into knee-high waders, who had draped a colorful,

tattered blanket under a cape of the reflective material typically devoted to windshields. He began to rummage through the trash can a few feet from me, examining styrofoam to-go containers for their leftover contents. After making his selections, he sat at the bench with me, directly across from me, continuing his conversation over the phone as if completely unaware of my presence. He spread out his containers around my laptop, taking pains to prepare his meal properly. He delicately split packets of hot sauce over a half-eaten bowl of red beans and rice, then a packet of plum sauce over rotting pickled cabbage. The air surrounding our bench became stale with the pungent smell of vinegar in summer heat. Suddenly, and somewhat surprisingly, the man addressed me by offering a bit of his lunch. "Sorry, I just ate", I politely declined. He explained to me how he was, at that moment, in radio communication with two friends who were aboard an alien spacecraft orbiting close by. This man's name was Tom, and he would be joining his friends on their voyage to the Andromeda galaxy in the days ensuing. Tom seemed genuinely happy, and his life appeared to have an intrepid sense of direction. His story, but more so his demeanor, abruptly recontextualized my struggle to define myself. As cavalier as he had approached, Tom gathered his containers, placing them back in the trash bin, and was on his way without further acknowledgement. I was left with a complex set of guiltful emotions: first for not having offered help to a man in need, then for having been bewildered by a man as harmless as Tom was, and finally for exhausting my cognitive resources in the privileged pursuit of a better self—and here having achieved next to nothing.

I drafted out the words "I am afraid to write" on the blank page, and what began to flow was a poem based out of the realization that writing, for me, had taken on all of the potency of unforeseen judgment. The lucid insight Tom provided—that the proper negation of concern was unconcern—would

become for me a rationalized scapegoat, allowing me to flee from the words for a while. More life experience would be necessary to resolve the narrative, but so as not to see myself as a coward, I would shift the purpose of my activity toward preparing for my eventual engagement with the words, to one day vie with my personal Goliath. I was afraid to write, but I would not allow that to prevent me, when the time came, from taking proper aim with my sling. Following are the words, the late product of a heavily resisted shift in narrative arc, from *overcoming*—the words for which flowed at a tantalizing trickle—to that of *acceptance*—for which the words flowed at the rate of a tranquil babble. The words have allowed my story to set in a medium more permanent than concrete. They have given me the opportunity to reclaim my mind, but more so my body, and for that I am proud.

A Second Conception

I attended the University of North Carolina from 2012 to 2016. I majored in statistics & operations research and economics. I also minored in UNC's entrepreneurship program. I felt at the time, and would feel inclined to say today, that through some intentionality, but mostly by happenstance, I was able to reap the sows of liberal arts education—more than most anyway. First, the system offered me flexibility to satisfy a passion for literature. While I would scribble down discrete logical equations in the morning, after lunch, I would read, and reread the lines which heralded John Donne's memento mori: *"no man is an island"*. I spent a semester assigned the task of reading Shakespeare's plays, which I would read in the undergraduate library. When I did so, I would scan the room on occasion, anxious of catching a covetous glance: "look what I am getting away with!" I would say to myself, "if only they knew that I took pleasure in the readings, they would not allow this to be credited toward my GPA." Underlying my gravitation toward literature was an admiration for the power of wit to conjure up a romantic love. It was through literature that I developed a nostalgia for a reality I had never known.

On other days I exhausted my hand with figures of aggregate supply and demand curves (they were lines, as far as I remember), but my head had taken residence far above the clouds—I was in the stars. Perplexed by the idea of relativity, the boundlessness of the Universe, the births and deaths of stars, and the passage of time, my imagination was fueled by lectures in astronomy. My professor did everyone the service of removing most of the physics from his course, which would have been more than prohibitive for me. As I recall he once said, "astronomy is not founded in equations, it is founded in wonder", and I was wonder's hopeless victim. I was spell-bound with binding together the relations of all things. Without any awareness of what I was

doing, I had taken up the pastime of developing a small metaphysics. A project like this would absorb my thoughts, but more advantageously, it would safely detach me from my reality. Even then I was inwardly smug. The carrot of being realized by mankind dangled before me. Mankind was a faceless, grateful soul who would be there to accept my solution to the metaphysical problems plaguing philosophy, my *"theory of Everything"*, I called it. I had plagiarized the name, as anyone familiar with the 2014 biopic on Stephen Hawking would recognize. Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* had served as an addendum to my astronomical curriculum. I was an admirer of Stephen. He wrestled with the Universe's most challenging concepts. He concerned himself with discovering the poetry of the physical world. In a parallel sense, I was concerned with the poetry of the mental world: *everything*, at least *my* everything. On a deeper level, Stephen and I shared in a struggle against the influence of a body working against its fellow mind.

I do not mind so much that I made no attempt to disguise an egregious act of nominal appropriation. I am wont to believe that cognitive dissonance and forgetfulness are the only original authors. For everyone else, creative projects are spawned out of a great inheritance.

I will attempt to weave together a narrative of my life anchored at this stage rather than chronologically, not because elements of my childhood are less relevant—they certainly are—but rather because this period marks the beginning of my independence, when I was able to think and live for myself. Before, I was not me. I was not me because there was no singular "I". Before, I had multiple personas. I had a persona for my school friends, another for my friends in the neighborhood. Another was for the group I went to church with every Sunday, and another for when I was home. A more charitable version of my home persona spawned once or twice a year when relatives came to visit. Finally, there was myself, my deepest self, which existed only for me.

Like horcruxes, I had buried parts of this essential self in meaningful places, in memories I would revisit, in songs I told no one about, in little bits of poetry, and in my ideas. Before, I undertook the project of making sure everyone in my life was shepherded within designated pens. I defined my relationships within place. I believed that as long as my flock was well fed, they would not raise complaints of their being held captive. I would meet their occasional curiosity for life beyond the pen with a warm deflection or sarcastic diffusion. In this past life of mine, no one had shown me how to flourish. I had been used to living under a thick forest canopy, finding my light between the shadows. In my second infancy, I was a transplant under a new canopy, but I strained toward light in hard to reach places all the same. My development of the *"theory of Everything"*, inconsequential to metaphysics as it turned out, was my attempt to unify the Universe, but underlying that was the necessity to bring together a fractured *I*. It was my search for meaning, for the narrative that would put to good use all of my existing selves. It was the beginning of a decade-long struggle to find an authentic approach to life, one that would eventually lead me to Love.

Platonic Friendship: The Shadows on the Wall

My undergraduate experience was all in good fun. I made sure to balance studying with a moderate drinking habit. Chapel Hill was a college town. The bar scene was the envy of the neighboring colleges. The time would be 1:48am and I would have a fresh Blue Cup—two pints of beer in a single cup—in hand. If my foot were to catch on the nose of one of the metal stairs at He's Not Here, I was self-assured that I would be caught by an acquaintance, embraced with a shoulder wrap and a warm hello. He's Not was the stockyard for undergraduates, or anyone else who could be charmed by seven foot spackled ceilings and 1970's beer advertisements, where the best stench one could hope for was of stale beer. The space was filled with no-nonsense wooden tables and chairs so haggard Hades must have been pleased by their wherewithal to cheat him. Still, a Blue Cup was five dollars, a bargain even for the time.

