

The Streets Around Here Tell You Exactly Where You Are

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Abstract

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This is a series of reflections on pain, meaning making, memory, the body, and God. Through an exploration of significant personal encounter and the ways it intersects with global or distant calamity, I ask questions about how to locate God in a world full of ambiguity, chaos, and apparent senselessness. I search for Him in tsunamis, in war, in homelessness, in trauma. I interrogate the relationship between a loving sustaining force and the body's fragility, and what that fragility means in the context of redemption and eternal life. Above all, embedded in each essay is the question, "What can writing do?" In a world where suffering is all around us, why write? In what ways can words draw people to live more fully, bring them into closer communion with others and the divine? Can writing give us any answers? Should it?

Contents

Exactly as it Is, 1

East and West, 4

No Object, 10

Things We Don't Remember, 13

Names, 17

Nowhere Close, 23

For Margarito, 26

Regarding Words, 32

Afterword, 42

Poetics, 45

Works Cited, 55

Acknowledgments, 56

Exactly as it Is

I watch footage of disasters on the nights when I can't sleep. The waterline receding, the naked beach. The microphones are too flimsy to capture the roar, and so there is the sound of static, and people looking to the distance, innocent and still, for a moment longer, ignorant. They say, "What is that?" On the horizon, there's the foamy wall of water, coming quicker than you'd think, as the displaced ocean forms a massive tidal bore.

Sometimes, I think, This whole created world was one botched job. The breath across the waters, the mountains shuddering upward from the deep. It doesn't sound anything like this craggy, faulted place. What could you call good about Hurricane Irma, 9/11, Mt. St. Helens, or Zyklon B?

These days we can measure just how bad things are. Disaster is so common that we've developed metrics. Take, for example, 2004, Boxing Day, Sumatra-Andaman: 9.1. The plaque at the Aceh Tsunami Museum reads, "We do not have to know the victims to understand the anguish of a man who lost his wife, a mother who lost her son, a child who has been orphaned or a family still searching for missing members, hoping against hope that somehow somewhere they are safe."¹

It's true, perhaps, that we do not have to know. It's also true that we cannot know. The suffering is larger than the mind allows. It's easier to mourn a single bird that falls than it is to mourn 227,898 people swept up, slammed into cars, the ground, chunks of houses, each other. Easier, I think, a starving starling than a man who spends his final moments purple head-to-toe from total-body bruising.

¹ Lee Hsien Loong, *In Memory of those who Perished in the Earthquake and Tsunami, 26 December 2004*, Aceh Tsunami Museum, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

That day in 2004, with the earth thrown off its rotational course, we moved a centimeter away from where a just world would be. Once when I couldn't sleep I tried to take inventory of everything I've known since then and compare it to what might have been. I blanked at this task as much as at the number of deaths. It's impossible to reposition 13 years, to reanimate all the bodies. So I did it as best I could, piece by piece, starting with the most familiar. For example: my first kiss, a little to the left.

From my perspective, of course, everything in that moment would have been the same. The playground would be dark. We could still see our breath. There would again be no clouds, and so the stars would still be pinpricks in the sky. Yet from the stars' perspective, so far off you couldn't see me, it would all be happening slightly somewhere else. Then take what actually was and what should have been: two identical frames, juxtaposed, with just a little blurring, a centimeter's worth, from the transposition. In that same image, on the other side of the world and unbeknownst to me, is a man who has both loved and lost his wife, a woman who holds her living son and mourns him, a child with and without her parents, a family that never started and still is searching.

That is how I conceptualize the soul: By looking at everything exactly as it is, except a little different. The world by itself is giant, bereft of meaning. It's a puzzle where the pieces do not fit together, a promise of sense where there is none to be made. The world ensouled is the other, identical, imaginatively repositioned image. Or, rather, it is the world in its original position, having not yet moved away from where it started.

I don't mean that I don't believe the soul exists or else there would be no disaster. I also don't mean that the ensouled world could be rewound such that no one ever died. What I do mean is that the big questions we ask—Why do bad things happen? Where is

God?—are a reaching through the things that are to what we know that things should be. The reaching is simultaneously the blur between the first and second image and also the evidence we have, thus positioned in the first image, of the existence of the second. That is where we find beauty: in the imaginative leap between what is before us—the mundane, the ugly, the bruised, the dying—and the perfect thing that once redeemed it could be. And so I suppose that what I really mean is that sorrow is the necessary starting point from which beauty, which is at its best a hope in what our sorrow promises, is made possible.

This answer is not satisfying. When you're stuck within the first frame, there is nothing comforting about the possibility of the second. It is an easy way to sidestep a giant, messy form of suffering in which I only have a small stake. I return in thought to all the bodies of Sumatra-Andaman, a third of whom were children. It would seem that beauty by my definition should be commensurate with sorrow. I have to believe that that is true. In the absence of salvation—complete salvation, redemption equal to the distance we have fallen from it—art, and everything, is useless. Yet: 76,000 kids, all killed within 2 hours. Can anything be made beautiful about that?

East and West

Recently I've been going through old notebooks. An entry dated 31 August 2016 (my 22nd birthday, which marked 10 days since I moved from Washington, DC, to Seattle, Washington) says this: "There's a difference between the east and the west. The DC sky doesn't pretend to be smaller than it is, which is why you can only see a little of it. The Seattle sky is big, but big like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: magnificent, but you know its limits, and that you are trapped beneath it." More than a year later, I still know what I meant when I said that, and I still would be hard-pressed to explain it.

It's not that I believe the atmosphere to be somehow lower here than in the east (although on rainy days the heavy clouds could be enough to prove me wrong), or that I believe the eastern sky to be more "natural." It's not that I think the east more beautiful or that I believe the west to be beautiful only in an artificial sense. None of these get at the heart of what I'm saying. Maybe I should illustrate.

Just a few days after disembarking the plane at SeaTac, I found myself standing for the first time on the corner of 9th Avenue and Marion Street, where I could see, sloping downward, the extent of the city, 12 blocks down to the water, and then across, and then the far bank, and then, beyond that, even more buildings, crowded houses, sloping upward. Even farther still were mountains, which seemed to be the final limit of the entire world, snow-capped and sharp, a stark division between land and sky. It was as though I could see everything, behold the world in its entirety, all creation, each wonder, every mystery.

It is not the same in the District. On the corner of 16th and K Streets, the White House, just 4 blocks away, is barely visible. When I worked in Dupont Circle, I could not see my place of work until I was less than a block away from it. The field of vision is smaller

because the city was built not on a hill, but rather on a marsh, lowlands, a flat plane. Stretches of blocks are regularly partitioned off as a presidential motorcade races by with sirens and unmuffled engines and then is gone as quickly as it came, disappeared again, leaving everyone with a vague and inarticulable question. Even the history, the paving over the wetlands, whispers at the fact that there is something hidden from view. There are no mountains, no secrets of the universe, unless you count a creek or patch of stringy trees. Only rarely can you find a breathtaking landscape. And yet the boringness of the place is where I learned best how to wonder. The place is inscrutable, unknown until you've already happened upon it, and only then tangibly, in pieces.

*"Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed."*² So says Henri Bergson in *Creative Evolution*. Seattle is a newer place than anywhere on the East Coast, in every sense. As the millennia dragged by in the east, the winds wore down the Appalachian Mountains, rounding them and bringing them low, until even the tallest of them was just a large hill. They have endured the centuries and so been stooped by them. Once they held the shining Chesapeake, then saw it pillaged of its ecosystem, turned into a sludgy brown. They watched as the White House was built, then burned, then built again. On their shores came the Irish in their droves, those sick and starving masses. Their horizons held the Twin Towers, and then in a blink they didn't again. On them battles were fought and lost and won, and people killed, and people saved, and in their foothills I was born.

Like the mountains, like the trees, like the buildings and the fires and the battles, time inscribed me into my place of birth, and time inscribed that place into me. I was never

² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911): 16.

just myself, always a composite of the things that led to me, and so will I, in time, become a part of a greater mosaic that inscribes and imprints itself onto others. The world and its history are the pen with which time writes and revises itself, the way the story continues even when each individual loses his or her ability to tell it.

It's been a source of puzzlement to find myself here, in Seattle, 2700 miles away from the context in which I make sense, from the place where there is nothing new. Here in place of architectural obelisk is the Needle, which disrupts the city skyline no less than the jagged mountains disrupt the natural landscape. Here I look outward on my commute from work and see the hulking Mount Rainier, so awesome and exaggerated that it's almost funny, one of nature's jokes. Everything feels, in one way or another, fabricated, though I couldn't pinpoint exactly how or why.

Let me tell you how I first came to believe in God. I still lived in DC and had spent half a year cut adrift after graduating college and after my first sex-change operation, a subcutaneous mastectomy. During those months, my family barely spoke to me, and I spent the majority of my time alone. My clearest and most punctuating memory from that time was December 24, 2015, when my father made me walk home from Christmas Eve Mass because he couldn't stand to be in the same car as me.

