

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.*

Prologue

The month was June, the year 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, beads of sweat accumulating on my scalp.

At the time I was feeling the tumultuous 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. The problem, however, was that I found myself unable to fashion the 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 these words to task. I would become a writer, 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. Then, by familiarizing myself with my protagonist, 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 following. Tom seemed genuinely happy, and his life appeared to have an intrepid sense of direction. Tom, or more so his demeanor, abruptly recontextualized my struggle—perhaps leading oneself was not *supposed* to be a struggle.

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 guilt-ridden emotions: first for not having offered help to a man in obvious need, then for having been 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, 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 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 quieted the murmurs emanating from behind the words’ pursed lips it could do nothing to silence them. I needed more experience to resolve the narrative, but so as not to see myself as a simple 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, in due time, 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, and later my body. For that I am proud.