

ON WRITING A LIFE

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ABSTRACT

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For the creative writing portion of this thesis, I wrote a series of nonfiction pieces in the first person. Instead of covering any period of time comprehensively, they are fragments from a life, featuring, among other things, mental illness, friendship, the aftermath of abuse, treatment, suicide, natural philosophy, religion, a loss of faith, and that which is greater than ourselves. In the treatise portion of this thesis, the section titled “On Writing a Life,” I consider what it means and what it takes to turn a life into words on a page. I explain my own relationship to writing and how for me it springs from the journaling I have done over the past decade. I examine the relationship between audience and a writer’s craft. I consider whether life is or is not a story, and if it is not, what that means for us who write about our lives. I also consider the ways in which reality as it is experienced conflicts with the ways in which we represent that reality through words, and I look at some of the ways in which the process of crafting a narrative and telling a story are in some respects artificial and might actually push us further from the really real of life. In the end, I reflect on the degree to which all we might write, in any form, mode, or voice, says something about us, and as such, I broaden my understanding of life-writing to include any form of writing we might wish to write and call it so. We need only claim it.

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PREFACE

Life-writing is inexact, and as it comes time to finalize this thesis, I feel the weight of making permanent these true stories. My intent in this endeavor was and always is to get as close to the truth as possible, and on the whole I feel I have done that well. These stories are indeed true. I feel compelled, however, to underline part of what I have written about in my treatise: namely, that there is tension between the ways in which we represent reality through words in true stories and the way in which that reality is lived and experienced. Varying degrees of fictionalization¹ are involved in the process, and certain liberties must be taken in crafting these stories.² A writer is concerned not just with making the reader understand the facts of his or her experience but also, by means of the facts and those necessary liberties, with making the reader feel what it was like. We are bound by the facts, but the stories are more than just the facts.

Also of note: as are all memories and the written record of the time, the stories themselves here are incomplete in the sense that much has been left out, not just between the stories but within them. This is inherent to crafting a narrative, but it bears emphasizing. This is most true in the stories under the *Summer 2014* heading, which were my first sustained attempt at a more traditionally narrative type of life-writing. Though the others do, too, “Rubble” in particular contains some simplifications, the occasional compression of time in the sequences of events mostly within some scenes, as well as re-created dialogue, among other things. Sometimes I wrote my way through fraught days and weeks with barely a mention of what they contained, and sometimes through moments and conversations that contained more and lasted for

¹ Dave Eggers, in the preface to his memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, writes: “For all the author’s bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction. Many parts have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for various purposes” (ix).

² Among these are changed names. All names have been changed.

much longer than they do here. As for the other stories in this collection, because they were less traditionally narrative and more essayistic, they feel much more precise, though I am sure that in some respects and in their own way they, too, are inexact.

And beyond the nature of what life-writing entails, I think it is fair to say that my writing was also limited in part simply by my present ability and current circumstances.

All this in mind, I consider the creative pieces I have written here to be more akin to exercises in the realm of life-writing, informed and in dialogue with the issues, questions, and ideas I write about in the treatise portion of this thesis. Some, I believe, succeeded more than others, and while these stories stand on their own as they are, I hesitate to say that what I have written here is in its final form. I may change my mind in future iterations of these stories about which liberties I take in the telling, and where in the stories I take them, and in what way. I may completely rewrite and restructure the stories collected here and the periods of time they cover. There may be things I wish to clarify, or new points I wish to make, or nuance I didn't add but will try to later. Old journals might remind me of something I'd forgotten, or show me something I have misremembered. What I mean is, a lot could possibly change, and for many reasons. As it is, here you have a record of where I have started in this project of taking my life and turning it into words on a page, and as it is a start and not the end, I do not wish to be bound by what I did and did not say or accomplish here. Any amendments, additions, or edits, large or small, that I might make in the future to content or simply craft in the telling of these stories should signal my getting closer to the truth, not further from it. I am still learning what I can do as a writer. I am still learning what I want to do as a writer. I am still working things out. So it is important to me that this be made clear.

BEGINNING

For the past half-hour, I have been standing in a dark bedroom watching a particularly active lightning storm. I slid open one of the windows to better hear and feel it, and I propped up my phone on the sill to record what it could. At one point dozens of bolts of lightning were flashing every second, the black night clouds glowing from within and the world lit up as if the moon were out and shining a white light as bright as the sun. Then, for a moment, the world again went dark, the lonely porch light of the house across the street shining off the wet pavement. I could smell the electricity in the air, and the mist of the rain through the window screen landed on the backs of my hands. Then streamers of blue exploded across the sky, popping, crackling, and fizzling like fireworks. The thunderclaps shook the floor and rattled the windows.