I had made it a goal to read two books a week, hoping to finish each on the same day: one "morning book," which I read upon waking and through my morning commute, and one "night book," which I read on the evening train ride home and until I fell asleep, usually drunk. I more or less adhered to this structure. I started new books on Sunday and tried to finish both by Saturday, even going as far as saving the last page of a book so that I could read it, along with the final chapters of the other book, on the same day. Perhaps

the week which tells the most about my general psychological state during this period was when I read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in the morning and the *Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn at night.

It was May or early June. I skipped work that day because I had an early afternoon train to catch to Baltimore. I took the same commute into Dupont Circle, but instead of heading south in the direction of the office, I ventured eastward to 17th and Q, another place which has inscribed itself into me and into which I am now inscribed. I sat on the patio of Java House, in the shade under the awning, and pulled out *Come Be My Light*, by Teresa of Calcutta, which was the one book that had taken me longer than a week to read. I had been trudging through it piece by piece for two or three weeks, a few pages here, a few pages there, and was determined on this day to make some headway. As I read, the sun began to move in the sky and the shade receded, until the white of the pages was too bright for me to focus on for longer than a few seconds, and so, closing the book, I looked up.

Truth be told, I couldn't tell you exactly what passage I had just been reading, or what exactly I saw upon closing the book. I could tell you that there was a public bench a few yards away from the patio, situated next to a trash can. I could tell you that I could see across the street Fox & Hounds, a bar which I frequented in those days. But those are general features of the landscape, ones I know to always be there. I don't know if there was anything remarkable happening that day. All sensory input was eclipsed by a change not in my sight but in the impulse motivating my sight. It was like, when at the eye doctor, he finally flips down the lens that is my exact prescription; or like when, after trying and failing to shut a ZipLoc bag, the plastic tracks finally click into place; or as though I didn't know I was looking out a foggy window until the steam suddenly receded; or as though . . .

There is no exact metaphor. There was a moment, and there was a change. And now I live in Seattle. I still believe the things I wrote, about the difference between the eastern and the western sky, but I believe them differently. Like my belief in God, my transcontinental move happened suddenly. I was an atheist, and then I wasn't. I lived in DC, and then I didn't. I was in both cases transported abruptly into new territory, where everything appears made, put in place.

This much is true:

Once I went to sleep, and woke to find my body wholly and irreversibly changed. Once, standing on a hill, I looked out upon a place I'd never seen and thought I understood the entirety of creation.

Once I went to a place I've known since the beginning and found inside it as the shade receded something new.

It's all different, but it's all the same. This wonder at a sort of newness, this stupid and myopic familiarity.

Again, from Bergson: "Real duration is that duration which gnaws on things, and leaves on them the mark of its tooth. If everything is in time, everything changes inwardly, and the same concrete reality never recurs."³

Time has gnawed away and left its teeth marks in me. Some of these are literal: changes in my body, scars. Some of these are metaphorical: finding similarities between two realities that once I thought bore no likeness to each other, the east, the west. The two are not so far apart, and both are the other's mirror reflection. The smallness of the east hints at what's hidden beyond the seen. The bigness of the west begs you to look

¹³ Ibid, 46.

more closely at what's right before you. And my body, the prism through which I've filtered everything I've ever known, is still a mystery.

The way we know that things exist is because both our understanding of that thing and the thing itself constantly change. The thing that is the oldest and the closest can always be found entirely new. Everything that is can flow. Something happens once, for all, and then we reap its fruits for all eternity. In this way it comes back to us; reality is collective, composite, folding over on itself. Everything is distinct and whole and runs together, everything a member, everything a body. The change is the reality and the reason we will never grasp it. There's nothing in the world that has ever been redeemable, and nothing in the world was ever not redeemed.

No Object

If the tracker can be trusted, we are just above Montana. Though darkness surrounds the plane, I can still see where a nameless mountain range ripples the earth below, contoured waves of white and streaks of bare, black rock, the peaks aloft, the valleys shadow.

Here and there among the mountains are lights at irregular intervals. They seem from here to be small fires, blinking in the charcoal landscape, a white that makes the snow seem grey by contrast. It takes me a moment to realize: These are not fires. Somewhere down there are isolated houses, where inside people live remotely and alone.

To the north, the speckled lights appear in closer and closer clusters, until on the farthest horizon, there's an entire illuminated grid, a Milky Way of stars upon the earth. It is so large and bright that I cannot tell whether it is a city or just a small town, unreal against the backdrop of mostly undisturbed darkness, except for the lonely sparks that punctuate the mountains.

The world is mostly places few will ever see. Even here, where one house is so distant from the next, is exceptionally dense. Most of the earth, and even more of the universe, is comprised of places that will never know a lightbulb, and places where there is no one to want to use them.

Take, for example, the ocean: limitless to the human mind, the dark, the deep. Even this is small to the uncaring vacuum of space, the way the boring water moves its massive tons in patterns giant and predictable, or how a deep-sea diver could casually find himself being crushed beneath its weight, bubbles in the bloodstream, then the pressure calibrating, the air rushing out of and water rushing into the lungs.

Ships traverse its surface, and at night their sternlights carve highways of illumination that disappear into themselves, which, but for the moment they impart themselves upon the waters, are irrelevant. Not much farther down, there is no light at all, aphotic, abyssal, and that is the world in almost its entirety. This is nothing if not evidence that our world is absolutely and irrevocably alone.

Sometimes I picture myself diving into that smaller darkness. I picture myself miles below the surface of the ocean, where the only light is farther downward, at the earth's heated core, an inward and sustaining sun, as though the entire ocean might be made of it, so bright it blinds us to it. I wonder at this desire, to see, to touch, as though by diving deeper I can know it through proximity. As though the darkness is a thing I can see better by surrounding myself with it. As though, once reaching the incendiary heart, the darkness would cease to exist. As though I could preserve myself from burning.

I'm wrong, of course. The world is better known through panorama. We can never know a thing if we lose ourselves to it. The closer we come to touching it, the more we burn away. To know it is to become it; when we find it, we bear little likeness to the thing that did the searching.

From the height of the plane, at a distance safe and far removed, I know the mountains because they lack immediacy. I can see them in their entirety, which somehow makes them seem smaller. There is no wonder here, no heat or cold, no vastness. Sight and feeling are so distant, they can hardly ever touch.

*The things of time are in connivance with eternity.*⁴ This life is one of tactile anesthesia. There is no mystery that cannot be solved by what is already here. To see the light is to lose what casts us into darkness. The goal is heat that has no object, a kingdom that has come. So we wait and watch and want to be enkindled, until the world becomes a Word, a story that repeats itself, unfolding, guiding us along and making us the way. So we jibe along the murky surface. Let the heavens lead us, hoping in that deep and distant shore, a place that's fogged by our forgetting.

⁴ Thomas Merton, "Epilogue: Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," in *The Sign of Jonas*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1953): 361.

Things We Don't Remember

Let the water cool. Mortar, pestle. Grind the green tea into matcha. A teaspoon in the mug. Whisk. I know the routine.

It's a delicate endeavor. If I wait too long, the tea will be cold. Too short, and the water burns the leaves, imparting bitterness. I haven't yet mastered this, though the evidence tells me that I've been practicing for months. I rarely remember this portion of my day, at least in the long-term. Perhaps it's because at this point, just after waking, my brain has yet to follow my body. Perhaps it's because the deluge of sensory data that floods me every waking second thereafter renders these quiet moments irrelevant. Yet over the weeks, the bag of loose green tea leaves has gradually diminished in fullness, emptying itself seemingly on its own, and each morning, there I am again, with a mug of matcha, sometimes bitter, ready to drink.

What is Life? What is Memory? More importantly, what bearing does the one have on the other?

In the movie *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, a man suffers from a brain tumor, which gradually erodes all his memories, until his experience of the world becomes a surreal tapestry of threads that don't, when woven together, make any sense. The man, Bill, buys groceries over and over again, until they've piled up in his apartment, and each time, he wonders who keeps buying his groceries for him. He finds himself wearing slippers he doesn't remember ever owning. He wakes to strange wet spots on his bed. Meanwhile, a narrator reveals the movements of Bill's mind to the viewer. He says,

Bill dropped his keys on the counter and stood there staring at them, suddenly thinking about all the times he'd thrown his keys there before and how many days of his life were wasted repeating the same tasks and rituals in his apartment over and over again. But then he wondered if, realistically,

this was his life, and the unusual part was his time spent doing other things.⁵

Life is mostly boring. Even at its newest, when I was young, I remember long summer days that seemed to duplicate themselves, where I slipped into a sort of trance that moved me through the heat of June, July and August, and dropped me into September, as though there were only a blink between the spring and the autumn. I remember listening to the Top 40 radio station with my brother, lying on our stomachs on the concrete floor in the basement, which was the coolest part of the house. I remember hearing song after song, which seemed to (and, considering the station, probably actually did) play on loop. I remember these things generally—no specific moments, just an absolute certainty that they happened.