I loved He's Not Here. My friends and I put more time into those seats than ones in lecture halls. We were randomly assigned to be roommates, the eight of us who began college together, yet the pervasive, unstated feeling amongst us was that we could not have chosen better for ourselves. It was a quasi-family affair. We ate together, we worked out together, we went out together. I was the runt of our circle. I was not the most athletic, nor the brightest. I was not good looking, having had a rough (and possibly perennial) clash with puberty; nor was I particularly charismatic. I was the subject of much of the play-bullying amongst our cohort because the jokes slid off of me like water; I might have even enjoyed the attention.

Whether anyone was aware or not, I cast myself into the role of our circle's guardian of camaraderie. My instincts called for reliability and a listening ear. Friendship, for me, resonated best in the form of a true dialogue, but never in the company of more than three. Vulnerability was an occasion: it was the things that were said when the protective layers of the psyche have been exposed by drunkenness, or exhaustion. I considered it my duty to

manufacture these occasions when I could. We would return home from a night of drinking at He's Not. I would pause as we were about to head inside. Then I would lean over our fourth floor balcony. A particular shimmering star would catch my eye and I would comment: "isn't it amazing how an object so bright can be hundreds or even thousands of light-years away...?" The edge of my top lip would curl into a grin, for on a level I did believe it: "All that light filling our eyes, an uninterrupted process." Such a line would almost certainly elicit the desired outcome, a moment of contemplation in concrete abstraction, which is to say, the absurd. In sorting out the contents of a bespangled sky, the onlooker is likely unaware that they are engaged in the absurd. Anyone who knows this knows they have a temporary window when their companion's ego—prone and dazed by the wondrous act—can be bypassed. It is the opportune moment to pounce, before the greater consciousness resets with a grounding look at the feet supporting its endeavor. The spoils for winning such a game, at least for me (the one cognizant of playing it) was a spark of emotional intimacy, which, fingers crossed, would ignite a fully unarmored conversation: one in which truths are unquestionably valid because of the situation in which they are spoken. Even if a spark was generated, however, it was unlikely to catch, and the regrounded consciousness would turn itself toward more worldly affairs: a drunkenly crafted quesadilla that would need eating, a third rewatch of *How I Met Your Mother* requiring forensic attention, etc.

Of course, there were variations to the game. My friends and I would engage in the absurd (and here I mean truly meaningless) overconsumption of late night reality TV. There was Steve Harvey's *Family Feud*, which aired from 12am to 1am, then Jerry Springer's *Baggage* from 1am to 2am every night on the Game Show Network. In truth, the underlying appeal to these shows was that watching them was a small act of rebellion, a waste of precious time. Here, my tactics were to seize upon my friends' fatigue. For the tired friend, like his drunk companion, comes into a conversation with less armor.

I found it odd that no one I knew seemed as keen as I was to engage at the level of vulnerability that I sought to engage in. For me, vulnerability was the device used to reveal one's self through the other, which I believed was the highest achievement of any relationship. My friends' interests—the latest rap and hip hop songs, the shapeliness of their incoming beards, their efforts to build out their physique, their desire to discuss the cultural and political exposés of the time, testing the limits of their drinking, women, etc.—exuded raw masculine adolescence. I liked these things too. There were moments I found myself completely immersed under their breaking crest. These things made me happy briefly, but I found myself unable to commit my attention to them wholly—as if my lungs beckoned me to remain above the surface, to swallow briny gulps of salt water as long as I could breathe a little soulful air.

If my friends were as inclined as I was to discover themselves through me as I was through them, they certainly didn't show it. For if they had been, they would have recognized the games I had fashioned and played along. My disappointment for having lost these fixtures initially led to a sharpening of my ego, for it became evident that the heightened sense of empathy I possessed (which I rather believed to be genuine emotions of love and care) was unique, particularly in a man. In actuality, this was a rationalization of my own relational scarcity. I became entrenched in romantic ideals, imagining the *one* who would understand me—and choose me. My hope required that I be a humanist (otherwise I would have rejected humanity altogether) in order that humanity might produce for me the person who would show me who I was, or at least do the work of holding the mirror in my direction. I languished waiting for their manifestation, but I was familiar with the struggle of faith—I was brought up in it. I waited upon humanity in the same way I had once waited upon God, bound by the hands and feet with golden cords—patience and self-control.

The sentences of my new holy scriptures were crafted by Shakespeare and the romantic poets. I commiserated with these poets in their attempts to woo their beloved, to separate the beloved from their subjectivity, to consume it, and in their inevitable failure to do so. I rejoiced in their defiance, their denial of death, in their audacity to breathe life into their words as if they were God himself. In their wit I saw the opportunity to make whimsical that which was surely existential—for them as it was for me. And yet, I rejected romanticism's enchantments. I craved the poet's power, but denied myself that power on moral grounds because I believed *true* love could not be exploitative. True love was not a conquest. The love relation had no aggressor. True love gave of itself. True love completed its object. True love did not beckon to be discovered, rather, it was found by those who were meant to find it. Try as I might have, I could not deprive myself from the mystical nature of Love: it remained an absolute subject with an independent will-of-force.

For the duration of college—a period of adolescent infancy—cognitive dissonance stretched me to the point of bursting. I prioritized practical studies so that I might lead a practical life. I made every effort to appear structurally sound, to reject my past for the pleasures of experience, and to be the mirror I sought. This was as much as I was capable of. My friends, the individuals I felt closest to in the world, did not seem to know the difference. Internally, I was a vacuum of space with an insatiable appetite for truth, for stable values, and for integration into a greater cause than myself. I was desperate to be identified. This was the period of a long spell of grief, one after which I had bid my farewell to God.

The Beginnings of a Patient Complex

It is not written in my patient record, but I believe I can trace the origins of my Crohn's disease to a Pizza Hut Original Pan Pizza. Shortly after we settled in North Carolina, we had family friends come to visit from California. It was an August evening at twilight and we children had taken to running about the playground in the backyard. I remember our enthusiasm as we methodically cupped our hands around at least a hundred lightning bugs and imprisoned them within a large mason jar we used for lemonade. After the sun had set this chandelier we had fashioned, radiating bioluminescence, became all the more striking. At this point, the pizza in our bellies had begun to digest, and in an extraordinary moment, I unsealed the jar to free our captives, but the little bugs seemed satisfied to hold on to the interior of the glass edifice, and, while admiring their contentedness, I felt the pang of a terrible stomach ache. I buckled over, my hands supported by my knees as we had been taught in Little League. I hoped this would appear natural, at least to the other children about the yard. The world slowed. I felt every drop of sweat beading on my temples and down my lower back. But, at six years old, I had already mastered the Stoic's grimace (freezing my negative emotions before they could reach my face) because even then the signatures of negative emotion were known to signal impotence, and were therefore unbecoming. Nobody seemed to notice my blunder, so near I was to dropping our marvelous spectacle of light, and I was glad.

Months later, my blunders became too frequent and too severe to be kept secret. I adopted a loveseat in the room off the foyer (the room most unfrequented) where I would wait in the fetal position, braced for betrayal, for my body to soothe itself. It stubbornly refused to be soothed. Fresh, stabbing pains would arrive in one to three minute intervals, and in their wake I would dig myself further into the recesses of the couch, hoping that if I *became* a part of the couch the pain would distribute itself outward. The sight of me wriggling about was too much for my mother to bear, and so I was

admitted to the emergency room at Duke University Hospital, where for six days I was tested, and heavily medicated, until my body had been restored to equilibrium.