I have forgotten to wonder at the world. I remember when I was little, the excitement of going to school and learning for the first time about space, clouds, lightning, and rain. I remember, too, those first warm months of the year, and I remember the rain they bring that smells like earth, those twenty-minute summer showers whose drops refract rainbows in a sun that's still out; and after, cool humidity lingers in the air, and grass squeaks under bare feet, and the sidewalks are soaked through but still warm. I remember, too, sitting many years later by that floor-length window in my apartment, the window that faced the park with the overfull green trees, watching the rain through the glass, thinking of light, prisms, Newton, and color. How do I get that back?

An English teacher in high school said that rain is like a baptism of the earth. If that's true, then in a way all the world is sacred. That seems like a proper place to begin.

RUBBLE

Summer 2014

“Mars” from *The Planets* blared, violent and aggressive, and I fell to my knees in the rubble of my destruction. A Bible ripped apart. Scattered note cards of verses and thoughts Jesse had written out for me. Shattered ceramic plates and glass from mirrors and light bulbs. A broken knife blade on the floor in bits of crumbled plaster and “FUCK” sliced into the wall above it. The walls on all sides marred with accusations and interrogations in permanent marker, saying “Where were you?” “Look what you’ve done to me,” “Do you hear me now?” and more. Their collective shouts reverberated in my head, and groaning, pulling at my hair, I pressed my forehead to the floor, trying to get the images of that man out of my head (hotel room, family vacation, church, house, couch, doctor, etc.), unaccepting of what my life had become and of what he did to me. My hands and feet tingled, numb from the overabundance of oxygen. My vision came in and out of focus. My body shook as I hyperventilated. The thoughts and images in my head blurred, spinning. And I was waiting. *Don’t black out. Control your breathing. . . .*

From underneath the music, barely audible, came a quiet knock. I pulled myself up, readied myself, and opened the door, looking down, looking away, saying nothing. Derek stood in the doorway—I had texted him, demanding he come over. I don’t know why I used that tone. He walked in, tentative, and I turned off the music, exposing my undoing to the silence. And then we sat and did not speak.

Maybe an hour passed like this, maybe more. I don’t know. The shadows increased. The apartment darkened. I couldn’t stop shaking, but my mind began to slow. I was coming back to myself, and the well-known sinking feeling hit: *What have I just done? What was I thinking? What am I going to do?* Shame pulsed through my body with each beat of my heart.

“Look what I’ve done,” I finally said out loud, awkwardly gesturing to the profanity-laden walls, as much to Derek as to myself. I still had not made eye contact. “I’m sorry. I’m so embarrassed.”

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I’m here, Garrison. You don’t need to be embarrassed. We can clean this up.”

I paused, knowing what I wanted to ask but unsure whether it was okay. “Would you come sit next to me?” My heart beat faster as I said it. I felt stupid the moment the words came out, but he didn’t seem to mind my asking, and he came over and cleared some broken glass away before sitting. I scooted closer to him. He prayed over me first. I still had a hard time saying much. Eventually he moved to a chair by me, and I asked him to put his hand on my shoulder as I prayed, and feeling strengthened by his touch, I prayed more openly and honestly than I had in some time. Was I praying or just talking out loud? I don’t know. I suppose there’s not much of a difference anyway. In the end, I asked for help, for God to be with me.

“I saw Jesse today,” I said to Derek, trying to keep my voice from shaking, still avoiding eye contact. “I don’t mean I met with him. I just saw him from my car. I didn’t mean to. It was unexpected. I thought maybe he had moved. I hadn’t heard or seen anything about him in over a year. By the time I got back here I—I was falling apart. That’s when I texted you. I could feel myself beginning to dissociate again”—words I had learned from my therapist to describe experiences like those of that day—“and . . . this happened.”

Derek picked up a piece of a broken plate. I don’t think he knew what to say. I didn’t expect him to.

“I can’t believe I did this,” I said. Then I repeated, “I’m so embarrassed.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay” he said again, looking over at me. “We’re going to figure this out. Don’t worry about the apartment. And you don’t need to be embarrassed. You’re my friend. We all have messy things in our lives.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t normal.” I still had a hard time making eye contact, but I felt a sudden warmth in my chest because he’d called me a friend. People didn’t often say that to me and mean it, and of those that did, he was probably the only one left who would have come sit on the floor with me like that, literally or figuratively. “I know this is hard for you,” I continued. “This isn’t fair to you, to expect you to walk into something like this.”

I got up and started picking shards and scraps and broken bits up off the ground with him. He left later that night. Later he told me that he was shaking when he got to his car, but he had God, and he was okay, and we were okay.