It's strange to me that the act of repetition can make us remember things simultaneously better and less. Better, because the more we fire those neural pathways, the more we reinforce and strengthen them. Less, because in so doing, we smooth out the details, gloss over variation, create a generalized composite of a series of distinct and at least partially unique events. This is the root of "practice," as in sports, as in music. When we rehearse something, over and over again, we come closer to replicating an action in the same ways we have done it before, drill it into precision; yet, every time we practice something, it becomes less likely that we can recall an individual time we performed it.

For example, every day until his health no longer permitted it, my aunt would take my grandfather to the mall. Then there would be an hour every day of talking to him, then another hour of afternoon tea. Though he is now in the late stages of Alzheimer's

¹ ⁵ Don Hertzfeldt, *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, directed by Don Hertzfeldt (2011; New York: Bitter Films, 2012), DVD.

and unable to leave the house, it seems to me that back then, the regimented structure of every day helped him “practice” the act of living. “It’s good,” my aunt said, “to establish a routine for him, to make sure he’s still connected with the world.” I can only imagine what it was like for him to get into the car each day, while with every passing moment, he gradually and imperceptibly remembered less and less why he was there; to listen to conversations about topics that seemed more and more to evade him; to drink tea without recalling having prepared it. My aunt, however, was right: Though his mind gradually lost its ability to retain specificity, the act of repetition slowed the disease’s progress, kept him cognizant and grounded for much longer than expected. Given a prognosis of 1.5 to 2 years, he is still, for now, alive, 4 years after the diagnosis.

I didn’t know how to end this essay. What is Life? What is Memory? More importantly, what bearing does the one have on the other?

This morning after making tea, I lost my shoe. It is a shoe I wear almost every day, which is evident because I never remember putting it on and am careless about where I take it off. Like the tea, it is so embedded in my daily life that it is easy to forget.

Then, almost out of nowhere, I remembered a moment from many years ago, when my grandfather, after misplacing his keys, turned to me and said, “You know what we say now? We say, “Tony, Tony, please come around. My keys are lost, and can’t be found.” I was far too young then to know who “Tony” was, that my grandfather was invoking someone simultaneously dead and still alive. But looking for my shoe this morning, I heard my grandfather’s voice, as clear as if he were in the room with me. I had not thought about this moment in years, perhaps even since the moment it happened. These days he cannot form

complete words, let alone remember prayers. But it was as though the parts of my grandfather that have already passed away came back to me, as though, having lost the parts of him I once knew, he instead sought me out and found me.

Maybe Life and Memory are these: the things we do that we will never remember, yet which come back to us in dreams, in projections. People we recreate in the mind, people we never know until a while after. Moment upon moment, constant, mostly senseless, washing us up on the shores of now. A picking up, a leaving off. A cycle of losing, and then finding—of being lost, then being found.

Names

It was a sorry list this year, and long. The rain came down in sheets as we stood gathered in the Cathedral courtyard, all dark except a single overhead light. There was no cover anywhere, and so clusters of people huddled under shared umbrellas. The readers rushed through the names, skipping some on accident in their hurry. The whole thing must have taken all of twenty minutes, the pace only slowing as we lingered on the two unnamed:

Baby Boy A.

Baby Boy J.

At measured intervals, the bell tolled.

This happens every November. The parish community comes together to commemorate the homeless who died in the streets during the past twelve months. We read the names as we know them, we stand and listen, we ring the bell. Some time in the coming months the names are published in the *Seattle Weekly*, or maybe the *Times*. Left unsaid at the service, though listed in the newspaper, are the causes of death. They are many and predictable: cirrhosis of the liver. Heroin overdose. Multiple stab wounds. Complications from HIV. Sepsis. Blunt force trauma. Lung cancer. Asphyxia. Malnutrition. Suicide by gunshot. Hypothermia from a night spent sleeping on the concrete.

This November, I had been working in the soup kitchen run by the Cathedral long enough to know that this event is not intended for kitchen guests. For example, one guest, Rosemary, did not attend the service. She couldn't bear to—she knew and loved 6 of the 133 people counted among the dead. Her pain is not unique. Everyone we serve at the kitchen for any length of time knew someone, either in this year's 133 or last year's

87 or both, and everyone wonders how this year there could be so many more. Everyone braces for the winter, when the bodies fall with the temperatures, and when we get the inevitable news, we are always saddened, but never surprised.

This event is held for everyone who does not have to remember on any other day of the year. It is meant to enkindle in us a sense of emergency. It invites us to recognize the ugliness that is hidden in plain sight all the time, the ugliness we walk past, the ugliness it is easier to ignore. We look at each other, and at ourselves. We look at the ways our actions and our inactions create that ugliness within ourselves and around us. We hear in the names an indictment against ourselves, as well as an invitation to work together, so that next year's list will be shorter.

Next to me, Dennis, who once saw a thirteen-year-old shoot a twelve-year-old for money, fidgeted. "Hell," he said. "I need a smoke."

When I take the time to think about it, it surprises me both how close to and how far from homelessness we are. How we're often so near to them that we could touch them. How their proximity makes it easy to believe they're not really there. How it's not so hard to picture losing a job, or having one too many bills. How somehow every month the bills will still get paid. How if not for houses we would all be living outside. How so many in this city sleep in tents for fun, in the Cascades in the summertime.

A friend who spent a summer homeless once told me that the worst thing about being homeless is that no one sees you. A friend who's currently homeless says the opposite: Everyone who sees you is someone you'd rather not be seen by.

I see many of them twice a week, across a counter. They walk by in a line, and I ask them if they'd like the fruit salad. From 4:15 to 4:45, we serve anywhere between 125

and 230 people. At the beginning of the month, the number is closer to 125, because more people still have money left in their monthly assistance checks. At the end of the month, we spread the portions a little thinner to make sure everyone gets a meal.

There are a lot of regulars. There's the woman who never makes eye contact who knows I know to tell the person serving the entree that she gets the vegetarian option. There's Elise who would walk by very slowly until her back problems no longer permitted her to stand, who now has someone carry her food to her. There's the man who gets mad when we don't remember that he can only eat soft foods, because he has no teeth. There's Bluebeard who has a blue beard. There's Dennis who lost both his daughter and his money to cancer. There's Pancho who worked construction until an accident crippled his right arm, who asks us all to pray for him. There's George who was waiting for his new bifocals when I met him and who, when he finally got them, told me he didn't recognize me. There's Stuart who's a genius when he's on his meds and compulsively paces with his rolling backpack when he's off them. There's Carlos who finally started A.A. and says he's real about sobriety this time. There's Rose who writes a blog and misses her cat. There's Ozz who busks and has a sign that says, "Donate to the Ozz Cause." There's the man who thinks we're accusing him of stealing when we ask him if he'd like a dessert. There's Gabriel who came in drunk the other day and passed out with his face in a pile of rolling tobacco. There's Cici who only ever responds by saying, "What?" There's the woman who in a manic episode once took off her shirt and flashed a group of police officers. There's George who thinks the Freemasons control society and only ever eats the raw foods—salad, fruit. There's Randy who is very proud of his military service, who carries trays to people who can't walk before he sits down to dinner. There's the short man whose English consists only

of the words, "Thank you very much." There's Chris who can't describe how it feels to meditate except that it's like what happens to a rock once it breaks the surface and sinks down deep beneath the water.

There are those who come only for a day or a week or a month. There are the ones who can't speak English. There are those who are too mentally ill to communicate.

There are also those who come every day, who suddenly don't anymore. For example, there's Aaron, an older man who wore a boater hat and suspenders and had bulky plastic glasses that were too big for his face. He told me he'd been coming to the kitchen for close to fifteen years. When he wasn't on his medication, his anxiety was so bad that he could only ever respond to people by saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." On good days, he used to greet me, "Mr. Dylan!" until one day he stopped coming.

It could be that next November, Aaron's name will be on the list of those who died. It's certain that next November, I'll read others.

On Wednesdays in the kitchen, an hour before dinner, we set up a table in the back of the dining hall. We drag chairs around it and then lay out a pile of notebooks and pens. Then we wait to see who will show up that day. On any given day, five to ten people come, some for the whole time, others for just a few minutes. We're all there for the same reason: We want to write, and we want to write with each other.

The first day we ever arranged to host the writing group, a woman sat down next to me at the table and wouldn't tell me her name. Instead she grabbed the Sharpie on the table and a notebook, and wrote my name on the cover. Then she began to trace her hand. She said, "Look, I'm tracing your hand, Dylan." She looked at me and examined my

fingernails the way they're bitten to the chase, and drew those as well. She etched in the wrinkles of my knuckles and the freckle on the back of my palm. Then she began to repeat everything I said after me.

