

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 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 sat slouching 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, 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. Thereafter, 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 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 covering 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. Delicately, he split packets of hot sauce over a half-eaten bowl of red beans and rice; then 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 summer 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 radio communication with two friends aboard an alien spacecraft orbiting close by. His name was Tom. Later, he would be joining his friends on their voyage to the Andromeda galaxy. Tom’s eyes began to glisten as he recounted his last abduction experience; he reveled in nostalgia. At the tale’s climax curtains hoisted revealing a cream colored, bifurcated grin. I could not help but smile with him. If there was but a single drop of doubt that could be titrated from Tom’s blood, it would be necessary to measure on the scale of parts per million. Tom, or more so his demeanor, abruptly recontextualized my struggle—perhaps carrying 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 with a single remark:

“ya have a good day 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, 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 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.

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.

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 lived by another, 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”. 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 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 held captive. I would meet their occasional curiosity for life outside of the pen 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. 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. But that is *all* that it was. My aim to understand “universal truths” belied the actual need to bring together a fractured I. 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, or else it cannot function properly; it begins to break down.

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!* My independence (a word I stretch considering my family was never further than 12 miles down the road) did not grant me the authenticity I desired. Instead, independence marked the beginning of a decade (perhaps life-) long struggle to approach life authentically, a struggle that would eventually lead me to Love.

