

Love is my Project

Carter Johnston

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 arrangement and tone.

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 philosophies 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.*

Preface

The most common advice I have heard given to writers is to “*write what one knows*”. I can certainly see why this is the general advice. It is the path of least resistance. When one knows, they need not doubt, and so the words pour onto the writer’s word processing document according to the natural rhythm and cadence of speech. The reader is allowed to suspend their belief that the words were ever painstakingly manufactured before striking their retina from the screen or, rather reckless for today’s age, from print. It is the imperative of the writer then to not only take up full-time residence in their imagination, but also to live life to its bounds—and have processed enough meaning from that life to have formed “wisdom”—so that the story they later manufacture, which intrigues its audience because it is larger than life, remains grounded in its realism. *Live first, write later*—a wise tenet for most, save for any writer of promise, of course.

When I began *Love is my Project*, I was twenty-nine and compelled to write. But despite having lived as many years, and having spent the better part of my twenty-eighth year conducting a global, rather surreptitious investigation across many ancient, many *enlightened* texts, I could not say, beyond the hesitancy of a doubt, that I knew anything at all. I was having for myself a *Descartes* moment. Like the cards of a house gone awry, I was collapsing rather momentarily into a heap upon the table—back to that radical square one; and not for the first time. I had attempted three times in as many years to write *something* significant. These ventures bore little fruit. I possessed a fateful gene encoded to doubt, the inheritance of which is of no difficulty to trace patrilineally. That gene had replicated so successfully, or rather, the circumstances of its propagation had been so amenable (nature versus nurture in this context is not to be discerned), anything I could create was nullified before ever reaching the page. Following the third failure, Doubt

(having developed adequate persona for a proper name) found only trace amounts of confidence remaining in his host for which to metabolize; Doubt then, in his insatiable haunt, became engrossed by —then obligated to consume—himself. Therein lay an opportunity for his host—to revive. But Doubt is not one to capitulate peacefully.

Here I sit for a fourth time to remember—just to remember—some historical episode of my own life and he fires off pulses of fear down to my adrenals. My gut sinks. My toes are burrowed into the ends of my shoes and pressed into the tentacles of my swivel chair. My chest tightens and protrudes forward in a position to run or to hide. He notices my stance, coolly stating the obvious: *“this is all rather ridiculous, isn’t it?”* I cannot formulate a thought, let alone an offensive. *“If you cannot think, therefore you are not”*, he scoffs, *“... Certainly not a writer”*. I will shut my laptop, having picked away at a few sentences, then I will bow to my oppressor. He is a critic, a Puritan (probably), a moralist (definitely). Above all, he is a romantic. He has bestowed in me a compulsory, unbounded imagination for “good” and an acute empirical awareness, or rather, *vigilance*, in order to find such “good” in the world. Doubt has a compulsive need to dominate the airwaves with his monologuing. I, fearing the casualties of *his* words, prefer to keep taciturn than to be his mouthpiece. He is reactionary, and does not take kindly to those few creative leukocytes probing about the (his, our) past. He has a defined agenda. Namely, to prevent me from having a semblance of identity. He is protecting me, of course. His methods are compelling, entangled as they are with reason, so I tend to comply. For my complacency he rewards me with rations of life’s baser pleasures: fried chicken (bread) and Instagram reels (circuses).

I often think of Descartes, not in association with his infamous deduction, *“cogito, ergo sum”*, but as a human being who, living in a world as

much my own, reveals through the painstaking nature of his meditations the agony in his confrontations with Doubt. He, however, could not adorn his superego with an antihero persona as I have. His superego/soul comandante had promised the prosperity of an afterlife, and was the cause of all that was good and none that was bad. This being the case, the stakes being what they were, Descartes—ego—was to bear the onus of doubt, and God—superego—omniscient as he was and is, was to be let scot free of the obligation of endowing his faithful servant with reassurance. If I may be allowed an ounce of conjecture (which I do not need myself, I know it in my bones) I would suppose that Descartes sought to find the basis of rationality knowing intuitively (ironic?) that this point of certainty, which he could always return to, armed him with a real chemical solvent to begin to alleviate the guilt accompanying his brewing fits of doubt. Descartes, too, was beguiled by the voice of criticism.