There were small victories in those six days. By the second day I had color photographs of the demolition to my insides my illness was responsible for: “a benign small bowel segment with mild chronic active enteritis; a luminal stricture of the distal terminal ileum and ileocecal valve, consistent with Crohn's disease; a terminal ileum with multifocal mucosal hyperplastic lymphoid nodules; a benign cecum with chronic active colitis, consistent with Crohn's disease.” I remember holding in a feeling of taboo flipping through the pages of the diagnostic report printed with these images, as if what was inside ought not to be seen. My doctor’s were pleased with my diagnosis. Though Crohn’s disease is neither preventable nor curable, it is highly treatable with medication, even *manageable*, the doctors said, though I would hesitate to use that word in the midst of a flare up.

Upon being admitted, I was administered a PICC line at the elbow, a contraption similar to an IV on its exterior: a clear plastic tube obscured by gauze and medical tape and connected to a noisy infusion pump, but differing in its extension of the line intravenously to a main artery near the heart. One of the overnight nurses showed me an x-ray of the line inside me, explaining that my most important role as a patient was to ensure that the line was not disturbed by my itching, pulling, or significant bending of the elbow; otherwise, all I needed to do was wait, patiently, for my recovery. But her attempts at reassurance were not enough to overcome the terror induced by this black and white image, for in her explanation she had brought me into the awareness that, as long as this contraption was connected to me—and continued to infuse the packages of liquid drugs dangling above me directly into the epicenter of my vital self—my life was out of my control. For these six

days, I was *completely* dependent on the authority of a team of gastroenterologists, their attendants, and nurses who were assigned to my care. Of course, I knew that the role of doctors, attendants, and nurses alike was to restore me to health, but they were relatively few, and there were many of us patients. What if, in their inattentiveness, they made a mistake? Or worse, what if they became flustered or angry at my requests? I need only bend my left elbow a few degrees to reinvigorate my paranoia that I was, effectually, immobilized under their authority. I felt I could not ask of them anything beyond what they were willing to give forthrightly.

My mother was on the recliner by my side, and she was my first and only defense. Though it made her visibly uncomfortable to do so, she would make sure I received the care I deserved. I was grateful for her advocacy. Together, in our shared state of helplessness, we regressed into our roles as anxious mother bear and docile infant. My mother showed me her love by commiserating with me when things were beyond our control and showing restraint when things were not. I mimicked her affections. The bond of love between us was developed in the depth of our capacity to contain the burden of our emotions, within the thankless act of restraining ourselves from translating our unbearable hurt onto the other—that is into words, at least. But the sequela for our emotional contortion was that my love and affection became rigid in the sufficient guilt for the burden of my disease, and thus, while my mother and I could commiserate openly, though nonverbally, over pain which sprung from our bellies, we unknowingly barred ourselves from the comfort and celebration of authentic joy.

I took to flaunting my child-innocence for the nurses who would take my blood pressure and temperature every 4 hours. Instinct told me this was my best bet in tiding over their affections. I would look away—but not wince!—while the nurse applied a rubber tourniquet to my frail left bicep to

pressurize my blood for labs each morning. My heartbeat rang in my ears, the strength in my fist fell faint, but I never failed to show them just how brave I could be. I beamed with gratitude at the nurse who had been so considerate as to bring me a plate of microwaved french toast from the employee lounge—I was a "selective" eater then and I found the food delivered from the hospital's cafeteria repulsive.

When I was not dissociating from the painful clamors in my abdomen, I was imagining my freedom from this place. Time passed in interchanges between a white walking man and a flashing orange hand, the former predicating the start and the latter the stop of throngs of visitors and medical staff in scrubs bustling across the six-laned intersection of Erwin road. From my bay window I amused myself by imagining the occasion my mother and I would be among that throng, crossing over to the parking garage (which taunted me in broad daylight) to make our journey home.

When one of the attendants arrived each morning before dawn to question me on my progress, I groggily held myself to the minimum viable complaint. I needed the attendants, who reported to my doctors directly, to know I was suffering, but that I would *not* be a bother to them. I hoped that by expressing optimism my prognosis would be made with haste so I could recoup sovereign bodily autonomy as quickly as possible without endangering myself by skewing the attendant's discretion. Besides, the test results from my labs would not lie—blood does not lie; the body does not lie.

I could not have put this servile role I delicately balanced into words then. No intelligible reasoning was involved in developing it. Rather, *Carter, the patient*, was the snap result of adaptation to the emotional mélange of disease: pain, vigilance, and subsequent fatigue amidst the theater of hospital life.

The real tragedy, I believe, that stemmed from my hospitalization, was not that there was any maltreatment or insufficiency in my medical care whatsoever; it was that upon my departing passage across Erwin road, I had, on the good authority of my doctors, learned to accept my diagnosis but misappropriated its implications. My diagnosis was a life sentence, but it was not a death sentence. There was no intermission in the production of hospital theater for which to grieve then, so I will now: such a young life to be so abruptly limited!

My doctors shared with me that Crohn's would come and go. At times, it would cause significant disruptions, but it would not dictate my life. I needn't feel sorry for myself. And so I was discharged with the assignment to live my life to its potential, an operation which would require bravery and tenacity to seize life in spite of my condition. But bravery requires a dilemma: in my pursuit of potential, under the guise of abandoning fear, I would have to abandon self-acceptance. I was acutely aware of the gap my disease placed between my life and its benchmark, the comparatively "normal" life I drew from my relatively superficial peer assessments. Tenacity would be the work of filling the gap, and thereby subduing an irreconcilable position: the narrative of my disease was not a conflict between domestic allies and foreign enemies; rather, my war was a civil war. My disease originated *within me*.

I was not safe inhabiting this body which acted to destroy itself, and I was powerless to prevent it from doing so. I developed contempt for my body. I closed myself to its speech and denied its rights to feel. I was doomed to a Cartesian reality before I had a real chance to explore the wonders my body could offer me. But I clung to infinite hope that the irreconcilable position would be reconciled through the work of meeting my unsettled potential. I would "fight the good fight." I would "run a good race." Then, and only after I had finished, would I feel wholeness, as if *being* itself were a process for accomplishment.

For twelve years I re-entered the hospital often, and each time, my role as patient was reinforced. Dr. Berman would enter the examination room with a light knock and an expressionless curiosity. He walked tentatively toward me while locking his gaze with mine, as if he were a bird and I were a lion, and he was evaluating just how hungry I might be, or if I would let him be. This approach never failed to bring a smile to my face, at which point he would also break into a soft smile himself. He would feel about my abdomen with cold, freshly-rinsed hands and ask me how I had been feeling since my last visit. Our time was always brief and formulaic, and I appreciated that. I wanted to be the healthiest version of myself for him, as if to prove his treatment was working, that I was managing quite well.

Implicitly I knew, as it had been spoken of openly before, that if I were ever to become too ill, surgery and subsequent hospitalization awaited—this prospect terrified me, for above all reasons, it would leave a scarlet letter on my very skin, incontrovertible evidence that I was not "normal". In the moments when my body's protests became too vocal to contain I was reminded that "normal" life for me *was* a ruse. I vacillated over who my healer could be. Who would deliver me to my potential if I could not arrive there on my own? It was certainly not the immune-suppressing drugs I took daily; no, my healer needed human-like authority. At times it was Dr. Berman, who made me feel as if we were navigating an unknown but manageable path together. In other instances it was my father, who would occasionally offer up an alternative diet he had found that allowed some internet Crohn's patients to live their lives free of medication. These discoveries gave me some brief assurances. Dr. Berman did not condone these holistic approaches, but the interactions between food and gut felt so intuitive and fundamental to Crohn's I did not dismiss them. I also made an appeal to God directly: to heal me, or at least make my symptoms manageable so I could have the strength to press on toward normalcy. In return, I would follow him loyally.