During the cleaning, Derek had put the handwritten notecards from Jesse in the trash along with everything else, but I dug them back out once I was alone again. That night, I finished cleaning what I could then tried to get some sleep.

The following days turned into weeks, mostly nondescript, ticking by like a metronome. Work. Therapy. Appointments with my psychiatrist. Passing the time on my piano, randomly choosing from among my shelves of music. Many nights ended with a movie or television show on my computer at the kitchen table, in the dark, alone. I got some white paint, matching the shade of my walls as best I could, to try to cover up the words I’d written on them. I painted many coats over them, but the words always seemed to show through. I saw Derek maybe once or twice a week at this time, some weeks more.

One evening, Derek and I were getting dinner at a burger place. We were sitting outside. A nice day. Once our food came, he looked at me and said, “I think I’m planning on proposing to Jenna. Hopefully in the next couple of months.”

I smiled and said as warmly as possible, “Really? That’s exciting!” But though the news was not unexpected, it was still hard for me to hear, because I knew it meant he’d have even less time for me. He was already busy with his job and church commitments. “Well, let me know if you want me to help out at all,” I said.

“Thanks, man,” he said.

I looked away towards the setting sun and felt the warmth of it on my face. There was some silence before I decided to add, “You know I’d do anything for you, right?” Having been hurt by things going unsaid by others in the past, I tended now to make sure people knew what I was thinking. “I want you to know that. I know you have other friends, and I know that I don’t always have much to give. I hate that I don’t have much to give. But I care a lot about you, and I’d do whatever I could for you.”

We briefly made eye contact and tried to keep from breaking the sweetness of the moment with a laugh, and we smiled.

“Thanks. I really appreciate that,” he said.

Later that night, I was back in my apartment trying to read, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the news of Derek’s impending engagement, and I started getting worked up, talking out loud to myself, getting angry, disconnecting from my normal reality.

“He already doesn’t have time for me,” I say out loud in the cool, lamplit air. “I don’t know if I can take this again. He’s leaving me. He’s going where I can’t follow. He’s going to do

what everyone else has done to me. I already can't go to church because of what those people have done to me, because I have panic attacks every time I try to go. He joined a small group from church that I can't join, not because I'm not welcome but because I can't handle it. He doesn't have time for me. I'm losing him." The blades of the engine of my mind begin to spin. I'm about to lose it again. My chest is tight. I start talking to Derek as if he's there.

"You say you care, but you don't invite me to things that I could be invited to. You didn't check in with me when I told you I wasn't doing well last week. You knew I needed to be a part of a small group earlier this year. You knew I wanted that. I knew you needed and wanted one, too, and I was doing what I could to support you. But you didn't even think to include me in this new one of yours. You don't think about me. Are you not sorry? I'm not going to let someone else treat me this way again."

And despite the protests of the small part of my mind still fighting for rationality, that small part that knows from ample experience that I will not always feel this way or see things this way, the small part that knows I will regret saying anything, I grab my phone and start typing out a text to him:

"You have no idea what it's like to be alone like I am. You have a girlfriend and you've always had friends. And you know it's not my choice, you know what people have done to me and how I've been treated for so many years. And why don't you tell me you care for me when I tell you I care for you? I'm not saying it because I just want you to say it back, but do you not care? I'm not going to let someone treat me like this again. I'm not going to let you do this to me. Either get your shit together and start showing me you actually care, or get out of my life."

I press send and make sure it is delivered before I set the phone back down. *Good*, I think to myself. *Now he knows that he's fucking up*. I can hear my heart beating fast in my ears and the

pounding in my chest. I've said what I needed to say. I go into my bedroom and sit on the bed, my back against the wall. It is dark, and I breathe.

Breathe.

After maybe fifteen or twenty minutes like this, tiredness began to creep over me, and my mind and body started normalizing, relaxing, slowing down. I could feel myself coming back to myself, touching ground, like I knew would happen but just moments before could not believe.

What have I done?

The angry, severely hurt, irrational self sometimes felt like an enemy. It was a part of me. It was me. But it didn't feel like me, and it was not accessible at will. And once again, anchored by my breaths in the dark, it had begun to sink back beneath the waves where it lurks, just below the surface. *O God, what did I say?*

And the stability started coming back, like the sense of stillness when you've been driving on a dirt road and reach your destination and turn off the engine, the silence. And then came the familiar dread. *I've done this so many times. How can I make this right again? Look what I said. He's not going to want to talk. He's going to need time to recover from this, which means more time apart, time that's running out because he's soon to be engaged, time I can't get back. No, no, no. But this is on me. Maybe I'll send a text tomorrow.*

Having arrived back at my mental base camp after such travels, exhaustion overwhelmed me. I took a shower then got under the covers and closed my eyes. *Is this what my life is always going to be like?* And I sunk into troubled sleep.

