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FAMILY ESSAYS

The Family Vernacular

When I curse in front of reserved people my father chides me, but I acquired my language from him. Language and storytelling are something that the individual customizes and my siblings and me were privy to the world of adult vocabulary and context, which gave us an advantage over other kids. The home I grew up in was on the same property as the family business and a number of young men were employed during the summers. I would often hear my father crack the verbal whip at a guy who looked idle. “Quit holdin’ your dick and get your thumb outta your ass!” If two young men were unfortunate enough to be standing idle together my father would yell, “Quit jerking each other off and get back to work!” And women were not excluded. I once heard him say, “I’d kick her in the cunt if I weren’t afraid of losing my foot.”

I also grew up listening to my father tell stories about the shenanigans he and his brothers got into as young men. Back in the day, they were driving two bread trucks home after a day of work for the family catering business. Their friend David was in one truck with my uncle Paul and my father was driving the other. They had been drinking. My father stopped at a road junction near home and my uncle Paul pulled up along the driver side and standing in the open sliding door was their friend David, completely naked and in a deadpan pose. We call this the “Statue of David Story.”

Another time, my uncle paid a stripper to visit my father at work. He had the young woman pretend to be there for a job interview. During the interviewing my uncle Paul started the music and she begin to dance and strip for my father. My uncle Paul lost his breath laughing while my father buried his head in his arms out of embarrassment. My mother was in the house and us kids were out playing in the yard.

My father took my sister Martha to Montreal when she was sixteen, along with my sister Elizabeth. They were able to get Martha into a bar using an ID from one of Elizabeth's friends. My father bought her a shot and when she hesitated he had the whole bar chant "drink" until she took the shot. The next year, at seventeen, my father took me to Montreal and I drank vodka cranberries while he danced with college girls.

When Martha and I were tweens my father took us to a play called "Coed Prison Sluts" in Toronto. There were men and women on stage exchanging foul words and phrases, and at the end a man dressed as a scary clown sang a vulgar number, delivering the last line directly at me. We all still sing the chorus of one song at family gatherings. "Shit, motherfucker, fuck you, you cunt, or a prick, bloooooooow jooooob, suck my dick!" Though most would consider this play inappropriate, to us it was an educational seminar.

My brother Peter is the family champion when it comes to vulgar stories and harsh language. To my brother, hands are "dickbeaters" and mouths are "dicksuckers," as in "right in the dicksucker" or "get your dickbeaters off me." He calls his girlfriend a cunt as a term of endearment, a pet name, and he lovingly refers to their baby daughter as "a little bitch."

Peter's choice phrases exist on a different level from my father's. They aren't necessarily better; rather they are the result of different life experiences. My father spent his life in a small farming community of fellow laborers and volunteer firefighters, whose brand of profanity shaped his more localized vulgarity. My brother lived a good deal of his life sliding on his belly through the wretched underworld. Each uses different formulas for calculating his own vulgarity.

As a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, Peter is never without a tale to tell. His vulgarity contains some of the strongest wit in our family. His timing seems almost preordained, and the man knows no shame. Some of his best stories involve his own personal humiliation, and he divulges the details without flinching. My brother tells his vulgar tales fearlessly and with animated humor.

Peter went to a strip club with friends years ago. One of the strippers pulled my brother on stage, tied him to a pole and put a mask with an attached dildo over his head. Then the woman proceeded to pull down his pants and dance around him while humping the dildo protruding from his forehead. I well remember this story because my brother was so irked from being publically defiled by a stripper that he recounted the story over and over again to anyone who would listen, including a number of lawyers.

My brother has a couple of stories involving prostitutes. When he was living in Texas, he received a blowjob in a parking lot from a prostitute he thought was a woman. By the time he discovered her extra equipment it was too late. And since it was a job well done, all my brother could do was get on the phone and tell the story to anyone who would listen. The last prostitute story he told me happened during his recent sober years. He felt so guilty paying for sex that he couldn't get an erection. He had said to me "So I mused her to death for awhile and then I gave up."

Peter doesn't talk to anyone in our family differently, especially not the young ones. He asked our eighteen-year-old nephew if he had lost his virginity to his girlfriend and after my nephew responded "no" my brother replied, "Come on! You gotta get up in them guts." He will also say, with antagonism, the phrase "I fucked your mother" to my nephew, not caring at all that my nephew's mother is his own sister.

One of the better and more recent examples of my brother and father's vulgarity occurred this past Christmas. We were all in the living room opening presents. Peter was sitting next to his girlfriend and their daughter. Over the years my father has enjoyed getting his daughters nice jewelry. To welcome my brother's girlfriend to the family he gave her a lovely pair of diamond earrings. My brother saw the little diamonds in her lap and his eyebrows went up and then furrowed. He held up one finger and said to my father, "You can have sex with her once." The entire family, including the kids, erupted in laughter. It was the highlight of the holidays.

Vulgarity is my family's vernacular. It is the language that bonds us. It is woven into our personalities and our humor is rarely without it. When we are playing video games and I kill someone with my shotgun, he or she will respond by calling me a "dirty cunt," and I know it is out of love, because we speak the same language.

My Father

The Family Business

His father was a bastard, even on his deathbed. His father said - as he lay dying - that there was no money to be made in the family business. He had kept the business small and refused to market his very popular barbeque marinade. Customers showed up to barbeques with empty mason jars, asking to take sauce home. My father saw the market value but his father denied him the opportunity. "Take the sauce and run," he said.

The man who married my father's cousin was treated like a son while my father had to watch. This made his back hurt. He went to see doctors but they found nothing. So he went to a psychologist and found it was anxiety.

My father started out as a bastard. He hit us with the belt but one night we three little ones went to him crying and asked him to stop and he never hit us again. He is a good communicator.

He tried to prove himself as a young man to his father and went to work for the railroad. A train derailed and my father went to reach under it for whatever reason. The foreman stopped him and told him never to trust anything manmade. When I was fifteen I wanted to prove myself so I went to work on a dairy farm. I watched the milker wipe shit off the udders with just a cloth and then attach the suction device.

I asked my father if he missed Papa. My father said that he has the best conversations with him now that he is dead. My father didn't listen to his dying father's advice. My father walked door-to-door trying to sell the family's product. The doors were slammed in his face, and he got in his car and cried. But he had certainty. He gave his blood, sweat and tears. Eventually, doors opened and people let him in. They gave him

shelf space and he used it. Then they gave him warehouse space and he filled it with wooden pallets. He has plenty of space now.

My father wanted to be a forest ranger but his father would only pay for a two-year culinary vocational school. When I was in college I spent one summer volunteering as a forest ranger. My father encouraged me to be whatever I wanted. He helped me out financially with my four-year degree and was surprised when I graduated on time.

Even though it wasn't what he wanted he was a self-motivated man and dedicated himself to the family business. He achieved greatness. He has the brain of an engineer. My father built things. He created a conveyer belt machine to bottle sauce.

My father cited his father a lot when I was growing up. As time went on he referenced his father less and less. I am not sure when he mentioned his bastard of a father last.

The Animals

They kept chickens, even after they stopped using them for food. There was a wooden chest in the barn that had a heat lamp. A cluster of fluffy yellow chicks huddled under the red light. They grew into chickens and roamed the yard. For a while there was a rooster who yelled at the sun whenever it showed its face. Next door there was a German Sheppard named Guido who got used to the chickens and the children who chased after them. The whole town knew them for their chickens.

My father's father brought four donkeys back from the Nevada desert because they were being rounded up and shot. The two males and two females bred until there were thirteen inbred donkeys in the pasture. Then the vet fixed all of the males. I remember watching my mother help sedate each one. I heard snapping, like elastic, as the vet cut off their testicles and tossed them over his shoulder. My father almost passed out. My sister Elizabeth put one testicle in a jar of formaldehyde. She kept it through high school and college.

We had a dog named Lucky. If we forgot to let Lucky out she would always shit in my father's bedroom. If the door to his room was closed, she would shit in front of the door.

My father was always the one to go to the vet when our pets needed to be put down.

A Thriving Community

My father and mother were on one of their first dates. She was seventeen and he was twenty-one. While driving down a road, an accident happened right in front of them. He said only a moment kept it from being their accident. An oncoming car drifted and clipped the car in front of them. They pulled over and got out to help. A man was lying in the road. He was hurt badly, but my father didn't know what to do. He felt helpless and never wanted to feel that way again, so he joined his local firefighter and EMS department. He has gone on all sorts of calls, from saving burning buildings to delivering babies. My father has helped many people.

My father thrives on community. He volunteered at the local fire hall for almost forty years. They play softball. He has been chief. There are picnics and pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners. There are church events, too. Raffle tickets, 50/50. There are old people everywhere who need doors opened and things carried. He helps people and they help him and feed him and give him community. He thrives on community.

My father anticipates the help people need. I walk with him and he stops in his tracks and I follow his gaze. He watches people who look like they may need help and then he helps them. I had major surgery in Baltimore and he came to stay with me. He told me that he tried to stop and help an old man out of a car and the man turned his help away. My father smiled and said "hello" to people on the street. I told him he can't do that here. The streets of Baltimore are dangerous, I said. He didn't stop until a valet at the hospital told him that knifings increase when it gets hot in Baltimore. It was very hot

when he stayed with me so he stopped trying to help people only because I was worried about him.

My father tried to save some of the troubled people out in the world. He hired them and gave them chance after chance but most of them, if not all, eventually drain my father of his altruistic wherewithal. I don't think he realized that the people around him who were doing well were the ones he saved.

Now that my father has an Xbox he has started building his online community. The rest of us turn our microphones off and mute other players but my father talks to the strangers. He has made friends with people in different states with different lives. Some of his friends are teenagers. We kids are introverts like our mother and we feel awkward when my father lets his online friends join our party, but he has fun and refers to them as his friends.

Mortality

In the “favorite quotes” section on his Facebook page my father quotes himself:
“Work Hard or Stay Home; Don't stop at the first wet spot; I don't finance insanity; None of us are getting off this planet alive; I'll be here until the sun burns out; I'm shooting to live for 130 years. If I fall a little short, I won't be disappointed; If I can't bring it with me, I'm not going.”

Daydream

The hero charges in and saves everyone.
Everyone.
And then he lives forever.