In the worst bouts of my disease, my faith had an astounding hardness to it. My doubts only began to creep in when I was my healthiest self. And thus, privately, I began to feel remorse for having used (or abused?) my relation with God to further my own purposes. Five years after my initial diagnosis, I began to receive a new treatment, Remicade—a recently approved, first-of-its-kind anti-inflammatory drug. While the traditional steroids and immunosuppressants I had been taking treated the symptoms of Crohn's, Remicade treated its underlying pathophysiology. My condition began to improve significantly almost immediately after my first infusion. I felt as if my prayer for healing had been answered, only, did I owe God the loyalty I had promised him? or did that debt I issued now belong to Science? Though I was very grateful to both, my doubts, restored by a long period of good health, coaxed me toward the latter.

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac

Indoctrination is a word that, today, is accompanied by the bitter taste of suspicion. I mean not to add on such connotative baggage. It was the protestant south, but we were from California—my family as well as the lead pastor of our church. Fire and brimstone did not seem to have the same effect on those who had never owned a large winter coat. I was indoctrinated by a gospel of Love, absolved by the being of Love—who is salvation, fulfillment, provider—and I absorbed this narrative wholeheartedly. We were led to this church because of its pretense of alignment with my father's gospel, which was intellectually motivated and bound toward the mystic.

When my family and I first became members, the church itself operated out of the middle school I would eventually attend. There was a contagious fervor which reverberated about the walls of the church in those early years. Attendance was growing by the week, and there were blueprints to break ground on a plot of land a few miles down the road. A live band led the congregation in praise and worship songs from the stage—five or six local musicians who performed each Sunday in what my father termed "dress code": button down Hawaiian shirts and shorts ending above the knee. As a congregation we sang upbeat songs with pop rock melodies and simple, repeatable chorus lines. Songs such as *God of Wonders*, *Blessed Be Your Name*, or *Better is One Day*, for those acquainted. The band's presence on stage held a sort of gravitas for me, for whatever spirit had its hold on them to sway back and forth and produce such uplifting sounds could not be a false one. Before service coffee and donuts were served, but not just plain glazed donuts, these were chocolate, blueberry, cream-filled, and sprinkled varieties, all bountifully displayed, free for everyone. I recall asking my parents, "how can we (the church) afford such luxuries?"

After service, my dad and I, along with a few other men who felt most comfortable staying busy, would voluntarily load up a Uhaul with all of the church's supplies and equipment. We began by loading speakers and

soundboards, then wrapping cables, and, finally, a task which I could perform: breaking down utility tables and stacking chairs. Quite simply, these were all the materials needed to liberate the *Spirit*. Then again, there was a sense that equipment wasn't even necessary; there was joy in that sentiment. While we were solely volunteers, we worked hard because there was work to be done. I was six, and I played a role in pioneering a revival. I felt enriched by my Sunday community; it provided my first sense of a universal soul. Between the walls of the church much of the typical friction amongst strangers was removed. It was this sense of trust and belonging that would complicate my exit years later.

When I met Josh, and his wife, Sumer, I was entering the sixth grade: a time when I was eager for life to *happen*. Josh was in his late twenties. He had a linebacker build, and a wardrobe full of distressed jeans and Abercrombie polos that were too tight and did little to mask that he was not, in fact, a student like us. He had a way of never demanding the spotlight and having it insisted upon him anyway. He fashioned his stories like a virtuoso in dynamics: he composed them with high notes of self-mockery (inspiring hearty laughter) coupled with low notes of contagious authenticity. Josh *loved* God. Sumer was Josh's perfect counterpart. Tall and elegant, dignified and perceptive. Hearing her cackle of a laugh was a reward in itself. I idolized their marriage, which, on its surface, flaunted an affluence of chemistry, affection, respect, playful banter, and effortless love. It was something special to observe, something I had never seen before. They tracked each other like a binary system: two orbits of similar mass, spiraling about, held together by an undeniable gravitas. Josh and Sumer treated us students as if we were revolving members of their solar system. They spoke light into our lives. I felt accepted, loved, far from the fringe, never smothered—rather in the thick of a large, endearing, chaotic *family*.

I wasn't one to speak much in a group. I calculated my words carefully, and dreaded the spotlight unless what I could say had a near certain truth value (in which case it would hardly be interesting), or else in order to correct something someone said in error. In this chaotic family, that made me "wise". I knew better. I was placed into a small group with the boys my age. I built up the skill of listening to them share their lives, far and away from being interested in sharing myself. These were boys I would never have self-selected as friends. We did not relate in the typical ways, and privately I held a split condescending attitude towards them. When we commented on scriptures, or, more generally, on theological or philosophical concepts, I found the opinions they articulated rather juvenile. I was acclimated to contending with the opinions of a castigator punching a generation above my own class, and these boys were no match for *him*. Even so, the material matter was that they spoke candidly, and I related empathically to their words, so listening to and showing up for them became a method for me to connect with and release some of my own incarcerated emotion. I dismissed my feelings of intellectual competition. I began to like these boys. I considered them my friends.

My father became disillusioned with the church as years passed. Its constituents were hardly of the intellectual sphere he had tapped into when he received his salvation. In California, near the laboratory where he worked (and where that fateful baptism occurred) they discovered God in increasingly complex, open-ended particle theories. He revealed himself in mass, and light, and essential uncertainty. In that desert valley (where they designed and tested lasers to induce nuclear fusion) God, like the physicists, was at work in the process of shaping the Universe to his will. The idea wreaks of mysticism. I am not convinced it is wrong.

In North Carolina, our congregation was cut from a different cloth. There was no nearby laboratory to supply the church with a sense of

wonder—that byproduct of insatiable scientific pursuit. In North Carolina, the peremptory argument for God was his healing presence. "God is here, with us!" And time spent in his presence had the miraculous side effect of releasing one's body from its psychological affects—and in slightly more hushed tones, could even heal disease. Abiding with God was life lived to its absolute, frictionless potential. As we would say, "*his yoke is easy, his burden light"*. The figure of God as the loving paternal Father resonated with blue collar, middle-class families whose daily occupations were wistfully more mundane than the discovery of the Universe. The figure certainly resonated with me, but my father was unconvinced. He may have felt slightly duped. He found emotional engagement unflattering, unworthy of the holy pursuit. It was not that he did not believe in Love, only, he did not believe it to be in the character of Love to *meet one where they are*. Making friends in the church did not come easily to him. He could garner little respect for emotional, effeminate men who attended church to "feel good and make small talk." But he saw how much the church meant to me and my mother. He neither encouraged nor discouraged our attachment. He would wait quietly in one of the back rows tuning out, or, if the message was extraordinarily intolerable, he would wait for us in the car. The church was no longer my father's. It was mine. He retreated into the depths of a private faith, which, I conjecture, ultimately absolved itself, and by that time, he had lost faith in family as well.

As fortune would have it, I became witness to one of God's great miracles. I was spared a most undesirable fate. My father was a landlord, and he corralled my brother and I to assist in the landscaping service and adjunct maintenance projects at the two apartment sites he owned. Here, even a base amount of service was a perpetual affair. Fortunately for my brother and I, our duty lay contemporaneous with my father's generous threshold for neglect, so it was only on the weekend mornings when the lawn and hedges had reached

the brink of disgrace we were summoned. I was thirteen then, certainly of age to operate a lawn mower, and well beyond the age to recognize the value of a t-shirt covered in the stains of sweat and chlorophyll (and to know it was more than the lunch we were compensated with).