Anxious days passed. The frustration you, reader, may feel is not lost on me. I feel it myself now, can see that Derek probably did more for me than any friends I've had before or since.

I was more in control of myself after coming back down that night, but I still felt hurt. I had sent a text to Derek the next day apologizing, trying to explain what I've had to explain so many times before. I knew at this point he'd need time because he'd be hurt and confused, so I understood when he didn't respond until the following Sunday.

"I can come over sometime today if you want to talk," he said.

"Sure, I'm free anytime. Maybe come by around 2?" I replied.

"Okay. See you then."

That afternoon I heard Derek's knock on the door. I opened it.

"Hey," I said uncomfortably.

"Hey," he said.

And we sat down in the living area.

I started. "I'm really sorry for what I said. I wasn't myself. I'm working on it. I'm really trying. I'm doing everything I can to get the help I need and to try to take some of the weight off of you." I was unable to look him in the eyes. I considered my next words, then rushed through them: "It's really hard for me when you don't tell me you care about me, or don't tell me what you're thinking or feeling. I've had a lot of people not tell me those things, only to have it turn out that I was right in thinking that they would actually prefer I not be in their lives. I need you to stop treating me like that."

Then I looked up, and I immediately regretted my words. There were tears in Derek's eyes. "Garrison, I'm trying," he said. "I know this isn't your fault, but it feels like the church just kind of dumped you on me last Summer, and I'm not equipped to help you. They've let you down, but because you're not getting the support you need, and even though it's not your fault, I'm not being supported like I need. I'm basically your only friend right now, and I know that's not your fault either, but it's really, really hard. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm overwhelmed. I have so much going on right now. I know I don't say enough when we talk. Jenna tells me the same thing. And I know that's hard for you. But I'm trying, I really am. This may be hard to believe, but I'm really affected by the way people around me feel. I hate what has happened to you, but I just can't do this, I can't be everything you need me to be and everything you deserve in a friend. I'm sorry. I do care about you. I want to be a good friend. I'm not leaving you. I'm not going anywhere. I just need you to show me more grace. I feel like if I slip up just once, you lay into me and bring up things I thought were resolved a long time ago. I know you've been through more than I can understand, and I know you're trying, but I need you to try to be more patient with me." He stopped and looked away, wiping his eyes.

I didn't know what to say right away. I felt a pain in my chest over the tone I had taken with him just two minutes before. I took a moment to think before I spoke. "I had no idea, Derek," I said. "I'm sorry. I wish you had been telling me these things before today, not that it's your fault you haven't, but just because I wish I'd known. I can't make promises. I don't trust myself. But I really will try to be more readily forgiving. I do mean it when I say I care about you and that I'd do anything for you. I know I haven't given you much reason to believe that because of what happens on nights like the other night. It's like I have two people inside me fighting to express their version of reality, and they're both me, and they contradict each other.

I'm a crazy person, I know. I'm trying to figure out what's going on with me. I'm trying to get control over this. I'm trying to get better."

I twitched a half-smile and tried to get the kindness in my eyes to match the affection I felt towards him. He half-smiled, too, then looked down.

We talked some more that afternoon. It was nice. It felt nice. Vulnerability is disarming. We both resolved to do better, though I knew I was much more in the wrong than he was. And then Derek headed home, and I sat once more in the quiet, alone.

The summer days grew hotter and longer. My A/C seemed to run all the time, and the sun reflected so bright off every surface that the world looked faded, bleached, and hazy. I went to work at my summer job and didn't do much else, not unless Derek happened to be available or invited me to come along with him and his other friends. And a deeper depression once again began to take hold. This was nothing new to me. My energy sublimated into the air, my sleep worsened, and I lost most emotions most of the time, save for particularly negative ones. It was like swimming laps and making progress and then having someone push your head underwater, not letting you breathe: it would come out of nowhere and any slow progress you'd be making would be negated and come to a full stop; it would become a fight to survive. I continued to suffer dissociative episodes and panic attacks, and I felt increasingly unable to deal with them in my head alone, too tired of dealing with the same things as they seemed to continue to escalate. The cutting, first to my face then to my arms and torso, began sometime in June as a more desperate means of coping and of trying to show people what it felt like to be me. "I can't make you hurt like I hurt, but I can show you how much I hurt." That was the idea.

In late July, Derek proposed, and it all went well for him. The loud, crowded party afterward was difficult for me, but I had bought a military green collared shirt for it and took a Xanax to mitigate any sort of episode and made myself go. Derek and I were not speaking with any regularity at that point. The people at the party who knew me or knew of me knew that Derek and I were close and assumed that I would have known what the plan was. “Do you know when they’re going to get here?” “Do you know what exactly he was planning?” But I knew nothing. That was hard.