What About Love

At the age of twenty-one he married a seventeen-year-old girl. They had five children over seventeen years. He left her after the seventeenth year for his twenty-something-year-old secretary. As he drove into the city to meet with the lawyer he screamed at the top of his lungs because he knew he was about to ruin a lot of lives. The secretary moved into the house and tried making it her own and covered it with Winnie-the-Pooh. She was good to the kids but there was too much trauma so we weren't very good to her. The family broke apart with the force of a centrifuge. After six years the secretary wanted kids but he already had five so she left and he cried. I was at my mother's alone and my father came to pick me up. I was a teenager. He sat down next to me and cried on my shoulder. Emotions were something that happened to me in storms at that age and I didn't know how to handle them so I sat ridged while he cried. I regret not comforting him.

For a short period he was single and dated. There was a woman closer to his age named Joyce. She was in the military. My father broke up with her because he didn't like her chicken neck. My sister Elizabeth is planning on getting cosmetic surgery so she never has a chicken neck.

Then he met his new girlfriend of a dozen years who lives with him. My father won't get married again. She redesigned the house again and put up her own nick-knacks.

My father said he feels sorry for the men who date his four daughters because we were all raised as alpha females and no man will ever dominate us.

Sickness

We all got sick. Not the quick kind, but the kind that drags on until the day you die, which for some is soon. The mother and brother's brains went bad. Their souls came and went but they came back less and less. Their bodies stayed alive and waited in Limbo. Now they are free. The two daughters worried themselves sick and will always be skinny now. The third daughter needs needles for the rest of her life, which is shorter now. The son recovered but we are all waiting for his diagnosis. The animals in the pasture are dying one by one. Lightning struck the first donkey. The next one dropped dead. After that another one escaped the pasture and wandered around town out of his mind and then died. The horse impaled herself on a tree limb. The other horse died of a broken heart. There is only one donkey left. My father is considering getting him a miniature donkey for company.

In the emergency room, after they tortured me, I asked them to dope me up and (because they felt guilty) they obliged. My father came into the room and held my hand. I waivered back and forth, eyes glossy. Through the tears in my eyes I whimpered, "Daddy, I don't want to be sick anymore." And my father turned away and took a deep breath and blinked.

One day his brother messed up the maps for the drivers at their catering company. They had a screaming match about it and both men stormed out and had to go elsewhere to cool down. His brother suddenly forgot fifteen years of his life so he went to the doctor. They found brain cancer like whipped cream mixed with gelatin. Aggressive treatment froze the cancer but it also froze his brother in perpetual disability. The man awaited a delayed fate in a nursing home.

But even though everyone is sick and dying we still laugh about it, because it's funny. Like when the animals in the pasture were dying and my grandmother was withering away from dementia and someone said that the animals were her Horcruxes. Once all of them were destroyed then she would finally die. Funny things can't hurt us.

The Mother

My father was a dedicated son. His mother was his best friend. She was the quiet wife for a while but the bastard father died young so she grew wings. His mother was the matriarch and loved and nurtured her very large family. Her home was something different. It was a microcosm of peace that existed for all of us. My father lived with her during the divorce. Kathleen moved in with the kids when she had nowhere else to go. Elizabeth spent a summer there drinking wine without scrutiny. I stayed with my grandmother when she started the process of dying. After she died my father went upstairs and her ghost closed the door behind him and jammed it with the yardstick so he had to call for help.

When she died the earth shifted. My father was determined to keep his balance. He brought a cooler full of wine to the funeral home, which is illegal but the owners made an exception for our merriment.

Ever since her death we have all been dreaming about her as though she is part of the collective, waiting for the rest of us.

And so, his father was wrong, his mother was right, his community will always be there. Slam the door shut but open the damn window. He may not live forever but his name will take one hundred generations to be forgotten. He saved me as well as many others and one day he will save us all. He treats his loved ones well because he knows they may go any day. He has always needed a companion because he doesn't want to die alone. But he will always have a large and well-bonded family to carry on his legacy, once he buys the farm.

Our Children

When I was a baby I had serious acid reflux.

My mother went to check on me in my crib and found me unconscious and blue. I had choked on my vomit. Being a nurse, she was able to resurrect me, but being a young mother she sat in the corner afterward and sobbed.

My father has belonged to the same volunteer fire company for almost forty years. But recently he experienced something for the first time.

At around nine in the morning a woman was driving drunk down a road.

My father had finished a previous call and was on the rig with his fellow volunteers. They were dispatched to a two-car MVA (motor vehicle accident). They pulled onto the scene and my father jumped off the rig. He surveyed the area and concluded there were four vehicles involved.

Then the tunnel vision started. My father had trouble seeing the people who were trying to get his attention. He began to move his head back and forth, attempting to widen his field of vision. Finally he found the two loudest voices. As he approached them he heard someone say *SUV driver ok, mom of car being tended to... infant needs care*. My father thought to himself *I have more than enough equipment and ambulances, and the victims don't add up*. This is when he realized that there weren't four vehicles, but that one vehicle had been split in half by the drunk woman.

The two loudest men were standing in the ditch next to something that was covered with a jacket. One of the men removed the jacket, uncovering a car seat with an unresponsive baby strapped inside. My father's decades of training instantly kicked in:

First impression, possible cervical injury from head turned far right, chin over shoulder, head pointed down. Second impression, oxygen deprivation, infant's skin was cyanotic with a deep bluing around the mouth.

My father reacted: I made the decision to work the code. I felt the bluing was oxygen deprivation and the child would have a chance with CPR care. I brought the infant in the car seat to the ambulance where all the equipment was. Because it was an infant-trauma-cardiac-arrest I felt the three minutes to the hospital was the infant's best chance. Stay and play was not a choice in my head. Load and go.

Ambulance in-route to the hospital.

After graduating from college, I worked with nonhuman primates for several years. My first experience was with a free-ranging population on an island in Puerto Rico. The birthing season was both lovely and tragic. Watching animals express love toward their new offspring was heartwarming. However, watching an infant slowly die from tetanus while the mother carried the limp body around made me feel helpless.

A number of infants died for random reasons. A few mothers abandoned their dead child, but most carried the corpse around, eventually letting go at some advanced stage of decomposition. One mother carried her infant around when it was nothing but an empty skull and dried straps of leather. A worker on the island took a chance and tried to grab a child's corpse for disposal but the entire group of three hundred monkeys turned on him, defending the carcass as though it was still a member of the troop.

My sister Kathleen was pregnant with her first child, a son.

She was still a teenager living with her mother. They were on the bed talking when baby Alex ripped a hole in the wall of her uterus. Kathleen soaked the goose down in blood. She remembered being at the hospital, being injected with something, and losing consciousness as the baby's heart monitor flat-lined. She woke up with a healthy son and a patched up uterus and then had two more children, daughters. Everyone is alive.

The infant from the MVA was *DOA*.

My father wrote to me about the accident:

I just came off a new call involving the murder of a three year old. Your Daddy is not tough, but because of the MVA I have a better understanding of the spirit world. When I first saw the dead infant I was filled with a clean light energy. I truly believe the baby had something to do with that. I had the mother screaming for her child and a lot of others screaming for my attention. My attention turned to the survival of my new EMT. I didn't want to lose her in the EMS field with this horrific death.

The woman technician working with my father was in training and new to the field. In the ambulance they followed protocol while removing the infant from the car seat. My father had done the procedure many times on a dummy baby, but the head of the dummy did not compare to the weight and fragility of an actual infant's head. The technician saw the baby's eyes open and close twice while removing him from the seat. My father told her, *The baby is dead. We are just doing God's work.*

He told me about eyes opening: *I once had an old lady hanging upside down in an overturned car. Skull split open. Her eyes opened and closed too. But you can't tell me that by those eyes everything is OK.*

When I was in high school a young man I dated passed out during a house fire. I went with friends to the hospital. He was on a ventilator. His eyes were half open and I thought that was a good sign. I tried to will his eyes to move and for him to be alive. Years later, after seeing death, I can return to those vacant eyes and see that he was gone and not coming back.

After Puerto Rico I joined a facility in South Carolina that bred monkeys to sell to the biomedical industry. I refer to that six month period of my life as the monkey holocaust. When a client was interested in buying male monkeys of a heavier weight, I was ordered to find these monkeys in the database and retrieve them for shipment. What the administration didn't take into consideration was that these heavy males were in field cages of mixed male and female populations that had been established in their hierarchy; and the heaviest males are always the alphas. After removing three alpha males from three different field cages, the veterinary staff started getting reports of injured infants. A number were pulled to the clinic with puncture wounds to the head from males trying to take over the troop.

I was walking through the compound with the veterinarian and a vet technician. We heard a commotion at a nearby field cage and went to investigate. The monkeys were yelling and looking at something on the chain link fence. When I got closer I saw that an infant was clinging to the fence and looking directly at us and screaming for help. At that

same moment the new dominant male grabbed the infant in his mouth and shook him violently, snapping his back in half and discarding the limp corpse. We retrieved the infant and examined the snapped spine and the vacant eyes.

The infant's death in the MVA put many members of the EMS community into grief counseling. At first my father managed to handle the event professionally but some community members expressed their sorrow by questioning his protocols. Responsibility for the infant's death was pushed onto my father. I didn't find out about his experience until months later, when he told me the story with peace-of-mind, after everyone had processed their grief and relieved each other of the responsibility, but my sister, who had been with him at the time, said she had never seen my father so grief-stricken.

I saw my father in grief for a child once.

I was sixteen and I left in my Crown Victoria for the gym.

My father had just installed new lights and sirens on his truck. He was showing them off to my sister when a call came over the radio dispatching his company to a nearby intersection for an MVA. My sister went with him; both were excited to use the new equipment. They laughed while driving down the road, lights and sirens blazing. They pulled onto the scene and my father recognized my car, which was totaled and on someone's lawn. The other car was worse. My father went right into fire-chief mode and focused on assessing and responding, but he couldn't come near me. He sent my sister and the other EMS crew to take care of me. He tended the unconscious woman in the other car. I had been crying and I had wet myself, and my knees were bashed up, but I was alive. My sister yelled to my father that I was fine, annoyed, as though I did this on

purpose. He still couldn't come near me and made sure that the volunteers performed extra precautions during the extraction protocol.

I was laid up on the couch for days. My father came in from work and said he was having a hard time. He was feeling depressed and clutched his chest, saying that it felt heavy. My brush with death had affected him. It took him more than a week to recover from my accident.