Thirteen was also the year I became curious about driving. My curiosity was born one afternoon while fetching a CD from the console of our parked minivan. I ventured into the driver's seat, placing the steering wheel's worn leather in the grip of my hands. To my surprise, I was met with a resistance beyond my twisting efforts: "Now it is obvious why only adults can drive...the strength it requires to move such a large piece of machinery!" I did not know the wheel locked when the key was not in the ignition.

Months later, after a morning dedicated to our landscaping operation which had extended late into the afternoon, I was ornery to be home. We were headed in that direction when, unannounced, my father decided to route us to the PO box where he had rent checks and utility bills sent. There was no negotiating with him about this forestallment: he possessed a monopoly on all of our time, and this must have aroused in me a dogged impulse to flout my ever increasing self-competence. We rounded up a bend to join two other cars in the large, sloping parking lot in front of the post office. My father parked and told us to wait in the car.

For a second time, my curiosity overcame me and I began to examine the still warm steering wheel. This time, however, I was seated in the passenger seat and could not easily maneuver the wheel. My hands shifted toward the gearbox in the center console, and I began to play with the resistance of the shifter. The lever was stout, just like the wheel of the minivan had been. How seamlessly, gracefully, my father transitioned the gears, and how formidable this lever was for me! I grew confident, and pulled with a heightened intensity. To my dismay, the lever freed itself into neutral gear, and immediately I set to work on resetting it to evade my father's notice. Then, a shout from the backseat, my brother: "WE'RE MOVING." I looked up.

Wide-eyed, I pushed back on the lever with renewed desperation, but the groans of metal grinding on metal signaled our Jeep had been freed to roll backward toward its natural destiny. I have no memory of the moment, but I leapt out of the rolling car and latched onto the bars of the engine's grill. I dug my heels firmly into the asphalt to halt its progress, and was dragged several feet before abandoning the foolish attempt. I scurried back to the passenger door. My brother had crawled up to the front seat. As fast as I could run, I snatched open the door to clear the way for him to jump. Despite my efforts, our Jeep had only accelerated on its sloping path, and the jump had become far more compromising than when I had done it moments before. I threw out my hand for my brother to take, and he took hold.

A woman behind us, who had been resting in her driver's seat, leaned out her door held ajar by her outstretched arm and wailed "Oh my God" in that tone reserved for when something helpless and terrible is happening, and watched on, then, having gathered her senses, dashed for the PO box room to fetch my father. My brother did not hesitate, leaping from the perch of the step rail, clearing the span of the door and breaking his fall with a slight roll. He was alright, save for a few minor scrapes. I re-oriented myself toward the Jeep barreling its way toward the edge of the parking lot. Six-foot hedges stood guard, a final line of defense, then a steep slope to the active road below. A faint glimmer of hope arose that these hedges, which were planted out of a prominent curb, might hold some sway against the feral hunk of metal. The valiant shrubs boosted the Jeep into the air, revealing a mechanic's view of its undercarriage, and after a moment of intense violence—the snapping of twigs and the cries of leaves torn from their branches—the Jeep was gone, completely swallowed by the hill below.

I was certain now that the Jeep would collide with an unsuspecting vehicle. Someone might die. I might kill someone. I heard screeching tires, shattering glass, the strike of predator meeting prey: all my imagining of the event which was sure to follow. But the actual sounds did not register immediately. Then not at all. I made my way nimbly between the hedges,

which had taken a visible beating, and peered down at the ongoing scene. Mere feet from traffic, the Jeep, with all of the momentum of its descent, had steered itself into the flat of the ditch at the hill's bottom running parallel with the road—such an incalculable turn for a beast whose course prior had been so linear. Traffic continued uninterrupted. The Jeep had come to rest upon white-washed, tumbled stones—the town's effort to disguise the ditches' unappetizing function for drainage, and thank God for that. And thank God for diverting an inevitable calamity that day—what would have been a guilt forever on my conscience.

After my father had fetched the car, he left my brother and I in the car again, this time pulling the parking brake taut, and with composed anger bellowed "YOU COULD HAVE KILLED SOMEONE. THAT INCLUDES YOUR BROTHER." I looked down in shame and said nothing. He shut the door to recollect his things back in the mailroom. I remember watching the woman, who is faceless in memory, who leaned into the wedge of her open car door as ours rolled down the hill, move to confront my father as he was returning from the mailroom. She struck a tone with him I had never heard anyone use with him. Over and over again, she emphasized how important it was for children, in situations such as this, not to be blamed for their mistakes, no matter the flagrancy of their actions. I thought this talk to be oddly intrusive—was I not old enough to be responsible? But my father politely (surprisingly to me) heard her, and, perhaps, thanks to her, we never spoke of the incident again.

I spent months reliving the event when I felt alone enough to daydream, particularly when I was in the shower and, for that duration, stood encapsulated within the baseness of white acrylic and a translucent curtain with its irremediable rectangular creases. In the nakedness of the moment, I could think of nothing else, and the terror attached to the memory cascaded upon itself. I re-dug my heels into the asphalt. I re-grabbed my brother's hand to jump, hearing over and over the exclamation "Oh my God". I saw the metal of the undercarriage swallowed beyond the hedges. And then my chest would

tighten, my breathing became quick, and my eyes welled with tears, for again, I was faced with *what might have been*.

To restore myself, I hummed the melodies of the songs of worship that we played in church, and the lump in my throat would melt away slowly like a pad of butter over heat. With a sort of crescendoing confidence, I praised God, transitioning to singing with the full volume of my voice. It was God who had steered the Jeep into that ditch—at the very last moment—and he who protected those anonymous passengers and my brother from harm. It was God who had given me a second chance at childhood innocence. It was he who was interceding for me against the fusillade of panic at that very moment. I dismissed the awkwardness of my fortissimo. For each of these incidents I furthered my commitment to the church's message of forgiveness and restitution.

My shower episodes faded after a few months, but the bond I had made with my church community remained vibrant. I entrenched myself further in church activities. They offered me an escape from my life at home. In youth group, we had our small groups, outings, and retreats. We ventured toward North Carolina's perimeter mountains and the sea, reaping the benefits of a natural setting—and coming asymptotically close to admitting that nature itself (to us, God's creation) was therapeutic. Sunday sermons were a form of therapy, as long as the message was generally agreeable.[1] Josh spoke with reverie for God's paternal nature. To Josh, God the Father was rather like a grandfather. He doled out compassion and bestowed his "lived"

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[1] It is more so the form rather than the content of preaching which soothes the listener. Freed from the typical demands of active listening, the audience is led to process individualized conflict as it pertains even vaguely to the message, or at least, this is my thought.

wisdom upon his grandchildren. He abstained from imposing physical strength; he did not need it.

As years went by I progressively required the patriarch's affections—I felt as if my own was failing me (and I spiraled considering that perhaps I was failing him). I was assured that God would meet me if I were receptive to him; all he required was faith. Rather like the pursuit of Nirvana, the presence of ulterior motives negates the pursuit of faith. This is cruel news to the struggling mind who comes to him in need—faith begins when one drops the very thought of need (and succeeds when one no longer *needs.*) I wonder, *would anyone seeking God enter faith if they knew it was a journey, completely of one's own, toward not needing him, defeating its very purpose?* Then again, results may vary. Faith costs nothing to those who do not need it and everything to those who do. I was earnest and untrained, and set about negating needs and doubts alike. Denial was my most formidable tool. I continued to utilize it until I could no longer articulate want or desire. It was consuming work, and my concentration appeared devout, so much so that I was affirmed, and even admired by my peers and, most importantly, by Josh—and that was validation enough to continue self-erasure deep into the marrow.