"Thank you, everyone, for being here today."

"Thank you, everyone, for being here today."

"I'm Dylan."

"I'm Dylan."

"I'm glad you all could make it."

"I'm glad you all could make it."

She did this for about five minutes, until she very abruptly froze. She sat silently for a moment, and then she got up and left, keeping the notebook and the Sharpie. I have seen her since but still have not gotten her name. In the moments when I first met her, her name in some way really was my name. She is and, I think, always will be a person I cannot invoke without first remembering myself in her.

In the writing session that followed, Stuart, the schizophrenic genius, filled up two pages in ten minutes. When I asked if he wanted to share, he said, "I don't want to read it out loud. But you can see it." In his notebook, for two consecutive pages, he had written, "Fe Fi Fo Fum. Fe Fi Fo Fum." over and over. He said, "I'm a giant today. I climbed a beanstalk and then I fell from it. I was slain. That is how I got here."

That same day, toward the end of the hour, a boy about my age came in and sat down. I told him about the prompt we were working on. He answered, "Thanks, but I'll do my own thing for now." When time was up and everyone took the opportunity to read their

work, he said, "I wrote a letter to my grandma. I lost my phone a while back and couldn't get in touch with her to let her know I'm okay."

Nowhere Close

It's December, and the lilacs are still in bloom, but barely. I see them as the bus trundles past St. John Presbyterian, where a pushpin board says, "What's happening? You are welcome here."

All the streets around here tell you exactly where you are. On Fremont Avenue you're in Fremont. On Phinney Avenue you're in Phinney. On Greenwood Avenue you're in Greenwood. Where I'm from the streets are nothing like that. For example, on Pennsylvania Avenue, you're nowhere close to Pennsylvania.

St. John is, I think, the patron saint of brothers. First the brother of James, with whom he hoped to sit at the left and right of the Redeemer, until He asked them if they could ever drink His bitter cup. Then the adopted brother of Jesus, there at the base of the Cross in those final moments, when he watched his greatest friend bleeding from hand and head and foot, His ribcage crushing His lungs with every breath. After that St. John had no home anywhere and so took to wandering, far off from where he knew. I often think of him, banished and alone on Patmos, writing about broken seals and trumpets and blinding light and glooming darkness. Did he ever wonder why he, among all the others, was left to die in peace, only after his life had run its natural course? Could he forgive his Maker for refusing him the gift of martyrdom?

My brother shares his name. He is as I write this stationed in the south of Spain, where he works for the United States Navy as an officer in Explosive Ordnance Disposal. He was supposed to be back stateside by now, but the Department of Defense extended his time overseas until 2020. I don't know who was more crushed, my brother or my mom. I

have my own theories for why they are making him stay there, all of them involving impending war. The last thing he texted me was, “Fuck I miss America.”

He will be home for the holidays.

Death isn't always bloody. Sometimes it's rather clean. Sometimes it looks just like sleeping.

I don't know this experimentally. No one close to me has ever died. Not yet.

Sometimes I think about St. John's death, years after his adoptive mother was lifted upward by the angels, out beyond the firmament. Did anyone bear witness to his final breath? Who found the body? Did he leave his writing desk a mess, as though he might come back to it? Was it morning? Was it night? Did he have arthritis in his fingers? If it came to it, would he have thrown his body on a bomb?

Someone I know believes that Revelation was a premonition of the present day.

Take this passage:

The shape of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle. On their heads were crowns of something like gold, and their faces *were* like the faces of men. They had hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' *teeth*. And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings *was* like the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle. They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails.⁶

My friend believes that here, St. John was struggling to describe the Apache helicopter. I'm still young and like to think I have a lot of time left. I am also obsessed with death. I've met men who were younger than I am now who had their legs and arms blown off in Afghanistan. I haven't met the men for whom the IED struck closer.

Here in Seattle, where the streets and signs make sense, I am worlds away from war. Despite the obvious signs, the Boeing headquarters, the military bases, I rarely think about

⁶ Rev. 9:7-10.

the things that get decided on Pennsylvania Avenue. Instead, I am free to picture St. John dying peacefully on Patmos, never have to worry about the distance between Andalusia and Syria, or the maximum speed of the Apache helicopter.

In the last photo I saw of my brother, he and his friends were doing vodka luges from a golden rocket launcher. He seems to be doing fine. So I don't think about it. I think about the saints who weren't martyred, the saints who were assumed or died of old age. I think about the things they wrote and hope they don't depict the future. I don't think about war, and I don't think about its consequences, just as once there was a man who fled from supper because he thought he had to, crossing through that dimming threshold, out into the night.

For Margarito

Over several months I have accumulated a strange assortment of artifacts that I have found on the bus. I'm always taken by these things and wonder at the type of person who might have carried them, and why they were left behind. A tiny plastic cross with embedded pink rhinestones. A Book of Mormon. A single leather glove. A can of tuna fish. A tube of dissolvable electrolyte tablets. A pair of headphones. A hat.

Some of these have obvious explanations. It's not so difficult to imagine someone getting up in a rush at their stop, the glove falling out of the pocket, the headphones coming unplugged. These are the items for whom the explanation is easy, and so they are the least interesting. Others are somewhat harder to figure out. Was the Book of Mormon left there by some boy in a white button-up in the hopes of evangelizing a stranger? Or was it discarded by some person who never asked for it in the first place? Or, the strangest possibility: Was it forgotten by someone who was actually reading it?

When I take time to think about all the people in the world for whom items such as these are common, it seems that the sort of person with whom I surround myself is very narrow. The group whom I consider friends can't be an accurate sampling of all the breadth and variation found in people who occupy the same geographic space, let alone in the whole world. I think about the gaudy, rhinestoned cross, which might have broken off a plastic necklace. There must be such a demand for things like this that there is a whole factory in China dedicated to producing them, operated by yet another group of people for whom I feel, at this level of anonymity and removal, very little empathy. Who are these people?

One of my more recent finds on a bus was a pile of newspaper insert coupons. Newspapers and magazines and the like rarely capture my interest, and so I couldn't tell you what drew me to them. It could have been that I forgot my book that day, or that I had had too long of a day at work to retain anything that required close focus. In retrospect, it seems funny to me that I spend so much time constructing stories about strangers—the Mormon who planted the book, the woman with the rhinestone cross necklace—when I can't even offer an accurate accounting of myself. I seem to take so much of my life (How did I get here? What was I doing just before?) on faith. However, I do remember the coupons, and that is a fact I do not have to take on faith. They are, as I write this, sitting crumpled in my room somewhere, and I could point you to exactly what I found within their pages.

I flipped through the pages, only scanning most of them enough to take in the general meaning. We'll mow your lawn at a discounted rate. The best dry cleaners in town! Quick, reliable, and affordable pest removal. Everything seemed so boring. There was no space wonder why someone might have without a thought discarded these coupons on the bus—certainly I would have too, were it not for something my eyes fell upon just before closing the packet. There, at the bottom of one of the pages, with a yellow background, tucked so seamlessly in with the rest of the coupons, was an advertisement for a missing person.

The ad featured a boy, now a 23-year-old man, named Margarito Sanchez. He disappeared in March of 2011, which means that he's been missing now for 7 years. In the high school photo printed there he has a cleft lip and one eye that droops more than the other. Brown eyes, black hair. 5 feet, 4 inches. 135 pounds. Pierced ears. His smile

doesn't carry well in photos, seems plastic and posed. Next to it is an "age-progressed" picture of how he might look—if still healthy—at 18. For some reason in that picture they've removed the cleft lip and the lazy eye, perhaps because they know they're being optimistic: They might as well make him beautiful. HAVE YOU SEEN ME?

I couldn't then and cannot now bring myself to wonder about Margarito, couldn't possibly imagine what his disappearance might have been like. There's a gap in me where my imagination should be, an inability to extend myself beyond myself. What did he see in, if he's had them, his final moments? What is he seeing now if he has not? There's nothing for my mind to grasp on, no way I can know what those seven years might have done to him. Instead I ask the questions whose answers are closer and more familiar. I think about the loved ones and the people now bereft of him. What routine did Margarito break by not coming home? When did his mother start to grow suspicious? After how many weeks did the terror at the worst-case scenario sublimate into certainty at its having come to pass?

In all likelihood, I will never see Margarito Sanchez, whether he is dead or not. I pass hundreds of people every day and only rarely remember one or two of them. Some people go their whole lives without really seeing anyone except the people they want to. The evidence of strangers is around me all the time—the headphones, the plastic cross, the hat—and yet I never see anything of the people themselves, except what they leave behind.