I left the hospital traumatized and skeleton-thin after a bowel obstruction.

I was standing in my grandmother's kitchen cooking something that I would barely eat. My twin sister was with me and her toddler daughter was coloring at the table. We were talking about something trivial. My sister turned away for just a second. I looked at my niece and when my sister turned back I was sobbing. She chuckled a little, God bless her, and hugged me. Knowingly, my sister asked if it was her daughter that made me cry. I saw my niece's helplessness, and my weakened state could not bear it. There is a tension between the love we have for children and the sickening fear that something might harm them. This tension erodes part of the psyche. The selfish part, perhaps. I felt something while looking at my niece that stays with me always. I feel it whenever I think of my nieces and nephews. It is a permanence that doesn't have a name; and it doesn't fade with time.

The Mind's Occupation

My nephew Brayden wanted me to write him a story. I asked what he was currently interested in to get some ideas. He was seven at the time and quite enamored with computers and games, though he was still learning how to read (he could navigate computers by memorization). My mother told me his favorite online video game was called Wizard 101. The game type is an *MMO*, which means *massively multiplayer online*, the themes and graphics of which cater to younger, more imaginative audiences. I opened an account (which was free) and began to individualize my avatar. Avatar customization gives players the liberty of self-expression through various options and combinations of physical characteristics. Once I started picking out my avatar's hair-color, I was hooked.

I never got around to writing the story for my nephew, but we played online sometimes - our avatars would meet up in an agreed location - and every time we met we would jump up and down in order to express our enthusiasm for seeing each other in such an imaginative space. The first weekend I played this video game (meant for children) I stayed up until 5 AM two consecutive nights. My eyes were bloodshot and I had a headache. I usually went to bed early - around 9 or 10 'o clock - but once I started playing video games I developed a habit of staying up. On weeknights, when I had to work, I was getting to bed around midnight or one; on the weekends I was getting to bed much later. After so many years of going to bed early - I had nothing better to do - I now have the (bad) habit of going to bed at 3 AM and not waking up until noon or one. My mornings are most peoples' afternoons; my dinners are when most people are having late-night snacks. I love being a night-owl (there is something about being up when

everyone else is asleep) but when I have to get up early to accommodate the rest of the world, I am rather cranky, and very tired.

After a couple of months my sister, Elizabeth, purchased her own Xbox and started playing video games: specifically, Halo: Reach. It didn't take her long to convince me to buy my own Xbox and copy of Halo: Reach. My Nephew Brayden was upset that I stopped playing Wizard 101, but I convinced my mother to buy him his own Xbox. He plays Halo with us sometimes, but his age makes him less suitable to play in large groups (he usually demands to play Spartan Ops while the rest of us want to play War Games).

I purchased and played other video games and invested a lot of time and energy in playing online. I found it to be a relief, a comfort, to finally have a creative outlet to distract me from daily stresses (mostly work and future plans). Many of these video games will track how much time you spend playing. For Halo: Reach it calculated that I had spent sixteen days playing; but I stopped playing so much once the new Halo 4 game came out.

Another video game I have invested a good amount of time in is Skyrim. This is an open-world video game with medieval and magical themes (dragons are involved in the main storyline). There are a variety of humanoids to choose for avatars. I prefer the *Khajiit* race, which is a humanoid cat people, because they come with a useful, and frequently applicable, power called *night eye* (they can see in the dark).

While traveling into virtual spaces, our movable minds have a minimum carry capacity; therefore, our mental baggage is left behind in our physical bodies. There is a lot of debate surrounding the nature of video games and the effect it has on its constituents. Gamers are often accused of being introverted and rather withdrawn; the

time they dedicate to their virtual life in virtual worlds is equal or more so to the time they dedicate to their *real* lives in the *real* world. *Virtual* and *Real* are words based on perception (what makes something *real*?). Exciting virtual lives can be more productive and satisfying than monotonous *real* lives. In *Skyrim*, I found productivity in collecting various reagents - such as flowers, claws, and berries – and experimenting with making potions, like healing elixirs and deadly poisons. Another activity that I found rather satisfying was looting. Sometimes I would just go and look through my virtual possessions and admire them. With gaming there also comes a fulfillment of completing quests. Being assigned a task, then setting forth on an adventure, overcoming obstacles, and reaping the rewards and benefits is a fruitful way to live a virtual life.

Our minds can establish a physical counterpart while existing within virtual space. This body is called an avatar. The avatar is an image like any other that makes up our perception of what is real. My self and my virtual image exist in tandem since my mind can occupy either body at will. Our perception is merely how we process the light that touches an object and then touches us. My avatar emits light that I perceive, and since my mind is occupying that body, I am simply looking at a virtual reflection of my self. Between realities our two bodies are merely an exchange of light. But while my mind is escaping the tensions of my physical reality as well as exploring and occupying these virtual spaces and virtual bodies, I am creating a multifaceted, multi-character identity that may confuse or enrich the whole, depending on my mental management. Technology is conducive to my mental movement and it creates a blank history with every new reality I encounter, allowing me new life experiences.

Gaming's greatest benefits for me are the lines of communication that have been established, and strengthened, between my family and me. After my family heard about the fun my sister and I were having they followed suit. My Brother bought his Xbox, followed by my other Sister (her three children also play now). Then Brayden received his and my father was the most recent addition to my network. We live across four different states, two time zones, and see each other about twice a year. Now, with our Xboxes, we are in constant communication. Research has shown that game playing amongst family members strengthens bonds; this has been a noticeable occurrence as we spend each session having fun together.

I balance my *real* life and virtual life in a manner that I consider healthy (and productive). I can't, and won't, say I prefer one over the other; rather, each half of my life forms one whole life with which I am content. In my virtual life, not only am I doing productive and satisfying work, but I get to spend time with my family (when we say goodbye to each other we say "see you later" rather than "talk to you later" because it does feel as though we are seeing each other). In my *real* life I get to interact with new people and create worlds and stories in my head (and then transform them into artifacts), which is equally productive and satisfying.

EPIC ESSAYS

A Patient's Account of Medical Technology

While suffering from declining health I was introduced to the violence of medical technology. Enduring many punishing treatments has created a grand tension within my life and an irreconcilable paradox. I should be dead. I should have died a very slow, agonizing death by starvation. Modern medicine is the reason I am alive. Though I am grateful to be alive, I resent the medical treatments to which I was subjected. Once my health stabilized I took my treatment into my own hands and removed the violence; however, I will always be resentfully indebted to the medicine that kept me alive.

During the summer of 2008 I became very ill and went to a doctor. This office visit started a chain reaction of appointments and tests and a misdiagnosis and a series of wrong treatments that lead to good enough treatments that were followed by detrimental treatments. From 2008 to the beginning of 2012, I experienced the worst years of my life at the hands of medical technology.

After many months of invasive tests and poor health I found a doctor who properly diagnosed me. Because cancer was on the list of possibilities my mother, stepfather and father accompanied me to the diagnosis visit. When she said I did not have cancer my parents were relieved. I, however, was angry. I was angry because I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. Whether it was cancer or Crohn's my life had been severely interrupted. The doctor listed my choices for treatment, many of which were immunosuppressants that had serious side effects, like cancer, infertility, birth defects or death. After she finished, everyone turned to me as though I would automatically know what to do.

The doctors I encountered presented these violent medical technologies as inconsequential, even as they listed the horrendous side effects. These choices are full of their own subjectivity and industry influence. As a patient, you are seriously suffering or perhaps dying and there is no time to decide and it is impossible to imagine what life will be like with these treatments. The choices are made without knowing what is at stake. I am resentful toward the doctors who never acknowledge that these medicines come with a cost.

Before my diagnosis, when I was suffering the most, I saw my family's general practitioner. Like many doctors I have dealt with, she is motivated and affected by the market. At the time, I had serious intestinal pain, inflammation and gastro-paresis (my digestive tract was not moving). When I mentioned my anxiety she gave me samples of Cymbalta and delivered a sales pitch on why she felt Cymbalta was the best on the market. I had to point out to her that the label stated it is not for patients with stomach motility problems. When I asked to go on birth control, I requested an older pill that I had taken before but the doctor tried to sell me on Yaz. Again, I informed her that the commercial for Yaz states that it is not for patients with inflammatory diseases.

I have spent years working in academia and the biomedical research industry, as well as years as a patient in the medical system. I have come to realize that having a degree does not mean someone is educated. The human condition is a complicated matter that cannot be simplified and no person has enough information or knowledge to completely understand how any individual is affected by the world they live in. A streamlined medical education with a hidden curriculum does not put a doctor's understanding of my health and wellbeing above my own. All of the doctors I have

encountered disregard patients' personal anecdotes because they are not objective. However, scientific research produces data only. That empirical data is processed via subjective interpretation and then formulated into a conclusion by people. Doctors are not any more objective than patients. Excluding a patient's subjectivity is a serious oversight in medicine. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has written about the reality at the end of the process of creating a purely objective universe and how there is no longer anyone there to see it¹. The two states coexist at all times. Instead of separating the two it would be more fruitful to understand the relationship that exists between them.

My personal, subjective experience with medicine is just as important to my health as the objective information that accompanies the treatments. My first medication was prednisone, which is a hardcore steroid. I gained weight and developed a moon-face. This drug did not stop my inflammation but it reduced it enough so I could eat without throwing up as much. The few months I was on this drug I felt my body chemistry change. My skin produced greasy moisture, especially around my eyes, and whenever I coughed my face, hands and chest flushed with heat. The next treatment was a shot I had to give myself. It is called Humira and it is classified as a biologic drug. It suppresses a part of the immune system called the Tumor Necrosis Factor (TNF). The most serious side effects are cancer and death. On injection days I would pace and sweat. It took a number of attempts to finally inject myself, and I would always scream and cry. It was like injecting acid into my leg. I lived in fear of this shot. The anxiety was constant. Luckily, the treatment failed and I ended up with a bowel obstruction, so I had a good reason to stop taking Humira.

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011) 34. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011) 34.