When I entered high school I was tapped to become a member of the youth band at church, I on the lead guitar. We played at events directed for middle and high schoolers, but on occasion, we were asked to lead the entire congregation, and thus, that childhood fantasy of mine was fulfilled. It was a privilege, but as it turned out, more so a responsibility, to play from the stage on Sunday mornings. We played two services at 9 and 11am. Sound check began at 7am. I was perpetually tired, which was my first indication that leading a congregation was a human affair afterall. I tried my best not to nod off while on stage. Of course I did not, but I felt a certain wariness that I

should appear *taken* by the music as we played. All musicians worth their salt seem to allow their performance to inhabit their body, regardless of the day's hour. It is a sign of spiritual connectedness: a mystical possession, but also, indirectly, of talent. I was acutely aware that my body felt stiff while on stage, stifled by the upcoming chords and riffs. I could sing along sometimes. I could clap my hands on breaks. But I became dismayed that any attempt to engage my own spiritual being while performing felt, in itself, performative. I was either not talented enough, or I was an imposter—and a poor one at that.

Every subsequent mounting of the stage was a revisitation with these self-struggles in order to become unified with both the music and with God. That is what a worship leader did, but I could not. I made eyes with my friends in our usual corner section and envied them first for having gotten a proper night's sleep, and second, for their ability to surrender themselves to the music, an impossibility for me as a cog in its mechanism. Still, I enjoyed the spotlight. It was enough to ignore what was, at first, a relatively innocuous skepticism for the most performative aspects of the service.

Near the conclusion of my sophomore year—my mind's limbs had only just begun to perform their anticipatory summer stretch—Josh and Sumer announced that they were departing the church within the month. An opportunity had arisen to lead a budding congregation in the midwest, closer to family. When I heard, I swallowed a lump of trepidation. This was more spiritual forfeiture than I was ready to cope with. There was a girl I was courting at the time, secretly I suppose, who I thought I loved. We communicated almost exclusively over text, neither of us bold enough to risk the implications of public affection. This went on for two years. She was older than I was, attending seminary in the fall, and well out of my league.

This seminary, seen as a Floridian Valhalla by many of those in our youth group approaching that ripe age for personal autonomy, required that

first-year students take a vow of celibacy, which, to me, was an affront to one perfectly pure digital relationship. The girl I thought I loved wished to take this vow, thereby ending our relationship. I dreaded the night those pale stars rose, and readied myself to make the most of our wrapping summer. Secularly, I saw the absurdity of the vow. I also saw some merit in it; afterall, this sort of group cohesion lent itself toward a level of attunement with God that was otherwise unachievable when that comorbid alley, labeled "*crush*", was presently available to wander down. But the wave this hypothesis stirred was short-lived, made more than marginally awash by a contemporary knowledge that sexual tension might be silenceable, but it certainly was not abolishable. It would be unwise of me to wait for her at the finish line, though I wanted to.

Through the voice of my father, I heard what felt like dreadful wisdom (actually an attempt to invalidate my own feelings under the guise of "testing my mettle") that one year was not long to wait for real, substantive love (if that is what it was), though she gave me no assurance we would rekindle. But God rewards patience, does he not? And so my sense of helplessness gave way to earnest composure. Like Don Quixote I would look to the prose of the world for a sign of this love substance, anchored on the idea that the constancy of feeling was itself a sign of last resort. I would spend the summer searching, preparing.

The sudden exodus of my spiritual parentage, Josh and Sumer—they too answering God's whimsical sense of kismet—fledged in me, from what was prior a sizable spiritual hurdle, outright spiritual turmoil. I was unable to comprehend how this new congregation of Ohioans could accept the man-child (whom I revered) as their father figure. No, Josh would do excellently wherever he went. My gripe was not with Josh, it was with God directly. I felt betrayed that God would call away people when he knew I had submerged icebergs of affection for them. Mulling upon these feelings of

alienation, I began to scrutinize our relationship. I sought assurance. Quite simply, "did God care about me?" Care is exemplified in the world. Its origins lie in the empirical. Were there signs that he cared, that could be attributed to him alone? Pensively I recognized that, of all of the signs produced—particularly of that love substance—which I had attributed to God, all were of an indirect nature. And of course, if there had been a direct benefit to our relationship, I would not require the services faith provided. I questioned: What did God need from me? Why did he *want* me? And even if he did want me, why should I maintain the burden of faith? What I needed was regulation. I needed God to love me. But Love (like care) is active; it is by and for the living. I could not be sure that God was *active* enough to love. The signs of his activity in their traditional forms—of sightings and miracles—had gone stale, and the Jeep, that cardinal vehicle of my faith, in lieu of a miracle, could be explained rationally by an unexpected but nonetheless calculable trajectory. There are surely many nuanced theological arguments for why God would choose to hide his face from humanity since *anno domini*, but feeling duped, I sought out arguments which could produce answers that were more substantive than ambiguous. In my indignation, metaphysical pillars collapsed and the asymmetry of our relationship became obvious: God needed me to love him... because he could not exist without me. He could haunt—but not fully inhabit—a body. It was God who was desperate to be alive, and I who bore his parasitism. All of the love I had received from him was merely love which had been returned from its original sender. Only before, I had not recognized its source, myself.

As quickly as the rain from a summer squall, the core of my (living) spiritual family dissipated in two heartfelt goodbyes. I was finally alone, and somewhat afraid, left to my own discretion to remake sense of the world, then preserve, in memory, what had been, and always will have been, a good thing.

I entered my junior year of high school armed with nothing but skeptical teeth—newly erupted over the summer months and electrically charged by that oddly Socratic quip of Pontius Pilate's: *"What is truth?"* But Jesus—and for that matter, Socrates—could not, and did not in the case of Christ, reply adequately to this modern ontological riddle, and neither had as much of a world to exposit as our own. I devoured Sunday sermons to spit out their gristly fallacies. I was voracious toward God. In one fell swoop of a summer, he had taken my Josh and Sumer, and, along with them, my first love.

I reopened silver-edged scritta to its very heart—my eyes falling upon that curious account of the life of Job. As someone recently supplied with that constitutional epithet "cruel and unusual", and radicalized by this new notion of personal abandonment, the case of the righteous man *enduring*—to say it lightly—the loss of property and progeny, not once, but thrice, and with the burden of proof on the side of man's righteousness (an injustice in itself, while the Almighty openly abused his sworn duty to protect) was less a case to celebrate the defendant's triumph, but seemed, in my opinion, the appropriate occasion to reconsider the temperament of the plaintiff.

Upon examination of the case, the plaintiff's sordid behavior did not match the archetype of a lover, but rather that of a conceited tyrant. The plaintiff forsook his duty to a loyal subject; his absence causing the subject duress—all to manufacture a sign of the subject's continued felty, as if the Almighty needed signs, as if he did not know the very composition of men's hearts. And for the production of this sign, many beings—both animal and human—were deceased, and Life was made the less for it. No, this plaintiff surely did not act out of love—that force for life—which he (in a subsequent book) claims *to be*. Most characters are allowed the development of character arc, especially if that arc eventually bends toward the moral, but this particular plaintiff is linear. He is the same *yesterday, today, and forever*, and deserves no such tolerance.