By taking on the project of discovering the key to rationality, Descartes found himself well-positioned to rescue both ego (portrayed as a heroic knight) and superego (the damsel God) from Doubt's (his deliberating self's) clutches. In taking on this burden he signaled his great mental fitness, and in God's reward in recognition of the act he staked all his hope for survival (post vitam). Floodgates upon the dopaminergic pathway could open once more; the voice of Doubt could be overwhelmed. In momentary triumph, the Meditations allowed for Descartes' being to be restored to equilibrium. But the moment must have been short-lived. The seed of rationality does not cure doubt; rather, it increases tolerance to it.

I have digressed. Whereas Descartes doubted because he had placed such high stakes on the afterlife—and this reward being, in fact, alarmingly immaterial—here in these pages I have placed a high wager on aligning myself with Love. Underlying both of these bets: the will to live beyond our Selves. From the fading nebulous of my childhood memories I recall feeling that Love, when it manifested, would be a sort of tropism that would develop and *complete* me; with it I would mature blissfully into the light of day. This was

hope. Along came doubt. I doubted that I had ever been loved in such a way as to trigger the development of *happily ever after* (or whatever that fantasy represented); thus, *my* soul comandante could not rest until he knew *precisely* what Love was and why it had not occurred in my case. Accompanying doubt, despair—for the quest for Love had involved many false turns which, at best, resulted in neglect, at worst, betrayal. With time, the intensity of despair lessened to a mere precautionary emotion. I carried on.

In my quest for Love I have been confounded by how others could find and fall and *settle* in love seemingly without trouble. By coming of age, there were weddings, then anniversaries. Love existed, though with increasing explicitness, not for me. Love continued to defy my passive interest, but as I have said, my need for Love impinged upon the existential drive, and so I tried very hard to be worthy of it. Only I did not *act* so much as I *thought*. The battle was carried out across the expanse of imagination. To claim victory I was to convince *myself*, via rational argument, of my own worthiness against all imagined uncertainty. The world was not cruel and pitiless; I was too proud to make such a rash claim. Rather, the empirical arguments put forth deduced a simple rational premise: my strengths were not, in reality, strengths. I had a particular aptitude for observing and processing the world. I listened before I spoke. I was never quick to anger (I did not know how to be angry). In fact, I internalized the entire emotional spectrum to the degree that “calm” was the most charitable superlative anyone could give me. But with the proper encouragement, I could come alive with a biting, witty humor. All of this being true—but because I could not completely possess myself, much less make serious demands on the attention of another, and the dynamics of power needing, necessarily, to be more or less settled for Love to persist—I was unlovable. I carried on.

I was raised in the Church. In the vacuum created after leaving it, I was primed to explore ethics and morals as rational rather than religious concepts. The pious, the good, the righteous—those who are the most agreeable, diligent, conscientious—they are the sowers who have the first right

to harvest a bounty of Love, no? By the time I had left the Church, my heart had already been formed by its persuasions. After a brief interlude of grief I returned to that former obsession of doing right by others. Effortlessly I heard the echoes “*love thy neighbor...*”, and, well, the rest of that commandment was of lesser significance. I was drawn into romanticism—for who solicits Love more than the poet, the playwright, the artist? But the romantics were bold in their maneuvers and were not exactly the most ethical bunch. My thought: the romantics pressed the pedal of their passions to full throttle, rarely utilizing their emotional breaks in pursuit of the Other or Others. Left unresolved: would I follow the path of passion or of empathy? Regardless, the romantics could write. I felt the power of their pens. I had always wanted to write, to possess that power—had always felt that I could, someday. Perhaps I could write with both passion and empathy, overcome my dilemma, and earn the love I sought to reap. I wrote a handful of poems in my university years hoping to satisfy the itch. Each was determined to express irreconcilable melancholy. Though they jived for their authenticity they failed to invoke romantic “success”. The drafts of these poems lacked any sense of personal satisfaction; their vulnerability was a source of embarrassment. I could hardly share them. My drive to write in a dominant mode persisted, though I failed to find within myself the identity which could express unbridled passion.