It frightens me to think about how every day, someone somewhere is living the worst day of their life. How I can, without much searching, find evidence of the most unthinkable trauma a mother could ever know in a pile of coupons left littered on a bus. How we force ourselves into denial of our own fragility, allow the truth to hide in plain sight before us.

For example, once as I was walking by a hospital I pass almost every day, it occurred to me that I couldn't remember the last time more than ten minutes had passed since I had heard a siren. This realization shocked me. Had I really been literally deaf to them this whole time? How could I pass by this place, get the regular phone calls to donate blood, pray for the sick and the dying every single day, and not have thought about it?

I began to go through a sort of index of all the things that might lie at the sirens' destination: Someone trapped between the seat and the steering wheel will never walk again. For someone else the transfusion came too late. Someone waited too long, didn't want to wake her husband in the middle of the night to tell him about her chest pains. An overflowing ashtray caught near someone as he was sleeping. A kid who left school early with a headache took a nap from which he didn't wake. A sister found a sibling hanging from the rafters. A husband who said he wouldn't lose his temper again broke his promise. Some mother's son left for school in the morning and didn't come back.

Of course the sirens do not always head to tragedy. Yet disaster is built into their teleology, an end which they were made to anticipate and one which they cannot always avoid. In actual fact they anticipate Disaster in General, not specific ones like, for example, the time my grandfather fell unconscious and hit his head in a Starbucks, and nobody really knew why. They hint at the fact that something could, and will, happen, but they are as incapable as we are of predicting what that thing might be. When tragedy happens they can anticipate nothing, only respond. The ambulance is never waiting at the site of a disaster. So many things around us that are a flimsy reassurance of our safety are evidence of our own delusion.

So I think it's some sort of miracle, that disaster befalls people all around us, yet here I am, still walking, breathing, writing. I am never more than an inch from death, and yet that inch has never closed in, a tiny buffer that is so vast and so thin that I will never understand it. The ambulance so far has not come for me.

I think of how we're asked to give our guardian angels a name. Once, at a yard sale with my family, we heard a loud cracking noise, couldn't identify its source. It kept going like that for minutes until my mother, seated in a lawn chair, got up to check something at a table a couple yards away. The moment she reached the table, a huge pine tree came crashing down, smashing the chair in which my mother had been sitting. Shaken, she said afterward that maybe her guardian angel's name was "Mr. Pine Tree."

This seems to me to be a useful way to name an angel. It is a name that grows longer with everything that could have, but didn't, happen—my mother's angel's name might now be something like, "Mr. Pine Tree that Missed, Regaining Control After Hydroplaning, Benign Carcinoma." Those are just the threats I can offhandedly identify. For myself, there are also some things I know, the things that came the closest—the car that barely missed. The test that came back negative, the illness that finally passed. There are, as well, the boring ones. I don't, for example, give thanks for every street crosswalk I've traversed in safety, without a car in sight. I don't give thanks for the moments when I can hear no sirens. At every given moment, there is an unimaginable number of things that could go wrong. The floor could just give out beneath me. My heart could stop beating in my chest. Most of my life consists of moments where, in the face of all the things that could go wrong, I am never even made to know their possibility.

Yet, too, there are the bigger things from which we need protecting: protection in the form of reminder, protection against forgetting. If there were never any disaster, we might never think to ponder just how frail we are, how dependent, how constantly in need. Our fragility is, in its own way, a form of mercy. When it comes to it, it could be that we meet our angels and hear their names, and they are names that are as long as every moment we ever lived upon this earth, every known or unknown disaster averted, every boring moment, every time that nothing happened, as well as every heartbreak, every trauma, every time we remembered our mortality.

Margarito, who was never even given the gift of being beautiful, is, I hope, somewhere where there is no grieving. Even perfect, resurrected bodies come back full of holes.

Margarito, if you're listening, then speak. Like you, I have not yet come back home. I need to know that there is something out there. Margarito, I'm lost. Remind me that it's good to need salvation. Pray for me and guide me. Help me to know, as you do, what there can be found in emptiness, in loss, in mercy.

Regarding Words

“I have long since come to believe that people never mean half of what they say, and that it is best to disregard their talk and judge only their actions.”⁷ So says Dorothy Day. In many ways, I have come to agree with her. I need not and should not look any further than my own actions to know that she is correct; my professed beliefs rarely make themselves manifest in what I do from day to day.

I suppose it’s a sort of Catch-22 to say that I agree with Dorothy Day and yet commit such a significant portion of my life to the pursuit of writing. It is quite the quandary to be a writer who is slowly but surely losing faith in the power of words. Surely if I, through my words, profess that I have no faith in words, then I should not through my actions demonstrate my stalwart belief in their value. Does the dissonance between my lack of faith in words and my impulse to write mean that I actually *disagree* with Dorothy Day, that I don’t believe what I said when I said I have no faith in words? But doesn’t that mean that Dorothy Day is right?

Like everyone, I have lofty goals for myself. I want to be a good person, whatever that means. I want to live in a way that would not make sense if God did not exist.⁸ Yet, more often than not, I find myself acting with selfishness or unkindness—deliberately trying to board the bus first to ensure I get my favorite seat; speaking or thinking critically of a person who only vaguely inconvenienced me; borrowing things from my roommate without asking under the pretext that “she’ll never know.” These are the small faults,

⁷ Dorothy Day, “A Time of Searching,” in *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 107.

⁸ Madeleine L’Engle, “Icons of the True,” in *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 22.

theones that are easy to laugh off. I won't bore you with the big ones. The small ones are big enough. The fact is that I will without a second thought sell out my faith for a seat on a bus. Every day, I repeat the words, "I believe in God," and every day, in the parts of my life I consider irrelevant or unimportant, my actions say, "We have no king but Caesar."

I have been puzzled over this for quite some time, and yet it is a problem I have only recently been able to articulate (and there it is creeping in again; I can't get rid of my belief in the power of putting words to things). I have, of course, been able to diagnose the problem outside of myself, to point fingers at other people not "putting their money where their mouth is." It is easy to partition off judgment and critique of myself, to claim to not be like the others, to believe that I am somehow exceptional in my ability to avoid hypocrisy. It is certainly more psychologically acceptable than the alternative. Yet every time I turned a critical eye to others, every time I judged them for saying one thing and doing another, I felt within myself a growing sense of malaise.

The thing that finally led to my breakthrough on this issue was an opportunity to facilitate a writing group for the guests at the St. James Cathedral Kitchen, which serves dinner free of charge to homeless and low-income people in Seattle. I had been involved in the Kitchen for about a year before that, usually serving the dinner and washing trays and large cookware after service. My work provided me some minimal contact with the guests, a few of whose names I knew. Some of them were people I knew well enough to have conversations with or to acknowledge outside the Kitchen; however, the frantic rush to get everything cleaned after dinner prevented me from having much meaningful interaction with most of them, especially not for an extended period of time.

Prior to the start of the course, I had a few anxieties. For one thing, I had never taught anyone before. Who was I to present myself as some sort of “expert”? And who was I to handle all the potential challenges of ensuring everyone felt safe and respected enough to be vulnerable? What if no one showed up?

As the weeks went by, however, I encountered my deepest apprehension of all. How could I, who so frequently condemn others for being “all talk and no action” (rarely if ever admitting that same quality in myself), sit in front of these people whom I love and care for, and try to convince them of the power of words? These people, who suffer the most from the nice, palatable rhetoric of those who will in the same breath call for encampments to be paved over with concrete, refuse them affordable food and housing and healthcare, and passively murder them through apathy and neglect—what words could I say that could make any difference at all? How could I dare tell them that words are meaningful when they know better than I ever will how useless they so often are?

This line of questioning very quickly turned inward toward myself. If I really do believe that most words are empty, that most people are all talk, then why do I allow myself to be one of the “talkers”? How could I devote my time and energy to crafting the best words when there are people to feed, dishes to wash, things to do? What was the point of writing if I believed it to be at best an exercise in futility, at worst an excuse to avoid actually addressing the problems I so easily diagnose at arm’s length? I was demoralized. If I hadn’t promised to do it already—if I hadn’t given my word—I might have backed out entirely. Luckily enough, I had made the commitment, and so there was no way out but through.

My fear of being unable to convince people to come and write was assuaged almost immediately. On the first day, we had a full house. George got there even before I did and was waiting at the table all by himself. Chris, who said he was going to be there, actually was there, at three o'clock on the dot. Rosalie, whom I hadn't met before, asked us to visit her blog (the URL she gave me led to a 404 error). Pancho wrote in Spanish about the accident that had rendered him incapable of working construction, and George translated for him. Melinda wrote a story about how she insulted a man at a luncheon, only to find out a few minutes later that that man was the archbishop. Carlos showed up late and wrote about his progress in a Twelve Step program. A guy who didn't introduce himself asked for a notebook so that he could more regularly write letters to his grandmother.