Of course, there were other little gibes to be made toward the sacred text. There was the phrasing in Genesis 4, after Cain murdered his brother Abel in the field, in which Cain, possessed by guilt, utters unto God: "I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." But *whoever* ought to be limited to relevant family members—Cain being the firstborn of Adam, the inaugural man, and Eve, the extraordinary progeny of a rib—Adam's, specifically. Perhaps, to a harder-nosed believer than myself, a semantic argument is rather tacky, but to me, *whoever*, following the story, seems to cast a wider net than father, mother, and unmentioned siblings. To me, it is suggestive of the presence of an extrafamilial group—presenting an embarrassing flaw in the Creation narrative, at least as I understood it.

Perhaps I had made an unsuspecting error by assuming, after Eve, a typical nature of sexual relations. Or, to supplement the Creation myth with modern anthropological context, perhaps Adam and Eve were not the first of the species Homo Erectus, but the first in their lineage to become *aware*, and Cain was deathly afraid that his neanderthal neighbors might enact justice on behalf of Abel. It's electrifying to speculate that the couple in the garden were the first Homo Sapiens; nevertheless, that reflection is a far cry from the straightforward analysis I was led to believe. Even to be so neatly explained away as a mere error of translation, *whoever* yields the question: ought the holy book, the perfection of language (as it is written by the author of all things), to maintain its perfection in translation?

My father introduced me to the biblical canonization events led by the orthodox church's early pioneers. I found it nearly unfathomable that there were manuscripts written by notable apostles whose account of Jesus had been disallowed for inconsistencies with—and, in fairness, their diminished utility given—the primary gospels. My discovery of gnostic gospels, and tangentially the Dead Sea scrolls, was a particularly climactic moment. When the discovery of these unfamiliar facts made impact upon the landscape of the

well-accustomed subject, a feeling of foreignness was produced in me where I was able to take up (this time forever) my subject, not as the loving patriarch, but as a veritable stranger, and my doubt against him finally split from its emotional struggle of will. Atheism was not to be a resolution made with logical certainty; it never would be. The certainty with regard to uncertainty had been the mustard seed beguiled to grow; but no longer. I was free—free from scrutinizing scriptures at least. I knew that the holy book was written by men. The sacred words were inspired not by the perfect being himself, but by idealogues, storytellers, and poets. The words had been a means of naming the unexplainable trauma caused by (and hence ending the need to explain) nature with respect to agriculture and disease (or, most generally, life and death) and as a banner for law and order, for conquest and empire. Then again, none of this information mattered. My disbelief was driven by an emotional engine—my need for love—as my belief had been before.

I did not leave the church immediately, and when I eventually did, I did so quietly. For a while, I stifled the anger I felt towards it, sensing that such emotion was unresolvable. The church had not wronged me—was not wronging me—but then, I did not know how to feel wronged. I *chose* to leave the church because, logically, I found its acceptance of a dualism between the literal and metaphorical interpretation of the bible to be mildly adaptive, convenient even, and certainly error prone. Biblical scripture, in my mind, was disqualified by the harsh criteria for Truth. Truth, afterall, is contained by a body of facts, and the quality of facts rests in their distinct lack of tolerance (an absence really) for means of interpretation. Regardless of its word, the church, this body of Christ, had integrated some of my dearest mentors and friends into its mechanism, and so in my indecision I found myself choking on the words of a relatively simple logical position, which, if expressed out loud, might harm other independent bids of faith. Worse, I might have been

cast out of the body I denied on principle, yet continued to love. And so, selflessly but mostly selfishly, I suffered to contain my conviction that wished to escape—so the prime goodness of my memory of the church could remain intact, its emotional nourishment salvaged. *"How does one grieve the loss of God?"*, I asked myself. As far as I am aware, there is no eschatology for life after Christianity. There is no ten step guide. I would have been far better off, and less perplexed, had I shortened the aforementioned question to *"How does one grieve?"* I had learned to bring my grievances to God for his protection, provision, and forgiveness. Ah, but who would I bring my grievances to now that my conscience was devoid of its prime agent? I could forgive others by emulating God's mercy, perceiving the other's guilt, and, out of my own goodness, releasing them of it. It was a *noble* thing, to forgive—it was the right of the wronged. It was a humble thing, also, to ask forgiveness. The critic, who had deftly cast down God from the throne of my consciousness, who fought valiantly and relentlessly for Truth, turned his critical eye upon my conscious life. My private shortcomings he compared with his ideals, and, as he was both the measure and the judge of my thoughts and my actions, he subsumed the rights of the wronged. Like God, he forgave out of mercy. Unlike God, mercy was a quality he particularly lacked, and he hardly remembered to love.

I carry within me a heavy intuition that there are many like me, a quiet many, who struggle or have struggled with doubt, whose voices are muted by the critic, and have exiled themselves quietly from communion. Guilt and loneliness, the price for exercising critical conviction. And perhaps, behind the spotlight of these objectifying emotions, the memory of love is lost. God *is* love, so the bible says. I swallowed the taste of despair to accept my rejection of perfect love, or at least its embodiment. Logic, having destroyed faith, felt cold and hard for a while, and, in due course, so did I. I did not

deserve love, nor forgiveness; I deserved cynicism, whose lash stung equally to faith's.

I must clarify; I hold only the highest level of esteem for the example of faith which exhibits no obvious markers of shame. Many of my dearest friends and peers continue their journeys of faith and I admire them for it—their faith motivates their art. It is the underlying functionality of all faiths, it seems, to reduce ambiguity amongst the connections of things—to yield all meaning to the gravity of a unified purpose—and I believe efforts toward precision and clarity lead us to a general order of things, and thus in our striving toward an endogenous good. Each endogenous good will find itself within the resonance of an exogenous *"greater good"*; and what a beautiful sense of community that arouses! I do, however, hold that Faith cannot be too fragile or too rigid and endure. It does Faith no good to bite. Faith must be permeable enough to accept reason, and further, it must be grounded in Life's struggle to contain alignment, to bend but not break in the receptivity of the sensations that dictate the reality of our lives. Religion, in all its varieties, is the work of Faith, and not vice versa. As long as this fact is recognized, and so long as religion does not extend itself beyond the horizon of the world, we might call its form *aesthetic*.

Entering into the Love Ethic

If I am to be successful in permanently severing the longstanding relation between myself and the Domination ethic, it will be due to an outright refusal to live a loveless life. Love, for me, has existed as a dormant ball of Rose of Jericho; it has never flourished, for I, as its caretaker, have whispered it sweet nothings while neglecting the task of seeking out the environment I promised it. I denied it the right to quench its roots. I denied it the right to establish itself in the earth. I denied it the right to *be*. And yet, it has always been there, waiting for me as it is—not as I imagined it thriving.

Now is the time for my return to the Earth itself, to accept my inheritance. I have done the work of starving the Domination ethic of its power. Now, I plant my love in the soil of this new ecological framework, which I will refer to as the Love ethic. One's life is a garden in itself, for the purpose of itself, the gardener. In this matter, the Love ethic aligns with the existential doctrine. Love can be shared out of the garden's bounty, but it is the garden, not the bounty, which must occupy the gardener's attention. The Love ethic, in order to rightfully sustain itself, not only suggests, but requires that one live in the mode of authenticity, that one take heed not to annihilate themselves in internal conflict. The Love ethic flourishes in those who have grown to know themselves, who continue to choose the labor of cultivation. Love relinquishes one from living in anguish, which the Domination ethic necessitates, as Love confirms itself in experience again and again.