After the engagement, Derek’s already limited time for me became even more scarce, and we weren’t speaking more than once a week for the following few weeks. I felt increasingly out of control and isolated.

Things continued to pass like this until two days before the fall semester, in late August. Despite negative experiences in the past, and driven by a desire to be able to connect with Derek any way I could with his ever-decreasing free time, I joined him and Jenna at a small gathering of the church group he was a part of. About ten people were there that night, squeezed into the living area of a small apartment, and they prayed and then started talking about the importance of community for the Christian—a perennially sore subject for me.

They were all talking back and forth, and I soon stopped following the conversation, sitting trapped in a back corner away from the door, and I began to feel the familiar racing heart and tightness in my chest and an overwhelming impulse to get out. And with unusual intensity even for me, I began to feel my normal self being subdued and my dissociative self emerging from those troubled waters of my mind.

INTERLUDE

A Fantasy

A man stands facing another man in the crowded foyer of a church.

“I want you to feel what I feel,” he says.

“You’re being dramatic,” the other one says.

“You don’t know what I’ve been through,” he says.

“God is enough,” the other one says.

“I had a panic attack at church last week,” he says.

“That was the Holy Spirit convicting you of sin. You should listen to it. Stop making excuses,” the other one says.

He pauses, then says, “Give me second. I’m not done. Don’t leave.”

“Fine.”

He walks off.

The man who walked off steps into the men’s room. After checking to make sure there’s no one in any of the stalls, he locks the door and pulls a single double-edged razor out of his pocket. He gently unwraps it, takes it between his thumb and forefinger and makes two swift slashes into the back of his left forearm, then nicks his forehead right above his left eyebrow for good measure. “Ahh,” he breathes. He lets himself bleed what he will for a minute, smears it around a little, then unlocks the door and walks back out.

“Oh God,” someone mutters. The hallway is buzzing with people talking after the service, but it gets quieter as people start to notice. A man, the bleeding man, is walking through

them dripping blood from his face and arm. His head is high. His eyes straight ahead. Someone rushes up and tries to pull him away out of sight, “Here, let’s go—”

“Get the fuck away from me,” the bleeding man says as he jerks his arm away. “Don’t you dare touch me.” Everyone is watching now, but the only gaze he returns is that of the man at the end of the hall whose face has gone pale.

The bleeding man starts to walk faster. “You see this?” he shouts at the pale-faced man. “I can’t make you hurt like I hurt, but I can show you how much I hurt.” He stops one step too close. “This is what you’re doing to me. This is what you’ve done to me. Do you feel that? Do you see it? Can you smell it?”

Nothing. Frozen.

“Good.” The bleeding man’s face lights up into a cheerful smile, and he says, “Well, have a good night!” and then relaxes back into unreadable in an unsettling instant. For one second more he stares sharply into the eyes of the pale-faced man then turns to leave. A security guard heads towards them.

“Don’t worry, I’m leaving,” the bleeding man says. “Everyone can go back to pretending they give a damn about people like me.”

AGAIN, LIGHTNING

In the back corner of an apartment living room, I'm surrounded by people here to study the Bible and be a supportive community for each other. I really only know Derek and Jenna. I look over at Derek. He's doing his best. He has stuck by me when no one else would. He's on my side. He's a good person. I know he cares. I know he cares. I know he cares. But then I look at him, and I look around the room, and I can't . . .

They're all sharing their ideas and experiences, and I'm sitting here, not near my friend who invited me who is really the only reason I came, coming only because he invited me and people so rarely invite me to anything, so rarely that I don't want to turn an invitation down out of fear that if I do I'll be even less likely to get another. My friend is over there, and I'm sitting here next to two people I don't know and certainly don't trust. My chest is getting tight. I'm being forgotten again. Ignored. Abandoned, neglected, and now cornered, trapped in this room too quiet and too far from the front door to make an exit that's anything but dramatic. My breathing gets shallower, and I'm not going to let these people do this to me again, I won't be hurt like this again, they will know how much they hurt me, I'll make them understand. I trace the hairline scab on my left forearm with my finger, a wound from a week ago, then dig my nail into it, but it's too healed to draw blood. I don't know what they're saying anymore, though I keep my head up and my eyes down. I take my keys out of my pocket and run one across my arm, but I can't apply enough force with enough stealth. I'll have to wait until this is over.

I sit, let my mind continue its upward dissociative spiral, repeating the same things to myself, *I'm not going to let them do this to me, I'm not going to be hurt again, I'm not going to let them do this to me, look at them happy and unwilling to confront what life can be like, I'm not going to be hurt again, I'm not . . .* My chest keeps getting tighter. My breathing more rapid. I try

to keep it under control, but I'm failing, my mind splintering again like a tree struck in a flash of lightning, the same roots still in the rain-soaked earth but the trunk blown violently apart. I know it and can't stop it.