We very quickly developed a sort of camaraderie. A few writers—George and Chris—came every week without fail. Teddi, the director of the Kitchen, was there almost every week. Many people—Ozz, Rosalie, Troy, Carlos, Melinda—came at least every other week. We all slipped into a routine, with everyone taking on a different role in the group and figuring out where they fit. For example, Chris started to call me “Herr Director” and brought in small gifts for me—a clementine, a PopTart—all of which I refused, only for him to refuse my refusal. He would complain when the coffee wasn't made right on time and never took his notebook with him after the meeting, saying, “I'd just throw it out if I took it with me.” Then there was George, whose presence meant that it was never difficult to find something to write about. When I asked the group if “anything came up in the past week,” George was always ready with a story about his job or a political issue he'd been thinking about.

Most days were good. The moments that stick out in my mind the most are the ones that were unexpected, of which there were too many to describe. Some highlights: Chris, when given the prompt to write about “one of the best people you’ve ever met,” wrote about me. George finally got the hang of “showing, not telling,” and wrote an incredible essay about a hoarder who lives in his building. Kham didn’t know how to write but constructed a whole story about a man traveling into space by drawing pictures. Troy had been nervous about writing but finally came one week and has been back every week since. George brought in an essay that he had typed, revised, and printed as self-assigned “homework.” Ozz, who has severe PTSD and hates being touched, shook my hand.

By and large, the writers in the group had no prior experience with writing. It was difficult to break some of them out of their adherence to English 101-style rules regarding the manner in which an essay “should” be structured or what a correct sentence is “supposed” to look like. So many of them had such an intuitive feel for soundplay, and I wanted to impart to them that spelling and grammar are not the be-alls and end-alls of writing—sometimes, the content of what you want to say is as important as the way you say it. When you rely too rigidly on ensuring your grammar is pristine, you lose the heart of what it is you’re saying. One example was from a man named Sinai, who gave me a piece that he described as “a mixture between an essay and a poem” and asked that I bring feedback for him about his spelling and grammar. In the piece, he described what it was like to be a member of the only black family in a small Alaska town. He wrote, “I knew I had it rough but my pops was beyond tough, skin so thick, race jokes he’d just laugh with.” In my feedback to him, I asked him to consider how different that passage would be if he had

written, "I knew I had it rough, but my father was beyond tough. He had skin so thick that he would just laugh along with the people who made race jokes."

Lots of other writers had moments in their work where they demonstrated an amazing grasp of language. I hope that in some way I managed to show them that writing is at its best when you're *feeling* it, when it's flowing. One of the cooler examples to me was from a guy named Tom, who introduced himself as Gabriel, a schizophrenic who came in drunk one day and left his notebook. He wrote a poem about the interactions between his mental illness and substance abuse, the closing lines of which read, "full delusions / collide with THC / enhanced with wild whisky SWET."

Beyond the actual writing, there were a lot of laughs. One came from a guest named Stuart, who is a somewhat erratic schizophrenic and also, in an odd way, my good friend. Though when I invited him he assured me he would come, I would have bet money in that moment that he would forget all about it, or else he would get caught up doing something else and just not show up. He proved me wrong. True to his word, there he was at the table for the next meeting. For whatever reason, he used the time to write the words "Fe Fi Fo Fum" over and over again for two pages. He stopped showing up after a few weeks, which didn't bother me. I sat with him at Mass on Ash Wednesday and asked him if he still had the notebook. He responded, "I threw it in the garbage. I ripped out all the pages though. I still have those."

A woman named Loralie came for one meeting and left early. She didn't show up for any of the others, which was relatively typical for most people. I didn't think anything of it; a lot of the writers didn't have time to make a weekly meeting, or else they were only in the mood that one day, or they came to try it out and didn't want to continue. There are any

number of reasons that people might not want to stick around for the entirety of a writing course. After about a month, I had entirely forgotten that Loralie had even shown up at all. As I was packing up my supplies at the end of one of the meetings, she approached me and said, "I've been avoiding you." When I asked her why, she paused for a moment, and then she said, rapidly, as though she had to work up the courage to do it, "I-don't-dislike-you-as-a-person-it's-just-I-hated-writing-even-when-I-was-in-school-and-I-didn't-want-to-hurt-your-feelings."

A man named Richard kept lurking near the meeting table. Every week, he would be just a few feet away, but he never joined us. Teddi invited him numerous times, and each time he declined. Finally, when Teddi was away delivering a presentation to students at Seattle U, he sat down at the table. He said, "I figured I'd come now that Teddi isn't here to nag me about it." He has not shown up since then, but I did bump into him recently at the Light Rail. He said, "Oh, Dylan, I'm so glad to see you. I have a confession to make, and somehow I just knew you were the one I'd be confessing to. I found a box of twenty beautiful chocolate chip cookies on the bus, and I ate every single one of them. I feel like how I used to when I took Valium."

I wish I could say that every portion of the group was like this. Some days were hard. There were times when writers came in on what could have been the worst days of their lives. Carlos wrote about working the Twelve Steps one week and came in the next week high on pills. One day, Ozz, who usually wrote for the full hour straight, came in and simply stared into space the whole time, saying he felt "numb." George talked frequently about how his alcoholism had caused him to lose his wife and family and home. When I asked Chris to write about what he would say to his state representatives, he wrote, "My

father didn't fight in three wars to secure my place sleeping under the bridge." A writer named Enrique wrote about a recent illness and trip to the hospital, saying, "Other people are getting urine samples, blood samples. They try to get me out the door as fast as possible. They think I'm joking, but they waited until it was too late [to treat me]. They think you're delusional. If you don't have anyone there with you, they'll do anything they want. I almost died because of it. They should treat everyone the same way, but they don't."

There were more moments like these, but I don't think it would be useful to write them all. It would just be a laundry list of senseless pain. It would be a means of using these people's suffering as a prop or a plot device. Their pain is their own. I don't wish that I had remained ignorant to it all, but I do wish that none of it had ever happened. I wish it was the sort of thing to which people wouldn't have to turn a blind eye, because it simply wouldn't be there in the first place.

I was reminded of the words in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me."⁹ I used to think of this passage as though a terrifying and tyrannical God were punishing His creation. After all, it is preceded by this line: "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels"¹⁰ One thing I learned through the writing group was that my initial interpretation, the image of an angry God, was the interpretation through the eyes of the goats. I was one of the people asking God

⁹ Mt. 25:42-43.

¹⁰ Mt. 25:41.

when it was that I had seen Him; I was one of the ones making excuses: It isn't fair that I should have to see You all the time. It's too hard. I didn't know what I was doing. I might have been selfish almost every moment of my life, but I'd rather You think about the times I wasn't.

When my friends told me about all the times they had been wronged, wasn't my perspective similar to the perspective of the Father, who watched the world mock and spit on His Son? Was He not justified in His anger at the people so fundamentally harming His creation? Was I not also angry for my friends, and hurt? What about the internal perspective, the perspective of the Jesus who is sleeping under the bridge, who is being denied healthcare? I imagined what it might be like to ask God, "When did I see You?" and to watch Him transform into Carlos, Ozz, George, Chris, Enrique. I imagined each of them reading what they had written, with their own voices, in their own words. The parable didn't seem so angry then—or, at least, not entirely angry. It sounded like the voice of someone who is in tremendous pain.

There are some things I know, such as: In the beginning was the Word. What I don't know is what that really means. All life, in every iteration, descended from that one Word. I tried to talk about it with a friend who is an atheist, and he said, "If that is true, it must be the longest word in existence." I'd never thought about it like that. A single Word, as long as and longer than the history of the universe, a Word so vast and incomprehensible that it both contains and transcends time itself. It was in the beginning before time began, which is a sentence that doesn't make any sense. And yet it is also so infinitesimally small that it could beget a tiny spark, a glowing ember, that bloomed into a story that started, "Let there be light."

When I say that I believe in God, I must mean that I believe in the Word. And so I have to believe that words are at their best when they are imitations of the divine. How could that not be true? It was through the written word that I encountered all these people, all these saviors asking to be fed.

Another thing I know is that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. There is, then, an inherent relationship between words and actions. Our words are only true if they are interchangeable with our flesh. When we blind ourselves to the divine within the living bodies of the people around us, we also make ourselves deaf to the ways God is constantly communicating Himself to us in the form of the stranger. If Christ has no body now but ours, then He also has no words. I write because I need the words to guide my flesh. I write because without the story God is always imagining, the story that is and always has been unfolding, I would not exist. I need the Word as much as I need the good news it delivers. So it is my duty to use my words the way that God would have used them, and to consequently abide by those words with faith in the hope they promise. I believe in words. I believe in God.