When I was no longer an undergraduate, I made my debut into the world as a lone agent ready to practice the art of love as it had been confusedly preached. I was late in this respect; nevertheless, I brimmed with optimism for the prospect. As it turns out, abrupt rises and halts to passion on overly sensitive moral grounds make for a terrible long-term reproduction strategy. I had not a clue what I was doing—only, I could give up neither portion of my character, and that was confusing to everyone. I demanded respect for both excellence and passion at least equal to my own. It was this way for many years. Then, in one summer marking the dusk of my twenties—a New York summer which was the parody of tragedy—I met the wrong person and convinced myself that she was right. It was refreshing to discover someone of

the mental constitution I prescribed. She showed me candor, passion, decency, also love; and if I'm being honest, I showed her the same. In the end, she determined she was for someone else. For weeks afterward I stared into the sun, stunned by my body's rejection of what had been my mind's prior dogmatic slumber. *How could Love be so naive?* I went to California. Inhaling the Pacific brought my murdered pride to a tranquil resting place. As my lungs filled with sea air, I was struck by a purpose for writing wholly selfish: the complete construction and maintenance of an ego, which, at that moment, felt a necessary project. Therapy. I was to start from nothing and express what I knew; create what I did not. I would love myself; I was the only person with the will to do it. But to love *anyone*, Doubt would have to be dispelled.

I returned to New York. And thus we have arrived where I began in the introduction: in the writer's seat engaged in a noisy inner conflict with Doubt. Stubbornly, I saw no other preoccupation worthy of my attention. If I did not manifest a fever in order to sweat him out, he would never take his own leave. I was vindictive. I began to write relentless attacks against him. As time went on, my writing improved and *my* voice found its own authority. I discovered what is obvious, I presume: writing resolves power to those who, at first, do not believe with their eyes, who must first fashion reality in their consciousness. In my written attacks I recognized that, no matter the rigor of my logic, nor the relative correctness of my facts, truth ought to be pursued exhaustively, *not* perpetually. I finally accepted imperfection. When I was employed in good writing I became exhausted by the effort, and Doubt was thrust to the perimeter of my mind—tomorrow's burden to be taken up with the morning's espresso. Writing was curing my nervous system. Doubt shriveled up a bit each time I completed the ritual. What a consequence of heartbreak!

To frame Love in terms of its physico-chemistry may appear, at first, to diminish it. But Love, afterall, is biological first, cultural second, and hence, beyond humanity, a determining force. It is possible—and probably correct—to associate Love with the behavior attributed to a handful of nonapeptides secreted from the pituitary. This does little to diminish Love, or its lack, phenomenologically. Biological ends (of first rank: fecundity, fitness) are complementary to the whole, at the very least satisfactory in explaining the currents which drive phenomenological Love. This is as good a place to start as any for those who suffer from the lack. I suffered for not having accepted the biological picture sooner. Having avoided familiarity until late in the writing of this book, it is, regrettably, hardly considered here.

Love is enmeshed within most every layer of the psyche. It is likely impossible to disentangle completely for oneself. Nevertheless, *Love is my Project* is precisely that attempt. It is an ego project that bends toward the discovery of Love. It is first—and primarily—a documentation of a period of mindful wandering, the result of which was a new conglomerative sense of Self. From there, it is an acknowledgment of philosophical first principles which, upon realization, provided structure for that conglomeration.

For a period of time I call *healing* (post-dogmatic slumber), I concentrated heavily on the modern French school of thought, unsurprising as it makes a point of emphasizing a positive psychology in spite of its agnosticism (which could not be said of the less recent rationalist school, always with a peculiar bend toward theism). The French provide redress to the young life crisis which brews today—and is presented, at least publically, far more satirically than it ought to be. I attribute to existentialism the personal breakthrough that it is ok, in fact *right*, to have and to operate with pride, one's ego. That is the French way—the reincarnation of the Greek way. It is the human way, though not, if I may be permitted to speak in generalities, the guised American way. Ego is a necessary good; necessary as the point of mass for radial (and radical) self-love. I have since moved away from

existentialism ideologically, though I remain of the opinion that its profound study may serve as invaluable—though rudimentary—therapy.