When the gathering ends, I remain in my seat. *Are you going to notice me, Derek? You're the one who invited me. Don't you see my face? Don't you see what's happening and what you're doing? You see me and know me and do nothing. You and your friends. And of course you don't. You already kept your distance before becoming engaged. Now there's even more. Fuck you.*

"Will you stay behind, Derek? I need to ask something of you," one of the group leaders asks. Derek doesn't look my way, says "Sure," and then takes the hand of his fiancée and says to her, "Of course you stay, too."

That's it. A secret meeting. No thought for me. I rush out the front door without a goodbye, into the dark night.

STORM

That night I had parked a few streets over, and as I walked to my car I tried again to draw blood with my nails, digging in as hard as I could. No success. So I reached in my pocket for my keys, only to find my pocket empty—I'd left them inside. Dammit, dammit, dammit. I turned around and ran, back through the front door and to the spot in the corner where I'd been sitting. "I left my keys," I mumbled, not looking into the eyes of my friend or his friends in their meeting. I hoped Derek or the others would have noticed the red marks my nails had left on my arm, but if they did, no one said anything. *If they did, I thought, no one cares enough to say something and come after me.*

Walking again down a side street to my car, I took a key to my arm, pressing in and dragging it across my skin as hard as I could. "Aagh," I grunted from the pain. I noticed a woman getting into her car who had looked my way. I didn't care.

When I got to my car, I jumped inside and pressed hard on the gas pedal as I pulled out into the street, desperate to get back home and cut myself properly, but I knew I had to stop by the grocery store first to buy more razors—I'd thrown out all of mine a couple weeks before. I avoided all eye contact and used the self-checkout.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror back at my apartment, I unwrapped one of the razors from its wax paper and started—my arms, torso, legs. After some time, I began to feel some satisfaction, and I slumped down, now naked, onto the bathroom floor, and I took that flimsy, stinging razor in my hand again and made two cuts up the entire length of each of my thighs. My mind was buzzing with adrenaline and rage, and I picked up my phone and texted Derek: "You asked last Thursday if I was going to be okay. I said no. It was because I wanted to kill myself. And I still do. But you're too busy to care. You're getting married." Then, in a surge

of energy, I picked myself up, walked out to the living room, and threw myself against the wall, smearing my blood on it, and then like a stamp I pressed into it again and again down the length of it, the same cuts on my stomach making the same imprint onto the white wall. Then I walked over to the wall above my piano and, using my torso like an inkwell, I forced out enough blood to write “I WANT TO DIE” in large letters. Ecstatically angry, smiling, I took a picture of the wall with my bloodied hand in the corner of the shot, and I texted it to Derek with the words “Guess what this is” and then threw my phone to the side. Further satisfied, I walked back into the bathroom and collapsed again onto the floor and just sat, my back against the wall.

Maybe ten minutes had passed when I heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs—the building was old and it shook—followed by four heavy knocks on my front door. The sound reverberated into my chest and sunk into my stomach. *Derek called the police.* I knew it instantly. Derek had told me recently that the next time I sent him pictures of my self-harming, he was going to call the police. I was upset when he’d said that, so I replied that I’d be glad for him to because at least then I wouldn’t have to be alone. I had since apologized, and we were on as good terms as we could be under the circumstances.

More pounding on the front door. I stepped into my shorts and cracked open the door, keeping my bleeding body hidden behind it, but a police officer immediately forced it open. Behind him are what I remember as at least six officers with radios and guns, and before saying anything, before I’d done anything but crack the door, the one who had knocked spun me around and put me in handcuffs, pushing me down into the wooden chair by the front door, the chair Derek always sat in, the one facing the wall I’d written on with my blood. The mental health officer was late, I’d find out. They were going to question me anyway. *What medicines are you*

on? Are you suicidal? What did you hurt yourself with? Where are the razors? Are there any other dangerous objects here? A group of three went from the living room to the kitchen to my bedroom, bathroom, and closet, going through drawers and cabinets and yelling “Clear” each time they found nothing.

Then EMS came in and asked me all the same questions. There were officers in my apartment standing around and officers outside, too, posted around the railing of the small courtyard of my small apartment complex. Bleeding, shirtless, pushed down into the chair, my hands behind me in handcuffs, I couldn’t look anywhere but the floor, but I was acutely aware that anyone in the entire complex who wanted to could see in. Anyone who wanted could be watching the entire scene unfold, officers standing around and now EMS, too, my front door wide open, the walls covered in my blood, my body covered in my blood, my hands locked in handcuffs behind me. My head was spinning but in a different way this time, and I felt dizzy.