Afterword

The time is drawing closer now when I'll have to call this whole thing finished. Even this notebook is running out of pages. The clouds have finally cleared over the city, revealed the sky for what it is—opaque and infinite blue. It's the season when my neighbors and I drink beers around the barbecue until late into the evenings, as the light lingers longer before it dwindles, and even the night is somehow not so dark. This is the time of year when everyone in the city talks about the end of the gloom, the widening breadth of a single day. We awaken to remember why we wait through the long, cold winter. That beauty is indiscriminate in choosing those to whom it shows itself hints at how unworthy even the saints were of having found themselves surrounded by a world created by such a God.

As I write this I am seated on a bus that's headed south, and before me stretches Puget Sound. The city skyline outlines it, rectangular, sharp. From here I can see the Fremont Bridge, the Needle, Columbia Center—practically everything there is to know of this whole city. In colder months, that is the extent of what the eye can see. But today, unobstructed, I can see what lies beyond—the mountains, which even after all this time take me daily by surprise. And then just before me is the water. It's blue, so blue, and the sunlight reflects off of it, which makes the landscape appear to be glowing. It is glowing.

Today the boats are out, and I'm thinking about other things that move across the surface of the waters. We have crossed the threshold from Easter into Ordinary Time. Like the expanse of the Sound, I feel within myself a sort of new beginning, a stepping over into a time that's open, ready to receive. What does it mean for time to be ordinary? I was told when I was young that "ordinary" as it is used here refers to how the weeks are ordered,

counted, measured. It is the listless trickle of weeks as we wait for something else to happen, as though the very fabric of time itself were holding its breath.

I, too, often feel as though I spend the majority of my time waiting. The poet Marie Howe suggests, “The mystics say / you are as close as my own breath.”¹¹ Breath, which is ordinary and constant and vital and miraculous. A part of me is often discouraged by the fact that we must wait seemingly so long, and must make wonder of the boring world ourselves. In the absence of anything new, we must instead make ourselves new, see the old with different eyes, allow ourselves to receive it differently.

In her book *Walking on Water*, Madeleine L’Engle says, “In art we are once again able to do all the things we have forgotten; we are able to walk on water; we speak to the angels who call us; we move, unfettered, among the stars.”¹² I have never wanted to walk on water. My writing has never sought to take me somewhere else, nor has it ever been successful in achieving it. Instead I’ve always struggled with the basics, with making meaning of the “here and now,” so much of which already lies beyond the limited grasp of my sense perception and my reason. My goal is not to do the unimaginable, but rather to arrive at some sort of understanding of the mysterious things that we call “ordinary.”

This is, perhaps, an exercise in futility—especially since, as even modern physicists suggest, the things we seek to understand are fundamentally altered by our attempts to understand them. This world that lies around us all the time changes the instant we lay eyes on it, and is changing even as we watch it, and will change once again when our

¹¹ Marie Howe, “Prayer,” in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 45.

¹² Madeleine L’Engle, “Healed, Whole, and Holy,” in *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 45.

attention is, as always, diverted. On cloudy days, when I look out upon the Sound, I think about the darkness and “encircling gloom;” on days like this I think about eternity and light. And so I’ve come to think of understanding, at least in this life, as a series of arrivals. We come, and then we come again, each time finding the potential for understanding perhaps greater, perhaps located differently from where we once found it.

When I disembark this bus, I still will not be where I want to go. Likewise, my thoughts will still trace routes as far as they can take me, and then no further. No matter where they lead, I still will not be able to set a foot upon the surface of the Sound. The conclusion is that there is no conclusion; the end is that I must come back and see again. Let these pages be, for now, a resting place, though temporary, as I await that distant scene, the lifting of the clouds, the parting waters, unobstructed and immediate, the site of my redemption.

Poetics

There is a specific passage from David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* that has stuck with me since the moment I read it for the first time, when I was fourteen years old: "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist."¹³ His words have disturbed me for a long time—a part of me actually believes him. If I am only myself when I am perceiving, then the converse also seems to be true: My perceptions are manifestations of myself. That the world exists externally to me is irrelevant to the overall point. If Hume's words are universally applicable, then it must be true that all people can only come to know and make meaning of the world around them by first asserting themselves within it, by laying claim. I have spent a large portion of my life examining, either latently or overtly, this dynamic, and seeking ways to break out of this apparent ontological bind, to prove it isn't universally true.

I wonder what Hume's ideas on identity and perception mean in relation to memory, and specifically to its loss. For example, what does it mean for me to call my grandfather "my grandfather" now that he has lost all memory of me? What does it mean for me to call him "mine" when, to his mind, I am no longer "his"? Certainly my grandfather exists separate from me; yet, he does not exist to *me* separate from me. My knowledge and understanding of him is necessarily filtered through the prism of myself.

¹³ David Hume, "Of the Understanding," in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Charlottesville: Dent, 1920), 239.

By contrast, I am no longer the person that he would have called his “granddaughter.” I am certainly not his “grandson.” Within the scope of his knowledge and understanding of himself, I do not exist. How do we make sense of ourselves if everything about us can change? What does it mean when even the things we hold dearest are subject to the dimming of the mind’s eye, if everything we see now illuminated is destined ultimately for a limitless dark?

My writing has almost always meditated on the strange and counterintuitive convalescence of self and not-self, the meeting point between the essential and the ancillary, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the fleeting and eternal. What is the difference between who I am and what is mine? In what capacity? For how long? This relationship is encapsulated well in the movie *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, which I quote within my manuscript. In the movie, a man with a brain tumor struggles to make meaning of his life when all the things he thought were fundamental to himself—his family, his relationships, his sense of place, his control over his body—are slipping away. The portion quoted in the manuscript says,

Bill dropped his keys on the counter and stood there staring at them, suddenly thinking about all the times he’d thrown his keys there before and how many days of his life were wasted repeating the same tasks and rituals in his apartment over and over again. But then he wondered if, realistically, this was his life, and the unusual part was his time spent doing other things.¹⁴

This passage captivates me for a few reasons. Firstly, for the moment that Bill perceives his keys, they are not just an object that impinges on his consciousness, but also a real symbol through which he comes to understand himself. In a literal sense, the keys become a part of his identity; they are no longer foreign or mundane but, for the entirety of

¹⁴ Don Hertzfeldt, *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*.

the time he explores his patterns and habits through the lens of his interactions with them, they constitute his self-actualization. Not just a piece of personal property, they are also integrated into his personhood. The keys stop being “ordinary objects” that do not get stored within his mind’s hard drive but are recorded and thereby integrated into himself.

Secondly, I am struck by this relationship to the “ordinary.” The majority of life consists of actions and objects that we consider “unimportant”—indeed, those things we think of as “important” are memorable only because they are contextualized within a vast fabric of things that are spectacularly boring. Things stand out because we make them “ours;” they become symbols which we use to represent and construct our own identities. Our identities in many ways *are* our memories, those things we perceive as integral to our senses of self. In this way, our identities are constructed through a process of asserting ownership and laying claim.

Thirdly, we seem to define ourselves by the things that are remarkable, the points that we could list on our resumes—the “milestones” as opposed to the miles themselves. Yet, all people do things every day that they do not remember. We might not think of our toothbrushes as a portion of our identities; yet, we interact with them (hopefully) multiple times a day. I bristle at the thought of defining myself by the ways I brush my teeth; still, it is an unavoidable fact that I brush my teeth far more frequently than I got my first job, or moved to Seattle. Within the context of my manuscript, I seek to interrogate those parts of my life and my experience of the world that I often file away as “routine”: my early morning rituals, my shoes, the bus routes I take daily, as well as my behavior on those buses—the things I do not automatically associate with “myself” and yet which are mine—the things over which I intuitively refuse ownership, yet which constitute the bulk of the ways I

move through the world. What do the negative spaces around my marketable achievements and significant encounters say about the sort of person I am, the sorts of people we all are?

Further, it struck me as odd that a set of car keys might be considered ordinary. Certainly if Bill—or anyone—were to lose his keys, he would begin to consider them hugely important, even vital. Often, the loss of an object drastically alters its relative value. This complicates Hume’s point, that perception constitutes identity. Oftentimes we begin to understand ourselves best when we reckon with loss, when we either know that we are failing to perceive or that we are perceiving a lack. I was reminded of a passage in the first section of W. G. Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn*, where the narrator struggles to locate the preserved skull of Thomas Browne, which has, along with the rest of his remains, been interred and exhumed numerous times:

Curiously enough, Browne himself, in his famous part-archaeological and part-metaphysical treatise, *Urn Burial*, offers the most fitting commentary on the subsequent odyssey of his own skull when he writes that to be gnaw’d out of our graves is a tragical abomination. But, he adds, who is to know the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?¹⁵

This example seems less flippant than that of Bill’s car keys, and it perhaps paints a clearer picture of the issue at hand. What is the difference between Browne and his bones? To whom do they belong? In what capacity? For how long? Bones, which bear such personal significance, such that their desecration could be described as a “tragical abomination,”¹⁶ occupy a somewhat contradictory area in which it is difficult to determine their value once made external to the body and the person they once partially comprised.