Love is my Project is an affirmation of both ego and self-love. It is first the account and ultimately the rejection of the ways and means of the “critic”: Doubt. For me, he is an internalized antihero with hands on the levers Fear and Anxiety. He stokes strategically the coals of heroism, or rather, a recognition of *self-worth*, only to re-engage those levers, dissipating the consequent flame. He values a sort of modesty and, more essentially, safety. Notably, despite having an imposing mental fortitude, he did not allow me the sort of mental *stability* to enjoy the fruits of a longitudinal love. *Love is my Project* is a long meditation toward the follow through of justice against the “critic”. This justice, ultimately, is my craving for a well-regulated mind—a phenomenological goal (and chemical fact) I continue to strive for each day. I have written *Love is my Project* not because I have lived, but so that I *can* live. When I can live (and here I mean authentically) I can love.

—CJ 10.10.24

Prologue

The month was June, the year 2021. I slouched over 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, beaded sweat accumulating on my scalp.

At the time I felt the rumblings of a story needing to be told—my story—and determined I would not let these physical elements deter me from conjuring the words. The words ached to commit themselves to the page. The problem, however, was that I found myself unable to fashion the causal nexus required to create narrative out of my recollections. These 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 would become a writer, or at least take a stab at acting the part, for by mastering the words I would become the master of myself. When I could read my story back, I would know who I had become. Alongside my protagonist, I could advance toward a better life.

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 rich. 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 reflective material that would typically span that summer's suburban windshield. 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 headset as if completely unaware of my presence.

He spread out his containers around my laptop, taking pains to prepare his meal properly. Delicately, he split packets of hot sauce over a half-eaten bowl of red beans and rice; next he drizzled a packet of plum sauce in a wave pattern over rotting pickled cabbage. The air surrounding our bench became stale with the pungent smell of vinegar in heat. I made to pretend as if none of this behavior phased me. 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 communications with two friends aboard a spacecraft orbiting close by. The origins of the spacecraft: alien. His name was Tom. Later, he would be joining his friends on their voyage to the Andromeda galaxy. Tom's eyes glistened as he recounted his last abduction experience. He reveled in the nostalgia. By the tale's climax the curtains hoisted revealing a cream colored, bifurcated grin. If there was but a single drop of doubt that could be titrated from Tom's blood, it would be measured in the parts per million. I could not help but smile along with him. Tom, or more so his demeanor, abruptly recontextualized my situation. Perhaps happiness was not so complex after all.

As cavalier as he had approached, Tom gathered his containers, placing them back in the trash bin, and was on his way with a single remark: "*Ya have a good one now*". I was left with a complex set of guilt-ridden

emotions: first for not having offered help to a man in obvious need, then for having been at first bewildered by a man as harmless as Tom, and finally, for exhausting my cognitive resources in the pursuit of a better self when most cannot afford to think through such things—and here, I had achieved next to nothing.

I drafted out the words “*I am afraid to write*” on the blank page; what began to flow was a poem based out of the realization that writing, for me, had taken on all of the potency of judgmental eyes—whose? I could not readily identify. Tom had reminded me that the proper negation of concern was unconcern; and this little incantation became a rational scapegoat: “*The words which cannot be rightfully spoken are no concern of mine!*” Though this neutralizing sentiment pursed the words’ cold lips, it did nothing to silence their murmuring. I needed more experience to resolve the narrative, if there was to be one, but so as not to see myself as a simple coward, I would shift my purpose 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, in due time, from taking proper aim with my sling. *I am Afraid to Write* was my first attempt; this is my last.

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, and later my body. For that I am proud.