I was hospitalized for six days with no food or water and just an IV. I also had a nasal gastric tube, which was the most violent experience of my life. They inserted a tube through my nasal cavity and down my esophagus and into my stomach. As the tube entered my nasal passage I heard and felt a cracking and crunching noise, and then blood leaked from my nostril. When the tube reached my throat I gagged and vomited. The nurses were inexperienced so they kept removing the tube halfway through and starting over. At one point the tube was in my lungs and I coughed and coughed but when I tried to speak nothing came out and when I tried to remove the tube the nurses restrained me. They eventually pulled the tube out which later caused an upper respiratory infection. The doctor took over and inserted the tube into my nose, the most painful part, and then walked away when someone called his name. He left the tube in my nose for a few minutes while I cried. Then he came back and successfully inserted the tube into my stomach. I cried like I have never cried before. It was a helpless and hopeless crying. It's how I imagine torture victims cry.

After I was discharged I began taking an immunosuppressant called Imuran. This drug stops the formation of an enzyme that is used to construct DNA. It did not put me into remission but it did greatly reduce my symptoms. I had a chronic sore throat. The label said I should tell my doctor immediately if this side effect occurred but my doctors always dismissed it. All of my hair grew in thicker as well, especially on my feet and around my nipples. I stopped throwing up after meals but I was not relieved of the worst pain experienced by people with Crohn's. I had a stricture, which is when the intestinal wall thickens and hardens from scarring caused by repeated inflammation. It is like someone stepping on a hose. There was a regular pattern of intense pain I experienced.

Because of my reduced stomach motility I became terribly constipated. Stool would sit in my intestines, not advancing, causing painful ulcers. After a few days the stool became toxic and my sympathetic nervous system took over and caused what I call an emergency evacuation. Liquid feces from the upper intestinal track pushed through my system like a freight train, forcing harden stool through the inflamed and ulcerated tract, and everything bottle-necked at the stricture. The pressure came in contractions. I did Lamaze breathing and held onto walls and bathroom fixtures. I rocked back and forth. When the pain peaked I started to panic because it was unbearable and I could not escape it. Then there was an inner gurgle and the pressure was relieved for a moment until the next contraction came. When it was over and everything was cleared out, and the toilet was filled with stool, blood and mucus, I was drained of energy. The worst episode happened in a movie theater bathroom where I almost yelled for help but decided not to because I did not have any health insurance at the time.

I lived in London as a student for several months and was covered under the country's free healthcare system. I was unaware of the heavy weight our healthcare system forces onto our shoulders. I cannot convey the relief I felt knowing that the system had my back when I needed care.

After two years of the Imuran I met a doctor who was more aggressive with my treatment. She added a steroid and a biologic to my regime. The new biologic is called Remicade. It also blocks TNF, but this drug is administered through a three-hour IV infusion. After a few months the medications reduced enough of the inflammation that my stricture could be removed. Eleven inches of my small intestine were removed. The day after the surgery my doctor visited me and I expressed my desire to go off the

biologic; my surgeon had told me that it was important I stayed on some kind of anti-inflammatory but it did not matter which one. My doctor got upset and threatened me with my worst fear. She said if I went off Remicade I would return to my worst state of illness. She listed reasons why I should stay on the drug and I realized she was listing my demographics, and then I remembered signing a release form that allowed her to use my patient information for research. She used my worst fear against me so that she could stack her data in favor of this drug, which costs around \$3000 per treatment and is usually prescribed every two to six weeks.

Eventually I contracted drug-induced lupus from the Remicade. I was crippled when I woke in the mornings. It took me an hour to unravel myself and get out of bed. I felt like a crumpled piece of paper. My joints would lock up and my limbs were always stiff. The word fatigue does not describe the severe lack of energy I felt. I was enduring a low quality of life. My doctor told me that these side effects were outweighed by the benefits of the drug. I broke out in hives during my last infusion and finally had enough. I walked out of her office and never went back. She and all the other doctors I met are unaware that the medical technologies they prescribe are violent and often terrorize the body. I have been off Remicade for over two years and not only am I still in remission but I am the healthiest I have ever been. Immunosuppressants are the trendy method for treating Crohn's disease right now but in my opinion immunosuppressants are analogous to bloodletting. Any measured positive effect is a consequence of too many variables and ultimately these drugs do more harm than good.

When we face a chronic illness or threat of death and then we are subjected to the violence of medicine, suicide does cross our mind. It is actually quite common, almost

expected. During the last day of my hospitalization for the bowel obstruction I found myself in a private room with the NG tube removed and my painkillers cut off. I was lucid enough to start processing my situation and I burst into tears and cried the words “What’s the point?” over and over. After I recovered enough, I went to London in an attempt to fulfill my childhood dream of being a National Geographic girl and someday live in a foreign wilderness. I found I was too sick and too dependent on medical technology to accomplish such things. I felt as though I no longer had purpose. I stared into the abyss and the abyss did indeed stare back. My love for my family kept me alive. I fought the urge to kill myself and instead dropped out of the graduate program and went home.

Before I became sick I struggled with life just like everyone else. I suffered from a number of emotional and personal hardships. When the physical hardship of my illness began I was forced to stop in my tracks and examine my self and my life. After experiencing the moment when I weighed the question of whether life was worth living or not, I arrived at a turning point. I accepted my new circumstances and looked back on the person I had been and what I had put myself through and said “something has to change or I won’t make it much longer.” This moment marked the beginning of a transformation. This transformation wasn’t immediate, though. It took a lot of self-reflection and self-discipline over a two-year period in order for me to come out the other side. Experiencing failure was a godsend. I came home from London thoroughly defeated, but I found that the world kept turning. I was suddenly less afraid. I applied to nine different writing programs and was accepted into one. I graduate in a couple of months and it was by far the best decision I have ever made. My years of professional

restlessness are gone and the contentment of my true vocation has taken its place. When the worst years of my life ended the better years started.

I figured out how to manage medical technology and minimize the violence. I educate myself about my body and my health and I reflect on my traumatic experiences. I look at what worked and what did not work and the role subjectivity plays in medicine. I follow a holistic approach and I know that optimal health is a balancing act of multiple variables and ultimately my responsibility. Holistic medicine is a long-term practice, though. When we spend years neglecting our health and suddenly become very ill there usually is not enough time to reverse the years of damage with holistic practices only. That is when we become dependent on the reactionary nature of conventional medicine. Holistic medicine is not perfect by any means. We still have not struck a balance between subjectivity and objectivity within medicine on either side. I have come to depend more and more on my own intelligence when it comes to my health and less and less on the medical system. When I do visit doctors it is to gain knowledge I do not already have. If doctors do not have any new information to contribute to my wellbeing or they are not receptive to my own contributions then I do not return to their office. The last conventional gastroenterologist I visited rolled her eyes at me when I mentioned alternative treatments.

Currently, the only medication I am on is cannabis. I hate getting high. It makes me panic. I cannot smoke because I have a sensitive set of lungs. Fortunately, medical cannabis has evolved. There are certain strains that have very low amounts of THC and high amounts of what is called CBD. CBD is a powerful anti-inflammatory and anti-spasmodic. I consume a capsule of this kind of cannabis oil every day and it does not get

me high. When I take my capsules and eat well and take care of myself by exercising, managing stress and having healthy relationships I feel healthier than ever. The cannabis treats more than just my Crohn's; it has cleared up my chronic eczema as well. My last gastroenterologist had no interest in the cannabis and ignored my claims of remission, recording the status of my disease as active in my files and urging me to take an immunosuppressant. When she received the results of my healthy blood work her response was terse, as though she had lost interest in me. My appointment with her was fifteen minutes long and she was rude and dismissive, and her office charged my insurance over \$400, one hundred of which I had to pay out of pocket. She lost my business.

If industrialized medicine wants to put their markets above our health then losing our business is how we respond in kind. There have been a couple of times when a doctor's mistake has cost me several hundred dollars in medical bills. I tried to be the middleman between insurer and provider and resolve the mistake but in the end I let the bill go to collections. I continue to hear stories from people about how they are wrongfully charged by their providers and their insurers refused to pay, so they let the bills transfer to debt collectors. We agree that we are content to ignore the collectors. The days of industrialized medicine putting a high price on our lives are numbered.

Too much has happened to be able to determine exactly what went right and what went wrong. I have learned that paradoxes do not have to be resolved. Instead, trying to understand the dynamics of a paradox can be fruitful. I take issue with the medical system and its violence but I recognize that it kept me alive. I know that my health is my responsibility and if I neglect it I will have to face the consequences of

modern medical technology. I know that if my loved ones were suffering or dying I would want them to live by any means necessary. I have suffered greatly from my illness but it has opened my eyes to a better life. I do not wish ill health or violence on anyone. I do wish for better health within a better system. And so the irreconcilable paradox is.

Bursting Our Bubbles

I grew up next door to a church. My parents sent my siblings and me to Sunday mass as well as Sunday school, to groom us as Catholics. However, when I was a teenager I learned the facts about Christianity from one of my social studies teachers. Testaments and bibles are sociopolitical tools created by men long after the life and death of Jesus, and women, among other groups, got screwed in the deal. I remember feeling lied to and manipulated. My reaction was to resist Catholicism's attempt to control me, to make me complacent, to put me in my place as a woman. But I also felt deprived of answers, and no animal sits well with uncertainty. I was robbed of my peace-of-mind.

I was spiritually adrift until my freshmen year of high school. My global studies teacher taught us about the various dominant religions, Eastern and Western. I was still adrift, but instead of being aimless I had destinations and traveled the realms of belief. The Eastern religions were the most alluring. Western religions seem like a set of rules intended to create one kind of person and one way-of-life. Eastern religions focus on awareness of the self and the world in which the self exists and achieving a peaceful balance between the two.

The numerous options are exciting but unsettling. I can pick and choose different ideals and ways-of-life that suit my disposition but by no means have I achieved any certainty. Buddhism and Taoism offer excellent principles of awareness that I have pillaged for my own use. After reading Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" I became convinced that my Ego was out to destroy me. Taoism has been a useful guide to reducing my egotistical tendencies. The meditation practices of Buddhism have developed my insight and have taught me mindfulness. I will take up any tools that help

me to maintain control of the chaos of being conscious. But even though I have high regard for these practices I'm still not satisfied by all of the answers they offer. There is something inadequate about any one system of belief.