I answered all questions as calmly and directly as possible. The shock of my apartment being invaded and being handcuffed in one instant had shut me down. The energy of before had dissipated. “Yes, these are only superficial cuts.” “No, they were not intended to be lethal.” “No, I have not done anything else.” “No, I don’t have a plan in mind.” “Yes, I do want to die.” After a while I asked the EMS person interviewing me if he could shut my front door. He did, and that helped some.

The officers and EMS personnel were all crowded in my small apartment waiting for the assessment to be completed. When it was, I was told that I was going to be committed for my safety. They pulled me up out of the chair, my hands still in cuffs, the blood on my thighs drying and sticky so that the fabric of my shorts pulled at my cuts with each movement. I asked for a shirt and some shoes. “In the closet,” I said. One of the officers walked into my closet and found

a white shirt and flip-flops. He threw the shoes on the floor in front of me and shoved the shirt over my shoulders, not bothering to pull it down. I asked if they could take the handcuffs off so I could put the shirt on. They said no. So bleeding, in flip-flops and bloodstained shorts, a white shirt around only my shoulders and my hands still cuffed behind me, they opened my front door and led me out, and the officers and EMS personnel in my apartment joined those who were waiting outside, and I'm forced to walk around the courtyard to the stairs on the other side, then down the stairs and out into the street.

This was a Monday in late August, around 10 p.m., just a few blocks from campus. Classes were starting on Wednesday. Summer was over and most people were back in town. The street was full of parked cars and lined with houses and apartment complexes. A few people were walking on the sidewalk. All the parked police cars, and there were many, had their lights on and flashing, and this was a one-way street so the ambulance had parked at the end of it—a long walk. Covered in blood, exposed, handcuffed, trailed by what must have been eight police officers and a few EMS personnel altogether, I was paraded down the street. I don't know why there were so many officers. A group of people sitting in their driveway cheered me on like I was being arrested, hollered at me, compounding my shame.

When we reach the ambulance, I was helped up and into the gurney, and I sat awkwardly with my hands still cuffed behind me, and it's only then, after I ask, that they take the handcuffs off. They were still waiting on the mental health officer, the one who should have been first on the scene. When he finally arrived, he explained to me what was about to happen, that I have to go with them but that this will not be on any permanent record. Then they closed the ambulance doors and we started moving, taking me to the university hospital about eight minutes away.

There was one person on each side of me in the ambulance, and the one who had asked me questions in my apartment was asking me more, but this time no longer assessing, just talking.

“You know,” he said, “this is a short ride, and you’re never going to see me again. You can tell me anything. Until we get to the hospital, you can say whatever you want to me.”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“Try me.”

“Well . . . I was abused. Sexually. By a guy in my church who was my mentor. When what he was doing with me came out, the church stood by him, not me. They looked out for him, not for me. I went to another church, got involved, invested in people there. But I was shut out and really mistreated, by pastors and people I considered friends.”

“What kind of church?”

“Evangelical, I guess.”

“So what I’m hearing is that I shouldn’t ever go to church.”

That my story bore that easy conclusion was no surprise to me—I’d said as much many times. But hearing it from another person ran counter to the witnessing and gospel-sharing I had been taught to do. So after that I deflected using generalities, not yet ready to throw all of my spirituality to the ground, and anyway, soon we were at the emergency room bay doors. They wheeled me out on the bed, and I was put in an empty, windowless room at the end of a hallway. A nightshift hospital security guard joined me, charged with keeping watch over me during the intake process. He tried to make small talk with me. I wasn’t in the mood, but I gave him some replies when I could. I asked him how much the ambulance ride was going to cost, how much all this was going to cost. He said the ambulance was probably going to be about \$800. A less than

ten minute ride that I did not want, a ride I was given involuntarily, only because I didn't have anyone around to drive me themselves.

After too long a social worker came in and asked me all the same questions again, then asked about my support system, my therapist, my psychiatrist. She completed her evaluation, and then I waited some more. I asked the security guard if I could get up off the table and try to clean some of my cuts in the sink. He agreed to it. At one point he got a call on the radio, something happening somewhere else in the hospital, and he left only after getting assurances from me that I wasn't going to do anything to myself. Soon, he came back and took his seat again outside the door of my examination room, and we sat some more in silence.

