

*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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 temporarily, but I found myself unable to commit my attention to them completely—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.