In my late twenties I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. My life was falling apart. I became delusional and decided to go to London for grad school even though deep down I knew I no longer wanted a career in academia. I was in denial about how sick I was. I was losing my mind over visa applications when I decided to call my brother so that he could talk me off the ledge. He had recently recovered from drug addiction and the AA program he attended had transformed him into a sober and enlightened person. I asked him what to do. The first step in the twelve-step program was to believe in a higher power. Peter's program was nondenominational and told its members to believe whatever they wanted. The point was to hand over control of your life to someone else and make it that thing's problem. Peter started his prayers with "Dear whoever-the-fuck." He told me to get off the phone with him, kneel down and pray, and then he said something life-changing. "When you're done go outside and help a homeless person. Get out of your head, you're not that important." I did what he said. When I went for a walk outside I came across a homeless man within a few minutes, even though I was in an upper-class neighborhood. The man asked me for money and I gave him a dollar. He said thank you and that God would take care of me.

So I decided to try believing in God for a while. During that period of time I did experience a change. I went to London with a different outlook. Instead of trying to control the direction of my life, I left it up to fate. I made it someone else's responsibility. I found my way into a relationship with my roommate. The relationship was intense.

Before him I had a difficult time having orgasms during sex. I was always anxious and distracted and there wasn't much quality in my relationships. But with this guy I decided not to care or worry about the things that usually occupied me. It was all someone else's problem. I had my first ever multiple orgasms with this guy (three to be exact). My relationship and trip to London eventually devolved and I moved back home and returned to agnosticism, but I definitely gained some enlightenment and insight from my brief time as a believer, as well as the ability to have multiple orgasms. What I learned was that occupying the center of the universe is tiresome.

Another realm of belief that has affected my life is science. There is a prominent groupthink culture within the larger scientific community that tends towards nihilism and considers scientists with spiritual beliefs to be heretics. They are treated as outcasts by this popular scientific cult that prescribes to atheism. Science may disprove religious superstition but it is a young system that has only collected a sliver of a fraction of the knowledge that the universe has to offer. I like science because it gives us information about the material universe, but it marginalizes the self as a mere byproduct of biological function.

My older sister is an atheist. Once I told her that, "Atheism lacks imagination. It's boring," and she replied, "It's effortless." The statement made me think that something doesn't feel quite right about atheism and science. Science takes effort. It is relentless and always in the pursuit of data. There can be no certainties without all of the information. "In science, we can't *affirmatively* know or assert something until we've empirically proven it; absent any such affirmative data, the true and proper scientific stance should be

one that echoes Socrates' credo of 'I know that I don't know.'"² To me, atheism seems to stop short of all of the information.

At first, I was faithful to science. The practice made me sure of the answers I got and promised peace-of-mind. So I became a scientist. For several years I worked in 'scientific' animal research. I began doubting almost immediately. I have come to learn that there is science and there is science. The former is the methodical collection of data on our material universe that contributes to knowledge. The latter is the collection of data that contributes to information that individuals and groups use for self-serving political, social and/or economic purposes. People declare campaigns in the name of science - though science is not its name, it has yet to receive a name because it has not yet peaked - and this practice is rampant. It is a mutation of applied science, which is when scientific information is applied to practical uses, such as developing technology. This unnamed practice isn't motivated by practicality; rather it is fueled by greed and self-interest. Corporate bodies like Monsanto, pharmaceuticals, hospitals and universities all use scientific information to support their efforts to make money or advance careers. But they deal only in information, not knowledge. Information is data that can be moved around, exchanged and collected, whereas knowledge is rooted in experience. A scientific experiment can provide me with the information that what goes up must come down, but it is my experience of jumping off things that makes it knowledge.

I've seen many incompetent experiments manipulated, and once that data leaves the lab in the form of publications it is generally accepted as objective scientific

² Nicholas Kardaras, *The Scientific Atheism Fallacy: How Science Declares That God is Dead But Can't Prove It*, Psychology Today, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/how-plato-can-save-your-life/201106/the-scientific-atheism-fallacy-how-science-declares-god-is->

information. There was a man whose face was shot off. He received a face transplant. It was in the news. I was in charge of the monkeys that were experimented on for this specific procedure. Many monkeys were experimented on. The pharmaceutical company funded it. The drug worked in that each monkey did not reject the face transplant, however, every single monkey died as a result of the drug. They continued to experiment on new monkeys with the same drug but other drugs were added, but each one died of either cancer or organ failure.

I remember when the successful human face transplant hit the news. I knew the man who led the experimental surgeries. He told me that the patient who received the face transplant was going to die from the drug. The hospital received a lot of good press and made a lot of money off this procedure. The man hasn't been in the news and is still alive as far as I know. But in a recent interview, one of the surgeons was asked what he wants for the patient as time goes on. The doctor replied that he would like to see the patient on less medication. This unnamed practice that operates under the name of science is something I distinguish from actual science within my belief system.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard warns against the consequences of science objectifying all of existence: "At the end of this irresistible process, learning to a perfectly objective universe, which is as it were the supreme stage of reality, there is no subject any longer; there is no one there to see it. That world no longer has need of us, nor of our representation."³ I found this statement jarring. I started to see the objective laws and material of the universe as something separate from the subjective and lawless present of consciousness within the universe.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011) 34.

Sir Roger Penrose is a knighted physicist who has made significant contributions to the body of physical law. Despite his accomplishments, he is generally viewed as a heretic by the scientific cult because of his attempts at expanding scientific practice into the realm of consciousness, which is known as the 'hard problem.' Because conventional scientists cannot explain consciousness using the physical laws that are currently available they generally ignore the problem and dismiss the phenomenon as inconsequential. Penrose has proposed that in order to study and understand consciousness we have to see it as a phenomenon that is separate from physical law and requires an entirely different set of principles.

I read Subhash Kak's essay "The Universe, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness" in the book *Quantum Physics of Consciousness* and was attracted to the idea that consciousness exists as its own continuum, separate from the space-time continuum. The language was dense and hard to follow but I was able to transform the concept in a visual aid. Imagine a body of water. Resting on top of the body of water is a net, and in the net are marbles of various sizes. To me, the net represents the space-time continuum of our universe. The marbles represent the matter of the universe that is subject to its very strict laws. And the body of water represents the consciousness continuum. This concept gives me some relief because one of my favorite belief systems, science, isn't completely ignoring the hard problem. There are people brave enough and creative enough to try and tackle such a complicated and mysterious unknown.

Hegel explains that, "These forms [of belief] are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not

conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole."⁴ The religious frame their beliefs in the spiritual while scientists frame their beliefs in the physical and philosophers frame their beliefs in the thoughtful. Why limit ourselves to just one mode of belief? Isn't more perspective helpful in forming comprehensive understandings? There are a variety of examples where the combination of systems has produced significant results: "Humanity has found cultural ways to exploit or get around physics. We built aeroplanes to fly despite the limitations imposed by gravity, and we invented endless variations on the basic biological themes, from Shakespeare's sonnets to Picasso's paintings. In each case, the supposedly fundamental sciences give us only a very partial picture of the whole."⁵ Hybridization is a component of progress.

I call myself a devout agnostic. The protagonist Pi, in Yann Martel's novel "The Life of Pi," feels sorry for agnostics because they suffer from indecision. But I don't see it as indecision. I see it as existing among the paradoxes without attempting reconciliation. When it comes to individual experience, we each interact with the creative space of belief in a customized way. Whether we approach belief through the spiritual, physical or thoughtful we are still engaging imaginative space. Once we resolve our beliefs one way or the other we confine ourselves to a bubble within that space. If we seek the path to a comprehensive belief system then we should not expect peace-of-mind. An anthropology teacher once said to me that people with religion live longer. I believe

⁴ George W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenon of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1976) 2.

⁵ Massimo Pigliucci, *Who Knows What*, Aeon Magazine, <http://aeon.co/magazine/world-views/massimo-pigliucci-on-consilience/>

that statement applies to anyone with a concrete belief system that offers them peace-of-mind. To be open to all realms of belief and all of its possibilities is to live a restless life.

The evolution of my beliefs has been a series of bubble pops and reformations. Every new experience and bit of attractive information I encounter will burst my bubble and when that bubble regrows the space concealed within is slightly expanded. My first bubble burst was devastating. I was twenty-two years old and left home for the first time. I realized how limited my world-view had been.

Opposing worldviews induces a psychological state called cognitive dissonance. When people try to hold two contradicting ideas, beliefs or values in their mind at the same time they experience excessive mental stress and discomfort. Back in the days before the leaps and bounds of technology and communication, worldviews and beliefs were a little more isolated from one another. The main political or religious bodies opposed to each other, but now, with mass communication through technology and the Internet, rapid travel of our worldviews is causing countless collisions. These bumps and crashes create defensive explosions that result in irrational tensions. The comment sections of the Internet are cesspools of cognitive dissonance. Developing coping mechanisms for cognitive dissonance would greatly benefit our society. Tolerance is a matter of people respecting each other's bubbles.

In recent years my twin sister has broken away from socio-normative culture and has been developing independent views. Some people consider her radical and inflammatory. Our worldviews overlap in some areas but are quite opposed in others. But I am dedicated to maintaining our close relationship because I value it more than being right. I am therefore inclined to cope with my cognitive dissonance. I find that if I

exercise my mind instead of staying rooted in one perspective I develop mental agility. I don't see my flexibility as vacillating or being indecisive or easily manipulated. It's more about empathy and being able to accept that my worldview and consciousness are by no means an absolute. Sometimes my sister convinces me that an opposing idea is something I need to start considering. Other times I am much less receptive. However, in these moments of opposition, when I am overwhelmed by mental stress, reminding myself that I love and value my sister helps to relieve the pressure. The continuous mental exercise helps me to build agility that contributes not only to expanding the confines of my bubble but to teaching me tolerance for the bubbles of others.

Poetics

My thesis is a collection of personal narrative essays that stem from my life experience. The process of examining my life has activated my anthropological lens, which led me to dissecting a perplexing duality that affects my poetics: subjectivity and objectivity. I was introduced to this conflict when I was an undergraduate, during an introductory anthropology class on animal behavior. Basically I was told that scientists had come up with strategies for quantifying behavior but that the data produced are still susceptible to the investigator's subjectivity, so as researchers we just have to do the best we can.

I didn't think about the issue too much at that point. After I graduated I moved to Puerto Rico and did behavioral research with free-ranging monkeys on an island about a mile off the coast. I remember my boss telling me that as a researcher I had to be as objective as possible and not interact with the monkeys and to pretend I was a tree. What I discovered, as well as most of the other researchers on the island, is that interacting with the monkeys was the best part. Getting to know them personally and establishing a relationship with each one, whether it be positive, negative or indifferent, was not only rewarding but it was how I came to understand the fundamentals and variability of behavior and relationships.