When Domination speaks it uses a particular vocabulary—it utters phrases such as survival, struggle, conflict, desire, lack, faith. It comes to understand love as predominantly insufficient and relies upon fantasies—or, if one is so ennobled, ideologies—of Love's perfection to sustain it. The experience of love for the submissive *is* a struggle, for they continue to choose to uphold an ideal world rather than uphold the world as it is. They accumulate resentment as they reflect upon their continuous failure to actualize Love. When Love speaks it uses a vocabulary that promotes Life—it

utters terms such as continuity, mutuality, joy, abundance, security, cultivation. For those who practice loving, Love is self-evident. Love releases tension, whether it is given or received. We call the experience of the release of tension—whether of physical or psychological origin—joy. The spirit of Love enters via welcoming doorways; it passes over those doorways which were shuttered in preparation for its arrival, whose frames have been marked by the blood of the lamb.

For a long while, I felt particularly unsettled by the idea that Love stood in direct opposition to Domination because Love represented a weaker ethic than self-interest. I felt as if Love would never "win" as many of its proponents had declared it would. I no longer concern myself with such a proposition, for it is based on a misguided assumption: that Love and Domination are in direct opposition. In fact, Love and Domination rarely oppose each other. Within the domain of our daily interactions in the world, but particularly with other human beings, Domination and Love are two of many playable strategies in a continuous "game" of interactions. Within the market of available players, Domination selects opponents who appear "weaker" than itself to exploit them. If Life were a tournament of single elimination events, Domination would be the de facto winning strategy, unquestionably. Early on in the evolutionary tree, however, Life introduced memory, developing the capacity for recognition, and, coupled (in the animal kingdom) with motility, for response.

Love is such that when it (through intelligent being) recognizes the strategy of unheeded generosity being played by another, it remembers to return to itself (or rather its embodiment in the other) in the future. When Love does reach into the world and encounters Domination, it identifies its opponent's features; it learns to avoid them. As Love accumulates for itself a network of interdependencies, it returns to the world less and less. From the

vantage of Domination, Love has made itself scarce. To Domination, Love has become fiction; Love has "lost". Love, meanwhile, rests in the security of the network it maintains. Love "wins" because Love's burden is light. Domination "loses" because it must restlessly affirm its reputation within social hierarchy; rest is, in fact, the end of its existence.

I tend to think of healing as a regenerative process resulting from a wound inflicted upon the body. Empirically, it would seem that healing is the skin weaving itself back into form; it is inflammation residing; it is absolution from pain. I am "healed" when the site of my wound is no longer tender to the touch and its functionality is restored. I am "healed" when all that remains of history is scar tissue, when I am able to recite a cheery ode to my path forward. In all respects, this description is inaccurate. Healing is, in all cases, *generative*, as it is a process of life, but only in some cases is it *regenerative*. In my case, if the malignancy I have attempted to remove returns to prevalence, the objective of my healing will not have been met and so I will not be healed.

Healing, for me, has been (and will be) a particular type of effortful cultivation. It has been the process of establishing a new, unified conscience, which is not so instantaneous as recognizing the falsity in an opinion and correcting it. A belief as powerful as the Domination ethic has its grip deep within the ancient brain, manning the helm by delegating chemical secretions that dictate the way one feels (the undercurrents for what one thinks.) It is to be treated as a serious foe. Healing is not complete until it has seeped into the subconscious being where Domination presides. It is the subconscious, emotional being which must remove its own block to accept love. The subconscious must "embrace" its ego image so that, in closeness, the ego recognizes the body's "mindless" care (love). Then, recognizing the "unnaturalness" of its nature, the ego may surrender itself in the name of greater natural spontaneity.

It is tempting to believe I am healed because my pain has subsided. I remind myself that pain is the design of survival mechanisms, not mechanisms for prospering. I want to acknowledge that healing with such intentionality—essentially placing my life on pause—has been my profound privilege, for the time and focus required for such an internal retreat is by no means free. But healing has been the most beautiful and rewarding experience of my life. It has altered for the better not just the way I view myself, but how I experience life. The process of healing is a necessary transition for those entering the Love ethic by way of the Domination ethic. The healed individual is one who can begin to love.

Healing began for me three years ago, when I happened upon Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning* in a free neighborhood library which could have easily been mistaken for a birdhouse. I was healing when I was peddling about on the Tobacco Trail, and in my little reading sessions along New Hope Creek. I was healing in my walks from Mission Dolores to the duteous windmills standing guard of the Golden Gate Park entrance at Ocean Beach. I was healing when I fell in love with the spirit of New Orleans on my runs along Bayou St. John and through City Park amidst the sweltering July heat. I was healing while becoming acclimated to the daily creep of the Pacific fog up the Russian River valley, the hawks circling above and the distant voices of rodeo announcers carrying themselves gingerly up the side of Magic Mountain. I even found myself healing while marching toward evening sunbeams tilted by the shadows of the brownstones and willows along Willoughby Avenue in the direction of Fort Greene—my narrow sanctuary in the midst of Brooklyn.

It is possible I healed more in three days dwelling on the language of trauma than I did in multiple years attempting a comprehensive study of philosophy to "correct" my thinking. Once I integrated some of the memory

fragments which daily reinforced the vigilance in my nervous system—and experienced the explosion of reawakened memories and capacity for forgiveness immediately following that integration—the progress of healing began to feel significant, rather like the result of *treatment* than that of discipline. I find no reason to be apologetic for the stubbornness that prolonged my journey toward healing. I cannot return to the self who saw therapy as an existential threat. I doubt I would feel the same ownership of myself had I struggled less to lead him out of the wilderness. No, I am the greatest ally I have, and I was made resilient by the fires which triggered my serotiny.

Healing, for me, has meant reconnecting with the body I took great measures to separate myself from. Healing has also been a reconditioning of my voice, to speak with the authority that demands being heard. Healing has been discovering the space in which I am needed, the space which I can fill with love. Healing will be the process of rediscovering those whom I love, that I might love them with more ardor. It is with intentionality that I will relearn to love my mother, my brother, my sister, my father, and everyone I care for. Now comes the second mountain of my life. I will believe in the Love ethic until I no longer have to believe.

Love is my Project

Love is my project, my raison d'etre: my gift of Life for Life. As Prince Andrei[2] concludes in his moribund delirium: "Love *is* life"! Life—that constant assembly of chemical structures I so often take for granted as the basis for my reality. Our subjective affection for Love is, in a grand sense, a recognition of the scope of Life's interconnectivity. Love develops the ecosystem. Love slows and directs flows of energy, and it flourishes where it is accepted. When I accept Love, Love's potential meets my capacity, completing me. And Love is gracious enough to allow me to pay my debts out of my strength.

My recognition of Love is my consent for Life. When I choose to love I relinquish my individual freedom in order to extend myself, to extend Life. When I choose to love, I discover meaning in my activity—Love vehemently denies nihilism. Love remembers, as the body does, but it readily forgives. Finally, Love is made evident in care; it is the parent of all virtues; it is the natural virtue. Love, I choose to believe, is as untameable as Life itself; it will not be overcome by Man, or any intelligence, for I will secure it. Love will be my project. Love will be my determination.

[2] Taken from Tolstoy's War and Peace.