—CJ 10.08.23

A Second Conception

From the years 2012 to 2016 I studied at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 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 so than most anyway. First, the liberal arts program offered me flexibility to satisfy a passion for literature. While I would scribble down discrete logical equations in the mornings, after lunch, I would read, and reread the lines which heralded John Donne’s memento mori: “*No man is an island*”. I would read Shakespeare’s plays in the undergraduate library. I even gave Milton a shot. When I did so, I would scan the room on occasion, anxious of catching a covetous glance: “*This is for class, I assure you all*”, I would mutter under my breath. And it was true. Only in a liberal arts program could one haphazardly splurge all over the course catalog in order to answer such questions as “*What would the rational econ do?*” while participating in a somewhat lazy entrepreneurship program, and still having access to highly coveted literature classes a la carte. I was fortunate to have a pragmatic plan A, though it was really plan B. Employers still valued youthful, logical minds, so I ground out a mathematics degree, cornicing it with my fantastical interests.

Underlying my gravitation toward literature was an admiration for the power of wit—and that to conjure up a romantic love. It was through literature that I developed feelings of nostalgia for a reality crafted by other hands. I believed that I, in spirit at least, was capable of living the lives my protagonists (and occasionally antagonists) carried out. Delving into literature was a means of exploring the rich emotions of the soul, and I, for one, had a

soul in need of exploring. On off days I exhausted my hand with the figures of aggregate supply and demand curves. Curve-crossing is hardly significant when your head is in the clouds, and mine happened to be far above them; on my off days I took up residence with the stars. At the time I was perplexed by the idea of relativity, the boundlessness of the Universe, and by the passage of time. Again, I have no one in particular to thank but the liberal arts program for allowing for such indulgences as a handful of astronomy courses which readily translated the fundamental mechanical questions into outright soul-conditioning predicaments with moral implications. 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 helpless victim.

I became obsessed with binding together relations of things. Curiously, as I had not taken to studying philosophy directly, I began to form a metaphysical system of my own. 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 faceless, though grateful. He or they or it would be there to accept my solution to the metaphysical problems plaguing (my own) life’s 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. But it was a good name. Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* had served as an addendum to my astronomical curriculum. I was an admirer of Stephen; he did not back down from the Universe’s most challenging concepts; and he concerned himself with 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. Another parallel: Stephen and I shared in a struggle against the influence of a body working against its fellow mind. It does not concern me 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”. 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 the life led inside my childhood home. A more charitable version of my home-bound 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 portions of my essence in meaningful places, in memories I would revisit, in songs I told no one about, in little bits of poetry, and lastly, in my ideas. Before my second conception, I undertook the project of making sure everyone in my life was shepherded within designated pens. Then, 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 penned—if they were to notice at all. I would meet their occasional curiosity for life in the other pens with warm deflection or sarcastic diffusion. The use of either of these tactics always prevailed. In this past life of mine, no one had shown me how to flourish. Naturally I was used to living under a thick forest canopy, finding my light between the shadows. In my second go around, I was a transplant under a new canopy, but all the same, I continued to strain toward the light in hard to reach places.

My development of the “*Theory of Everything*”, inconsequential to metaphysics as it turned out, was my attempt to create my own independent source of light. The “*Theory of Everything*” was an ego project which presumed no ego. That is *all* that it was. My aim to mold the world with only a handful of universalities belied the actual need to repair various shards of ego back to their original ceramic. Thus, it was an attempt at logotherapy with several skipped steps which I would have to rehash many times in the following decade. The fractured Self—the wounded Self—must be made to resolve narratively; if it cannot eventually unite, its operation is a malfunction.

I had hope that my life would resolve itself in its second conception. Actually, the second conception only revealed that the problem was not environmental, but inherent. *All* of my existing selves had developed as escape-minded situationists. They had a light presence. They were quiet but curious, generally uninvolved but nonetheless obliging. While satisfying the cravings of attention, they optimized for the relative safety of mysteriousness: “*one must not reveal all, for then they are had!*” The elevated degree of my undergraduate independence (a word I stretch considering my family paid for my education and was never further than 12 miles down the road) did not grant me the authenticity I desired. Instead, this independence marked the beginning of a decade (perhaps life-) long struggle to grasp a sense of authenticity, a struggle that would eventually lead me to Love.