I measured this experience against another one where I worked with the same species of monkey. This time I was managing a neuroscience lab in Massachusetts. There were six male monkeys living in cages in a small room in a basement on a college campus. We manipulated their testosterone levels and put them through a battery of cognitive, motor and behavioral tests. We found that the sex hormone had no effect on

their cognition or motor skills but when their testosterone was high they tended to watch video footage of other monkeys fighting for slightly longer periods of time; and the results were published. But I couldn't help question the entire experiment. What can six monkeys with psychological problems from living in cages objectively tell us about cognition and behavior in humans? According to my subjective observations these monkeys were full of personality, and suffering from their living conditions, even though we followed all of the government laws regarding housing and caring for them. Because of the artificial circumstances I didn't feel I learned all that much about the human condition compared to my experience in Puerto Rico. All I observed was the darker side of humanity. But science didn't want my opinion; it wanted the results of our contrived study.

A lot of scientists seem to ignore the presence of their own subjectivity within their work and have somehow deluded themselves into thinking they are working within the confines of objectivity. "Clearly, there are aspects of human culture in which the very notion of 'objective and ultimate truth' is a category mistake."⁶ To surmise that there is one answer that applies to the whole of humanity would indicate uniformity throughout our species and leave diversity unaccounted for. Donna Haraway has considered the constant presence of subjectivity within science: "Race, sex and class fundamentally determined the most intimate details of knowledge and practice, especially where the appearance is of neutrality and universality. These issues are hardly irrelevant to primatology, a science practiced in the US nearly exclusively by white people, and until quite recently by white men, and still practiced overwhelmingly by the economically

⁶ Massimo Pigliucci, *Who Knows What*, Aeon Magazine, <http://aeon.co/magazine/world-views/massimo-pigliucci-on-consilience/>

privileged."⁷ When scientists try to quantify behavior they aren't accounting for the subject's culture, rather they are accounting for their own. For instance, when a white female tests the effect of estrogen on memory in monkeys, the data are applied to white women and are never applied to that particular species of monkey.

The next situation where I found myself caught in the conflict of objectivity and subjectivity was the medical industry. When I became ill, the many doctors I visited to treat my disease trusted research studies and mistrusted my subjective experience. Patients aren't considered credible sources of information when it comes to their own health. Somehow, doctors have decided that their opinion is objective because it is informed by experiments that attempt to standardize human variability. "Truth be told, we don't know whether the laws that control the behaviour of quarks scale up to the level of societies and galaxies, or whether large complex systems exhibit novel behaviour that can't be reduced to lower ontological levels."⁸ The doctors weren't being objective about my health; they were applying uniformity to the chaos of variables that make up human health. This is when the conflict of subjectivity and objectivity started to piss me off.

During the program, while I was stewing over this conflict, one of my professors noticed something about my writing. She said that my essays are personal and subjective but they are written in a clinical and objective tone. At that time, I was reading Jean Baudrillard and the following quote shed a brilliant light on the tense relationship between objectivity and subjectivity: "At the end of this irresistible process, learning to a perfectly objective universe, which is as it were the supreme stage of reality, there is no

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions* (New York London: Routledge, 1989) 7.

⁸ Massimo Pigliucci, *Who Knows What*, Aeon Magazine, <http://aeon.co/magazine/world-views/massimo-pigliucci-on-consilience/>

subject any longer; there is no one there to see it.”⁹ Instead of treating the two states as mutually exclusive I began to see them as co-existing continuously in the manner of conscious life.

We can’t dismiss subjectivity without dismissing our own existence, so what can I gain from trying to understand the paradoxical relationship without siding with one or the other? Subjectivity is “kept in constant productive tension with its twin, objectivity.”¹⁰ I like the idea of objectivity and subjectivity forming a companionship rather than trying to cancel out one another. “The imaginary, which we happily associated with the real as its friendly shadow.”¹¹ The relationship is reflexive. Most of the time it is treated as conflicting, but perhaps treating it as amiable would be productive. “The detached eye of objective science is an ideological fiction, and a powerful one. But it is a fiction that hides - and is designed to hide - how the powerful discourse of the natural sciences really work. Again, the limits are productive, not reductive or invalidating.”¹⁰

Examining my life with an objective lens has helped me to unfold the complicated nuances of the human condition but it hasn’t simplified it into reductive pieces. Ezra Pound led the Vorticists in the undeclared war of artists against society via Imagist poetry, one of the principles of which is “Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective.”¹² Society urges me to rely on its objectivity more so than my subjectivity, but I can’t. From his essay *Vorticism*, Pound states that, “Art is more

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011) 34.

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions* (New York London: Routledge, 1989) 293, 13.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005) 18.

¹² Herbert Schneidau, “Vorticism and the Career of Ezra Pound,” *Modern Philology* 65:3 (1968) 214-227 (<http://www.jstor.org/>).

interesting in proportion as life and the human consciousness are more complex and more interesting than forms and numbers."¹³ Using objectivity to contradict or dismantle my subjective experience seems counterproductive, and pulling apart my life and putting it back together won't create some foolproof blueprint on how to create another me. As Pound puts it, " $a^2+b^2=c^2$ That is the language of philosophy. It MAKES NO PICTURE. This kind of statement applies to a lot of facts, but it does not grip hold of Heaven."¹³ Applying objective formulas to my experience results in relatable insights but there is too much human variability to be able to uniformly account for our condition. Uniform mathematics discards too many remainders that make up who we are. In Wordsworth's poem *The Tables Turned* he writes, "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; Our meddling intellect; Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—We murder to dissect."¹⁴

Knowledge comes from experience. "...one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."¹³ Until something happens to me, that thing is just information. Information is something that moves around me and is exchanged as intellectual currency. When data is something I no longer collect but do, that is when I have an experience. But knowledge is something I have to unpack from an experience. For me, writing is an exercise of unpacking said knowledge. "Any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language, just as a painter must have pigments or shades more numerous than the existing names of the colors."¹³ What I have beyond language is my own experience, which is knowledge in its raw form.

¹³ Ezra Pound, *Vorticism*, *The Fortnightly Review*, <http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism/>

¹⁴ Wordsworth, *The Tables Turned*, *The Poetry Foundation*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174826>

I originally thought my essays would vary in topic so much so that I would juxtapose them in some nonsensical order, but I found that there is an objective order to this subjective material. "Scientific practice may be considered a kind of storytelling practice - a rule-governed, constrained, historically changing craft of narrating the history of nature. Scientific practice and scientific theories produce and are embedded in particular kinds of stories."¹⁵ My objective mode is a useful tool for narrating my experiences that is for turning information into knowledge.

My scientific lens has identified three groups that my personal narratives can be divided into. The first category is "Family Essays," the second is "Epic Essays," and the third is "Sexuality Essays." My family essays are humorous and slightly exaggerated for effect, but there are other essays that are more emotional and serious and the humor provides the reader with a bit of comic relief.

My background in anthropology and primate behavior has shaped my approach to writing about my family experiences. I examine events both as the objective tree and idiosyncratic participant. There is a sense both of distance and indulgence. I can write about something as awkward and uncomfortable as the story of my brother having sex with a prostitute as long as I keep an objective distance; and I can write about the heartache I feel for my nieces and nephews by immersing myself in provocative near death events. These are examples of productive tensions.

My epic essays tackle big topics that need research and are related to my experiences over time. These three epic essays revolve around the topic of subjectivity and objectivity. I dissect three major areas of my life that depend on the fruitfulness of

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions* (New York London: Routledge, 1989) 4.

this relationship: my health, my beliefs and my writing. These essays are not fully fleshed out and will change over time as I encounter new experiences and research. This section is more about turning the lens of subjectivity on objective information. Sometimes it feels like objectivity tries to subvert my own subjectivity and invalidate my beliefs about my own health, my own worldview and my way of writing. My epic essays attempt to push back against objectivity but without rejecting or invalidating it.

My sexuality essay series attempts to show how reductionism cannot be effectively applied to sexuality. Most political arguments tend to simplify the issue, but sexuality is a multi-faceted and complicated development. Reductionism is a scientific tool that is too often used on human subjectivity. "In order to understand a complex problem, we break it down into smaller chunks, get a grasp on those, and then put the whole thing back together. The strategy is called reductionism and it has been highly successful in fundamental physics, though its success has been more limited in biology and other natural sciences."¹⁶ I break the series up into simple titles like "Bad Lovers" or "The Body" or "Women" as though I am breaking my sexuality down into simple topics, but the essays reveal the complicated nuances instead.

I'm disturbed by the current trendiness of science and its push for pure objectivity and discrediting of our subjectivity. "The eclipse of God left us up against reality. Where will the eclipse of reality leave us?"¹⁷ Scientist may think they are moving closer towards this goal of pure objectivity but subjective consciousness is ever present in our culture wars. As long as we are conscious the presence of subjectivity in the universe isn't going

¹⁶ Massimo Pigliucci, *Who Knows What*, Aeon Magazine, <http://aeon.co/magazine/world-views/massimo-pigliucci-on-consilience/>

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005) 21.

anywhere. Trying to silence it just makes it louder. Not trying to reconcile the relationship has proved to be fruitful for me. I have more tools to work with that help to maximize the knowledge I extract from my own experience. "These forms [of belief] are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole."¹⁸

¹⁸ George W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenon of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1976) 2.

SEXUALITY ESSAYS

My Romance

I looked up the definition of romance and wasn't completely satisfied with what was available, so instead I extracted a list of words from the different meanings that appeared repeatedly. These words are the following: Adventure, Attraction, Emotion, Remoteness, Mystery and Heroism. I further explore these words of romance by first rejecting their original definitions and then reassembling alternate meanings.

Adventure isn't about the dangerous or risky conditions of the circumstance experienced but rather it is about distance. Adventure is moving, covering, seeing, breathing and taking in as much distance as possible and processing all the wonder encountered along the way. Exploring land unknown or unfamiliar requires the conquering of fears unrealized and seeing sites the eyes do not recognize. People can change over distance and find their mettle in the process. Walking along the way, scraps of personality that can no longer be justified to carry are discarded. What is picked up are tools that can be used to interpret the world and all its mysteries. There is no adventure to be had in small spaces or in what has already been done. Adventure is about the distance covered, how it's covered and who it's covered with.