¹⁵ W. G. Sebald, “Part I,” in *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999), 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

They are so commonplace that, according to Sebald's narrator, "it is well known that in the period when public health and hygiene were being reformed and hospitals established, many of these institutions kept museums, or rather chambers of horrors, in which [human remains] were preserved in jars of formaldehyde, for medical purposes, and occasionally exhibited to the public"—so commonplace that it is possible to lose them entirely. Yet, their value is so great that people are willing to fundamentally violate the sanctity of burial in order to possess them. They are an object over which, at varying points, one specific individual, and all individuals, and no individuals can claim ownership. The desire to observe and analyze and make commentary on his bones drives doctors and hospitals to lay a claim on and indeed exhume his remains, even when that exhumation is a fundamental violation of their sanctity, even when that exhumation reduces their value to the point of spectacle or oddity.

Within my own manuscript, I explore this relationship through the lens of my experiences working with homeless people, and by interrogating how this means of making value is related to emotional proximity or removal. For many, the homeless are so common that they become, as a friend of mine recently expressed, "part of the scenery." Homelessness very frequently is an issue for which no one takes responsibility, and so it is an issue over which no one claims ownership. Homelessness does not belong to anybody, and so the homeless people do not belong anywhere—not on our streets, not in our stores, not in our restaurants, not in our homes, not in our public restrooms. The problem is so common that it is nearly impossible to maintain a sense of emergency or ethical immediacy. Similar to Browne's skull, once we lose sight of our ownership of and

responsibility for this ethical issue, it becomes easy and perhaps inevitable that we ultimately lose the problem—and thereby the people—too.

However, this dynamic is a rocky one. It is difficult to feel partially responsible for the issue of homelessness without also inadvertently laying a claim on the stories of the homeless people. This is another Humeian problem: If our identities are constituted by our perceptions, then our perceptions are also manifestations of our identities. In this way, in an attempt to empathize with the homeless, we appropriate their pain, in some way use it to self-congratulate, impose our own opinions onto them. So frequently I find, within my own interactions with the homeless and in my observation of other homed people's interactions with them, that homeless people can often seem to hold value for us only when we can, in some ways, make their stories stories over which we feel some sense of ownership, an ownership that violates them in a similar way to the violation of someone's resting bones. We seek to examine, observe, know. We trade the inherent and intrinsic value of the people themselves for our own egotistical insertions, our own means of making personal value. Within my manuscript, this dynamic is one that I seek to critique, but also is one that I sometimes fail to avoid. And so within myself I find a similar manifestation of those same contradictions—the ways I hold the homeless dear, the ways I use them as spectacles and plot devices, as both “ends in themselves” and means at once, the ways I am complicit in their suffering at the same time as I wish to and attempt to rectify it.

I explore this relationship similarly by looking at and thinking through my personal relationships to global calamity. I meditate on the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami of 2004, as well as the ways I live adjacent to war overseas despite my physical distance from it. These things, which are on their surface “not mine,” are also means of my coming to a

better understanding of myself, both as a lone individual within myself as well as a member of a body, a person situated within a larger social and historical context. For example, in the essay “Nowhere Close,” the context of my brother makes war something highly personal to me, while my geographic positioning makes it something about which I can, contradictorily, only make abstract judgments. By locating my brother within it, it ceases being, to me, something foreign and inarticulable, and becomes something for which I can offer commentary. So long as I can lay ownership over it, place myself inside it, I can exert the emotional energy necessary to experience its gravity.

Similarly, in a world where, as I say in the essay “Exactly as it Is,” “disaster is so common that we’ve developed metrics,” I was only able to make the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami emotionally meaningful by transposing it onto the deeply personal encounter of my first kiss. Likewise, in my essay “For Margarito,” I make meaning of the story of Margarito Sanchez by self-insertion, by attempting to play imaginative voyeur into the horror of a mother finding that her son has not come home. Without these forms of self-insertion and laying claim, calamity, within the context of my own writing, takes on its own sort of “ordinariness.” It becomes a dark but muted backdrop to all the other things in my life—the threat of war that haunts a trip on a bus, the tsunami that becomes a lens through which to look back on the entirety of a mostly unremarkable thirteen years. It is something that affects individuals—my own family, the families of tsunami victims, the homeless, the mother of Margarito Sanchez—and to which we collectively are often uneasily deaf and blind. I struggle with placing myself within this disaster, the imminent and frequently ignored forces in the world that hold the potential to realize within all people their mortalities.

It is deeply troubling to me as a writer and as a thinker to believe that we make meaning by laying claim, that things are either ordinary or owned, only valuable when we can view them, selfishly, through the lens of self. This sets up a dynamic in which we are faced with two options—fundamental indifference, a viewing of all things as “ordinary” and unremarkable, a refusal to search for meaning for fear of “exhuming” it and violating it; or falling into a sort of solipsism, in which everything in the world is just a potential mirror or receptacle for ourselves. Absent any other mode of thought, I believe that my exploration into these issues would end here, with the unsatisfactory conclusion that even at our best, our attempts to step outside of ourselves, to commune with the ordinary without laying claim, to help others without a need to make meaning by “abominating,” we must always face the fact that we never see anything except microcosmic self-insertion. However, this would not be an accurate representation of my own philosophical and creative thoughts. We are not bereft of intrinsic meaning; we are not left on psychological islands. We do not search for meaning either futilely or alone.

I am speaking, of course, of my resolute belief in the existence of the Living God. I do not wish either here or, frankly, ever, to justify that belief, though I know it to be well-reasoned. It is a sort of “knowing” that I am wholly unqualified to communicate, and so instead of pontificating, I would rather here remain silent. However, it is unavoidable that this belief is at play within my manuscript, and it would be a glaring oversight and would lobotomize my analysis if I failed to address it.

I believe the concept of God to be a means of circumventing the problem of either isolation or communion through solipsism. Perhaps the most significant insight into this is in my “Afterword,” where I quote the poet Marie Howe: “the mystics say / you are as close

as my own breath.”¹⁷ I am reminded of the word *spirit*, whose etymological origin is the Latin for *breath*. Of course within the Genesis creation myth, God’s *spirit*, God’s *breath*, moves across the surface of the waters. The process of creation is one of en-breath-ing, of injecting spirit. By simply existing, the entire world is locked in a constant mouth-to-mouth with God.

In addition to a vital breath, God is simultaneously the Word, as I reflect on in the essay “Regarding Words.” The creative and sustaining force that underlies all of creation is the writing of a story. In this way—a literal, though inscrutable, way—we as created beings are thoughts of God. I think of a quote by the mystic Thomas Merton, which I quote in my essay “East and West”: “The things of time are in connivance with eternity.”¹⁸ (Sign of Jonas, 361). Indeed, all things of time—all things in and of the world—bear the marks and images of their Creator. This thought is expressed more overtly in Merton’s more famous work, *The New Seeds of Contemplation*: “Every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men.”¹⁹ These “germs” are created things that are gifted to the created.

It is possible, when we understand ourselves as created beings, to see within others the image and likeness of the Creator whom we bear in common. Of course we often fail to

¹⁷ Marie Howe, “Prayer,” 27.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, “Fire Watch,” 361.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, “Seeds of Contemplation,” in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 16.

do this—we see only our egos in others. We use others as mirrors through which to gaze narcissistically upon ourselves. Thus we fall into the terrible isolation of David Hume’s conception of identity—we either fail to reach out and so see nothing and no one, or, upon reaching out, we only see an image of ourselves. We use all the faculties possible to the ordinary and unaided person, only to find that we reach our limits within ourselves. In any case, we are alone. To me, in a very real way, connection is only possible when we understand ourselves as thoughts of the divine, thoughts that are inherently connected to and in dialogue with all others. With God, we are not alone; with God, we are in communion; with God, we are members of a body.

I leave the business of being alone to God Alone; I hope to allow myself to exist within a context, a member of the singular body of God. If I see myself in anyone, I hope that what I see is the God in me, looking onto the God in others—to be a tool through which God can gaze through me onto Himself as it is made manifest in the rest of creation, through my perception. I can point to, within this manuscript, portions where I have failed to do this, passages where I have relied only on myself, although I do not believe it would serve any purpose to eviscerate my attempts. I will not presume to say that there are portions where I have succeeded; if I have, it was through luck or divine help, and so any attempt to take credit would be at worst prideful, at best ridiculous. As I say in my “Afterword,” the conclusion is that there is no conclusion. Each day, each time I sit to write, is a new opportunity to lose myself and thereby become a better instrument of God’s constant work of creation. Ironically enough, the way to reach the goal is to know I cannot reach it, and so allow myself to get out of the way.

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