Platonic Friendship: The Shadows on the Wall

In my undergraduate years I balanced studying with a moderate drinking habit. Chapel Hill was a college town. Our bar scene was the envy of our nearby rival colleges. *He's Not*—formally *He's Not Here*—was the stockyard on Franklin Street not only for undergraduates, but for anyone who could be charmed by seven foot spackled ceilings and 1970's beer advertisements (hung in the 70's), where the best stench one could hope for was of stale beer. We congregated at He's Not, I believe, for two reasons. The first being the fenced-in courtyard which was large enough to accommodate hundreds; thus, in making *the rounds*, the likelihood of coming upon a familiar face was near certain. Secondly, it was for the relative largess of He's Not's principal product: the Blue Cup. The cup was palmable, but only just. It was also stackable—and thus competition-signaling. The clean lines of white and Carolina blue lasered on its face endured many a beating from even the most iconoclastic of dishwashers. This cup, perhaps more accurately described as a small bucket, was five dollars per fill, its prideful impression upon the soul free of charge.

Once ascended from the courtyard up a rather unforgiving metal staircase, a small platform led inside through either of two outward swinging doors. These entryways were high-collision zones where, no matter if wits were near or far, spillage was unavoidable. Inside, in addition to the aforementioned low ceilings, huddled masses encircled wooden tables and chairs so haggard (but sturdy nonetheless) Hades must have been pleased by their wherewithal to cheat him. 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. Eight fledgling students allotted four rooms united by a common hallway and the strain of sharing a single bathroom stall. It was notable that, no sooner than an hour after settling into this new state of affairs, our families and loved ones having vacated the premises, a meeting at the Qdoba round table was called. At Qdoba we held the purchasing power of kings; every taco we ordered was \$1 with the purchase of a medium-sized soft-drink—this, on account of it being the student “week of welcome”. Being no slouch, I handled four tacos with relative ease. Alex and Andrew did the same. Brian had downed six before I had ventured upon my third. Jimmy was missing in action, though this was atypical. adjourned having tacitly agreed that we would be each other’s quasi-family for a year, or two, or three, or perhaps for the rest of our lives. We ate together. We worked out together. We went out together. I was the runt of our family. I was not the most athletic, nor the brightest. I was not good looking—my body having clashed with puberty at every opportunity it had—nor was I charismatic. In fact, I was invisible in every way imaginable except that I was there: a boy, very simply, in his thoughts. Having little to offer but a bodily presence, I was the subject of much of the play-bullying amidst this new cohort. Jokes slid off of me like water; and though not exactly constructive, I enjoyed these little quips. They brought me bits of attention I could package nicely.

I considered it my role to continue stoking the fire of our *esprit de corps*. That was instinct: clocking into the engine room, where I was most comfortable, caked in sweat and soot, reading pressure dials and shoveling more coal atop the embers inside the firebox (my steam engine metaphors are as extensive as my memory of Disney’s short, *The Brave Engineer*, and perhaps it shows). I needed our wheels to keep turning. And, for reasons which could hardly be attributable to me, they never stopped turning.

The idea of friendship, for me, resonated strongest when it took the form of dialogue exchanged across a dining table. I thrived in late-night, post-dinner conversation. I found other notable resonances in the midst of a walk, in passenger and driver seats, on park benches, where our eyes might meet on occasion but otherwise rest naturally at some distant point—this in reaction to the minor strain at the axes of hips and neck due to the wrought iron or perhaps treated timber and its limitations upon the lateral knee. In these settings the contents of character may be expressed and analyzed between two, perhaps even three, but never more. The quality of talk degrades into the general as the limit of the conversation's number approaches four. Any higher than four and it would require an act of God (or, at the very least, a most unfortunate disaster) for folks to be so viscerally aligned as to speak vulnerably with the group.

Trust requires a monopoly on time. Isolate myself to more likely procure these sorts of situations. So I looked to generate moments of isolation.

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."