Attraction isn't about two objects coming together. It is about the details in between. There is a detail in every step two people take toward one another. This step is for the eyes, this step is for the shape, this step is for the skin, this step is for the smell and the last step is for the touch. If attraction was meant to be quick, over and done with, then people would just be magnets; cold objects that follow rules down to the letter. Real attraction is found in the space between two people and the exchange of messages via their sixth sense.

Emotions aren't a state of feeling but are something projected from within using tools; like eyes, mouth, hands and body. Emotions have to be expelled just like all the other toxins in the body. The heart releases these feelings, the mind processes them, deciding what is good and discarding what is not. Then the tools expel what shouldn't be kept. However, sometimes the mind is corrupted by the intoxication of bad emotions. Instead of discarding them the mind swims in a pool of mixed emotions, drunk on drama. The tools then become defective and communications are scrambled. The eyes betray the meaning of words and the body negates what the hands are saying. Pretty soon there is no room for the good, so it's discarded. Once the toxic emotions have settled into every inch of the inside, the sense of taste diminishes. Next, everything goes numb and life is watched from far away. Emotions are projections of what's inside.

Remoteness isn't about being alone or isolated. It's about connecting with what isn't there, or what is unrealized. Remoteness is removing what's seen in order to reveal what is unseen and making new emotional connections to one's surroundings. When occupying a space that is absent of people and distracting stimulation, the features of that space are noticed. Details are enhanced and everything develops new textures. Not only is environmental awareness heightened, but so is self-awareness. The removal of things from the outside open up what is on the inside, leaving the self ready to be explored. Remoteness is fortified awareness.

Mystery isn't about not understanding. It's about creating more possibilities instead of being limited to the facts. Mystery leaves room for the imagination. The mind is free to construct answers and eliminate questions. Mystery keeps all life moving forward. Leaving behind mystery a life gives that story more possibilities. After death, the life can

be relived over and over again, each lifetime being a different version. Mystery is possibility.

Heroism isn't about acts of courage or nobility. Everyone is filled with a mixture of bad and good. Being heroic is reconciling the two opposing halves. Sometimes, the good in people isn't enough to triumph. The bad in humans may be a destructive force, but it can be used as an ally when the situation calls for it. Heroism is good and evil working together for a common goal.

My Promiscuity

Until my mid-twenties, I was promiscuous. Men were a number to me. In conversation I referred to them by a descriptive title rather than their given names. Like “The Mechanic” or “The Peace Corp Guy”. Every summer I felt like I was “in season” and multiple partners occupied my agenda. I hardly ever paid for a meal.

Eventually, I reached that age when adults suddenly become aware of their behavior and are baffled by such self-destructive actions. Since then I have asked myself over and over again, *why? Why did I sleep with all those men?* Then, I’ll see a movie or read a passage that reminds me of naked Sundays, balancing on desktops or a man’s fist tangled in my hair, and I answer to myself, *oh yeah, that’s why*. I realized I slept with all those men because it was the fun romantic thing to do, and being young, I didn’t really have anything better to do.

Once, I heard a scholar explain the three stages of love. We all start with lust love, which eventually gets us to romantic love, which hopefully gets us to attachment love. Attachment love is the kind you have to really work towards, putting in hours and hours of effort and emotion. However, the distance between lust and romantic love is, in my experienced opinion, less challenging and more thrilling. A woman can tiptoe back and forth between the two emotional states of lust and romance.

Oh, I forgot about the power that comes with promiscuity, too. The female pheromones can be equated to magic. We just raise an arm in the right direction and the spell is cast. As the chemicals reach his system, the man’s eyes get glossy and you know he is in *the trance*. Their pliable state of mind is only temporary, though, so the female

has to be quick, before the spell is broken by the wrong emotional sentence or an ill-timed phone call.

According to Sephardic Jews, before Eve, God made Lilith. Adam and Lilith were made from the same clay at the same time, so Lilith saw herself as Adam's equal and refused to submit to his will. She fled and God declared her a demon. I identify with Lilith. I don't necessarily feel demons are creatures of evil. I feel demons own their power rather than relinquish it. To this day, women who own their power and equate themselves to men are declared demons, or the more modern word, sluts.

Once a woman is naked in front of a man she is the one in control. A man's brain becomes automated and his primal mechanisms take over. Women, however, are lucid during the interaction. Why can women maintain their train of thought during sex and men cannot? Is this a flaw in their design? I think that while God wasn't looking Lilith created this loop-hole so women could exploit it.

Objectively, *all* nude women are works of art. This art form, the nude woman, does not reject the fat or thin, the smooth or rough, the firm or saggy, the post-pubescent or old, the symmetrical or asymmetrical. All shapes and textures are accepted into this art form. And skin color is the icing on the cake. Whether she is creamy white, sugary caramel, spiced brown or savory black, all skin colors are a delicious topping to this art work, the nude woman.

I may question my promiscuity, but I do not regret it, and occasionally I revisit it. These interactions among humans are ancient and feral.

My People, Health and Fantasies

At age 26 I experienced what I call a premature-mid-life-crisis. My world fell apart because I couldn't meet my own expectations. After everything imploded, I went through a two-year transformation period (which I highly recommend to any troubled or lost soul). During a stint of self-reflection I reexamined my priorities and determined what really matters to me. My number one priority ended up being with people. People matter most to me, specifically my loved ones. In second place is my health (both physical and mental) and in third place are my fantasies.

There is a software tool that behaviorists use when studying relationships among animals. After inputting the data the program spits out a sort of web-like diagram. Each point in the diagram represents an individual animal and the lines that connect the points represent the strength of the relationship between those individuals. The thicker the line the stronger the bond between them. Scientists found that the healthiest and most successful animals aren't the ones with the most lines but are the ones with the thickest lines, which means that maintaining healthy, high-quality relationships with your loved ones will pay off.

Occasionally, when I attempt to faithfully believe in God and say a prayer, I tell Him to forget about me, I can take care of myself. Instead I beg that He use my allotment of prayers for my family. Whenever animals evolve a beneficial trait there is always a cost. Developing strong bonds with my loved ones keeps me happy and healthy, but if I were to lose anyone, the cost would be too much.

We also need our health in order to live productive lives, but being healthy isn't as easy I thought it would be. I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, which contributed to

my life crisis. During my transformation period I discovered how unhealthy I actually was as well as what a depressing challenge it is to completely change my diet. I'm lucky to have a bully of a twin sister who harassed me into subtracting a few harmful items from my diet and adding some life-saving foods. I didn't start listening to her until I was at my worst. One of the poisonous medications I was on gave me drug-induced Lupus. I was crippled. I would wake up in the morning positioned like a crumpled up piece of paper and in total agony. It would take an hour for me to unravel myself and get out of bed for work (doped up on some excellent pain killers). Once I sorted out the diagnosis and told my doctor to go fuck herself (taking myself off the drug and out of her care) I finally listened to my sister and started drinking Kombucha tea. The effect was almost immediate. Within a couple of days I could move my limbs again. I began to believe my sister and started listening more. My current state of physical fortitude is largely due to my diet.

I maintain my mental health with meditation. I use meditation for mental exercise rather than spiritual enlightenment. When I paused once a day to examine the inside of my head I found it to be very noisy. There were multiple tracks of thought going on at once and some were stuck on repeat. It took awhile, but eventually I sorted these thoughts and discarded the negative repeats and replaced them with positive visualizations. For example, if someone slighted me at work, instead of thinking about it on a loop I would replace the thought with my 2-year-old nephew and how he likes to rest his head on my chest when I hold him.

I think humans are happiest when they are creating. Whether they create works of art, massive structures, or children, I think humans strive to make something that isn't into

something that is. I used to pace when I was a child. I was absent from reality and walking around in my head. I could see my fantasies so clearly. I wore holes in the knees of all of my pants because I spent hours riding around the carpet on all fours, pretending to be a horse. The round wooden globes that topped the posts of my mother's bed were powerful crystal balls that I used to cast spells. My father used to chide me for stealing the handle of our push broom. He didn't know that I took the magic staff into the back pasture and stood in the middle of the field and conjured up storms. I could see it all so clearly.

Now that I am older, reality fights harder against my daydreams. I used to be able to project my fantasies over the surface of reality. Now I have to do all of my constructing inside my head. My fantasies aren't as tangible as they used to be. Though I have lost that direct connection with my fantasies, it has been replaced with something new. I call it *the sight*.

When I finally shed my fears and committed to being a writer, something happened. I started to *see* stories. I don't feel as though I'm making them up in my own head. It feels as though someone has granted me access to his or her story. I feel as though I have the privilege to see what they experienced and then do my best to document what happened. I know I am admitting to this at the risk of sounding crazy, but there are many writers who feel the same way as I do. Stephen King is one of them. He feels stories are pre-existing, like fossils. He says that writers come across these "fossils" and use their writing tools to bring the stories to life.

Though I have lost the tangibility of my fantasies it has been replaced with a new way of creating. I will always long for what I had as a child, but I am finding happiness in this new stage of creation.

The Demon-Slaying Chickens

Once upon the now, a kingdom sits next to the Lake of Greatness. The West of York is a prosperous kingdom that is ruled by the patriarchal family called The Line of Chicken. The old King, Father Chicken, sits the throne as a wise rooster of black and red plumage. His daughter the princess, Sister Chicken - a bold hen of gold and red plumage - and his son the prince, Brother Chicken - a charismatic rooster of gold and black plumage - help oversee the kingdom. One day, King Father will pass on the rule of The West of York onto one of his progeny, but as of now, no one knows which child is destined for the throne.

King Father sits atop a rusted weathervane and meditates on the kingdom stretched out before him. He sees all the land and feels at peace with his life's work. But a small ache of indecision pricks his heart. *Who shall carry on after me? I do not know*, King Father thinks to himself. *They both have their weaknesses. Prince Brother has the love of the people but is too distracted by temptations. Princess Sister works harder than any, but she is stubborn.* King Father sighs a forlorn sigh. *I am afraid I must test them, as my father once tested me.*

Princess Sister and Prince Brother are called to the throne of King Father. Both approach their father who is perched atop the throne, their heads bobbing with caution.

"My beloved children," announces King Father. "I have toiled in agony over deciding which one of you shall take my place on the throne." The siblings stretch their necks, anticipating the answer. "I have decided to put you each to the test, as I once was in my youth." They look at each other with confusion. "Each of you must venture to The Dark Lands and slay a demon." They both gasp.

“But King Father, no one goes to The Dark Lands. It’s dangerous!” clucks Prince Brother.

“The Dark Lands are much worse now than when you were young, my King Father,” squawks Princess Sister.

“Silence,” chirps King Father. “You will do as I say. I know you will both return to me and prove which one of you will rule our kingdom. Prince Brother, you shall bring me the head of a monkey demon, while Princess Sister shall bring me the head of a boar demon. Is this understood?” King Father looks upon their pleading faces with a flinty stare.

“Yes, King Father,” they say in unison.

The two siblings leave the throne, heads bobbing sullenly. They gather a few supplies and set off together towards The Dark Lands. The sun is still high in the sky when they reach the edge of a darkened tree line. The forest beyond emits unfamiliar noises. The royal siblings step forward but are stopped in their tracks when a voice sounds from a tree above.

“Who goes there?” The voice wavers with age.

“We are Prince and Princess Chicken of The West of York. Reveal yourself,” demands Princess Sister.

“Ah, I see. I remember your King Father when he ventured through these parts years ago.” A tree branch shakes slightly and a wizened squirrel shuffles out into the open. “You’ve come to slay your demons, I reckon.” The squirrel sits on her haunches, crossing her arms over her belly. “Well let me give you the same warning I gave your King Father. Your demon will play your weakness to his advantage. You must defeat your own

weakness in order to defeat your demon. If you fail you will be forever trapped in The Dark Lands.” The squirrel nods curtly and shuffles back into the foliage of the tree.

“And where might we find a monkey and boar demon?” shouts Prince Brother, but the squirrel answers with silence. Prince Brother snorts with frustration. “How on York are we to find these demonic creatures, Sister?”

“I do not know, Brother, but we are wasting time standing here. Let’s go.”

The two siblings enter the forest and follow an overgrown deer path. The foliage is thick and it tangles their feet easily, while the canopy above shrouds them in shadow, making navigation difficult. Brother’s foot gets caught in a vine for the twelfth time when he finally yells for Sister to stop for a break.

“We can’t continue like this! If the path doesn’t clear soon we will never find our way back!” Prince Brother uses his beak to break free from the vine’s grasp.

“Well, we can’t turn back now, Brother. We have to keep pressing forward.” Sister moves ahead without waiting for Brother to follow.

“Sister! Wait!” He removes the last of the vine from his foot and hurries after her, but the foliage ahead has swallowed her up and he cannot see her plumage.

“Help!” Sister yells for Brother but he cannot see her.

“Sister! Where are you?” She does not answer but Brother can hear a grunting noise just beyond some bushes. He races towards the sound and bursts through, ignoring the thorns that scrape his legs.

“I’ll kill him!” yells Sister. She is standing to one side of a small clearing and on the other side is a wild-eyed boar, scraping the ground with his hoof. Brother notices Sister doing the same, as though she is going to charge the boar.

“No!” yells Brother. “Don’t charge, Sister! Force him to chase you! Serpentine!”

At first she ignores him and readies herself to charge the boar head on. But then she remembers what the squirrel had said about her weakness. King Father was always telling her how she is head-strong and stubborn. The boar begins to charge but instead of charging back she turns and runs frantically back and forth as the wild animal demon chases her. He is right on her heels and about to run her down when she quickly dodges out of the way of a tree, but the boar does not have time to swerve and he smashes his head into the unyielding trunk and snaps his neck.

Brother rushes to Sister’s side. She is out of breath and shaky but unharmed. He stands over the corpse of the boar and pecks at it to make sure he is dead.

“Well done, Sister. We best take his head and move on.” He helps her tear off the boar’s head, which she carries under her wing.

“Thank you, Brother, for your help. I do not think I would have survived if it weren’t for you.”

They continue down the path, which is now less encroached by the vegetation. The forest is growing darker, though, so they still have some difficulty navigating. They are about to turn back when they hear a noise from the canopy above.

“Oh, weary travelers, do take a rest and indulge yourselves.” A shadowy figure slips down the trunk of a tree and lands in the dim light just in front of the siblings. “Please, have some fermented fruits and burning leaf to help sooth your weary souls.” A monkey steps toward them, holding rotten fruit in one hand and a smoky twist of leaves in the other.

Brother steps toward the monkey, enticed by the niceties that the monkey is offering. He feels that after a long and arduous day the items being offered would ease his tired feet and aching wings.

“No, Brother! Do not be tempted by the poisons! They will incapacitate you!” yells Sister as Brother takes another step forward. He is about to reach for the offerings when he thinks of King Father and how he always chides him about giving into temptation. Suddenly Brother snaps out of it and instead of reaching with his wings he kicks with his spurs and lashes the monkey repeatedly, until the demon is a headless, bloody slump on the ground.

“Thank you, Sister. I don’t think I could have resisted without your words of protest.” Brother tucks the monkey’s head under his wing and the two siblings back track their trail. By the time they reach the edge of the forest it is full dark, but they see the lights of their kingdom not too far in the distance. They set out for home as the old squirrel watches them from her branch.

Come first light, the two siblings approach the throne where their King Father perches proudly on the royal seat. They each lay their severed demon’s head at the King’s feet and bow their own heads with respect.

“My dear children. You have both succeeded in slaying your demons. I will ask each of you how you did this?”

“I would not have been able to overcome my weakness without Brother’s help,” says Sister.

“And I would not have succeeded in defeating my weakness either, if it weren’t for Sister’s help.”

“I suspected as much. You have both proven yourselves worthy of the rule of our kingdom. I shall name you both my successors and when I have passed into the Fields Beyond you shall both share the rule of our great kingdom.” The siblings embrace each other with acceptance and King Father flutters down from his perch to embrace them both with swelling pride and happiness.

Literary Genetics

Henry MayVock was a certified literary geneticist and book grower. He never had much luck with growing books but he managed to splice and produce a few decent literary-genetic lines (lit-gens) from other book seedlings. Selling the few lit-gens to more skilled geneticists gave him a meager income, but it was enough to continue his attempt at growing a bestseller. His most successful lit-gen was from the “Tolkien-King” line, which he spliced with a less known but successful book from a grower named Shore. The book that grew from this seed had holes and continuity errors in the plot and no ending, but it did produce interesting creatures called bumble-wiggens. Expert geneticists were trying to splice the lit-gen in order to extract the bumble-wiggens and transfer them into a complete and engaging story.

MayVock’s book garden was populated with mostly disasters. If there wasn’t something horribly wrong with the storyline then there was something wrong with the characters. One book didn’t even have characters. It went on for three hundred pages, describing a single landscape. That book ended up as kindling in his fireplace, like so many others. Some books didn’t grow properly. Instead of the standard 8” x 11” rectangle the paper sheets would grow into deformed shapes. One book’s pages grew as triangular spikes that could puncture the skin. Another bloomed like a rose, producing rounded petal-like pages. Though the site was eye pleasing the words on the page were obscured. MayVock sold the rose lit-gen to an interior decorator for a decent price.

After years of struggling and coping with so many failures and so very few meager successes, MayVock was pacing his garden with anxious anticipation. A book was growing in the middle of the hothouse - where the most sunlight was available - that he

had been watching carefully for months. Throughout his work he had always used careful calculation, and applied standard procedures and principles when splicing lit-gens, but one day, out of total exasperation, he spliced lit-gens with absolute recklessness. He had been saving one seed that he spent most of his savings on that produced a bestseller from a very successful grower. Out of fear of destroying this one expensive seed with a bad splice, he let it sit in a locked case. But one night, after many drinks, he opened the case and went to work on it.

Splicing involved studying the genetic string, which contained codes for things like syllable arrangements, character strengths, conflict climax etc. MayVock was too drunk to discern the codes so his splicing was random. He also decided to splice-in codes from an unsuccessful lit-gen he had produced. The book had a bad plot, but the main character was extraordinary. In the world of literary geneticists, this splicing of a pure-line with a failed-line would be considered defilement.

MayVock sat on his front porch drinking his sixth beer, and reflected on all of the bestseller pure-lines. Successful growers kept their lines so pure that the stories being produced were becoming more and more generic and similar, but for some reason they sold by the millions. The thought enraged MayVock and that was when he had the idea to break the pure-line and try something new.

One of the most surprising results was that the first page of the book grew first. Books generally grew with the last page first and slowly one-by-one the pages grew backwards towards the first. This was an antagonizing process for growers. Literary geneticists have been trying for ages to find the genetic code that would result in the first page growing

first, but the results were usually scrambled page numbers so many geneticists didn't even attempt it anymore.

This accomplishment alone could make him millions, but what's more, MayVock had been reading the pages as they bloomed and the story is a phenomenal discovery. The protagonist from his failed-line is a shining star and a hero of the highest caliber. The plot is the most engaging, with well calculated twists and sudden emotional upheavals.

MayVock was having sleepless nights, terrified that the next page would be greatly flawed and ruin the book's perfection. His days were long and desperate. He went on several long walks; otherwise the pain of staring at the unmoving pages would make him break into a cold sweat.

All of his resources went into the care and production of this single book. The other books in his garden were now brown and dry, withering away slowly to their deaths. His most expensive soil filled the pot of the masterpiece and he used the last of his savings to import the finest book growing water from the Himalayan Mountains. On cloudy days his insanity drove him to call the local weather service and demand they do something about the clouds obstructing the sun.

Now, he paced in front of the plant. The last three pages were curled together in a scroll-like bouquet and the deep red flower that bloomed from the stem above the pages was dropping seeds like a leaky faucet. Three more pages, just three more pages of the seemingly perfect ending to this masterpiece and his life was set. He would want for nothing. He would have the best hothouse in the world, with the finest everything the world has to offer and he would create for the rest of his days without pressure or fear.

The three pages weren't moving under his stare and he felt the cold sweat start so he grabbed his hat and a notebook and went for another long walk, jotting down ideas for his next splice with child-like enthusiasm. It was a sunny day and his driveway was dry and blossoms fell from the cherry trees that lined his path. With a smile he jotted something down at the top of the notepad: More Beer