At about 2 a.m. they were ready to admit me, and I was escorted up to the psychiatric ward. The security guard left me at the doors there and wished me well. Then in front of nurses I had to strip and stand naked with my arms out while they made a note of every wound on my body. They took my clothes, telling me I'd get them back when I left, and handed me instead scrub-blue papery hospital clothes, oversized, puffy things, just a top and bottom that I hesitate to even call clothing, and then they took me to my room for the night. The psychiatrist on call came in to see me. Asked me the same questions yet again. Asked me when my next scheduled appointment with my therapist was. Then she left. A nurse came in. Asked if I needed anything. I asked for the medication I took at night to help me sleep. She said she'd have to get permission from the psychiatrist. She left to go ask, and I sat on the end of the bed in my dark room as I waited. There was no furniture but the built-in bed, and on it was nothing but a pillow and itchy sheets. The nurse came back and said that it was too late now to give me my medication.

“Please. I won't be able to sleep.”

“I'm sorry. The doctor says it's too late.”

And she walked out.

I got in the bed, my cuts stinging against the rough sheets and what they had given me to wear. The silence and darkness lay heavy in the room. The air was still, and I had nothing to read, nothing to watch, nothing to listen to, no clock, even, to know how much time had passed or how much more time had to pass before morning. So I lay there in the dark, covered in my dried blood, naked beneath that thin sheet and papery covering, and I started to hum the only melody I could think of, the opening measures of the second, final movement to Beethoven's 32nd Piano Sonata. It's the piece I'd been working on. That opening melody is simple. The bulk of the movement is essentially a theme and variations, but it starts off slow, *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*, and in C major. In the midst of all that had unfolded I couldn't remember more than the first theme, the first eight measures, so I hummed it quietly to myself in the dark, over and over, trying to comfort myself, trying to pass the time, trying to fall asleep.

Eventually I got up and went to the nurses' station to ask for some soap and a towel so I could shower in the bathroom in my room. I took my time standing under hot water, rinsing the blood off of myself, watching it un-dry and run off in little diluted red streams in the clear water, watching it run down my body and legs and swirl into the drain. After some time, I got out, dried off gently, and got back into the bed, the plastic covered mattress squeaking, and I lay there on my back because I didn't cut my back, and I waited.

At about eight o'clock the next morning, after a sleepless night, I asked if I could leave. I told them I had an appointment scheduled with my therapist for later that day, that it was already scheduled, which was true. They ran it by the doctor, and they agreed to let me go, though telling me they're letting me go sooner than they normally would let someone leave.

“Is there someone we can call to come pick you up?” one of the nurses asked.

“No. There isn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“There isn’t.”

The only friend I had, the only person whom I wouldn’t have minded seeing me like that, in bloodstained clothes after a sleepless night in an acute-care psych ward, was the one who had set in motion the events of the night before that had resulted in my being there, which wasn’t his fault, but it wouldn’t have been appropriate. And the only family I could call would be my mother, and I didn’t want her knowing yet. She didn’t know how bad things had been getting, and I wasn’t ready to explain that to her. I insisted to the nurse again that there wasn’t anyone and that I needed a cab voucher to get home.

So they set that up for me. Gave me back my clothes and shoes. Some person in charge of finances got my insurance information and told me I’d get the bill in the mail for whatever insurance wouldn’t pay. They handed me the cab voucher and discharged me once the driver was there, and I walked out, finally free, finally back in control, out into the bright morning sun.

AFTERMATH

The sky was clear and the streets were crowded with cars and people headed to work and to campus. The cab driver, when we were approaching my apartment, told me that the voucher wasn't enough. I told him that the hospital assured me it was and that I didn't have any money on me, which was true. He was angry with me, but I got out anyway and headed up, hurrying, hoping to avoid any looks from people outside or in their apartments.

When I opened the front door, I was greeted by the metallic smell of blood from the blood on my walls. Since I had some time before my appointment, I showered again and properly cleaned my wounds. I took pictures of it all for my records and scrubbed the blood off the walls. I already knew I would never be able to spend another night there.

In the appointment with my therapist, I told her what had happened. I said that I had never felt more embarrassed and ashamed. She told me that she doubted I ever would again. She told me that she had called the police for people before, suicidal patients who, for example, had told her over the phone that they had just overdosed alone in their homes, but that how the process had gone for them was nothing like how it had gone for me. She said that it should not have happened for me like it did, that she never would have imagined it happening like it did for me. She even suggested I consider getting a copy of the police report and taking it to a lawyer for how I was treated. But this to me felt like just another one of those things that had happened to me that shouldn't have. There were many.

After the appointment, I shuddered when my apartment again came into view, but walking up I felt calloused. Maybe it was the lack of sleep.

I knew I couldn't stay there, but my mom's house was the only other place I knew I could stay—which meant telling her what had happened. It meant telling her that things had gotten

much worse than I had let on, though she knew I wasn't doing well and was seeing a therapist regularly. It meant telling her about what had been happening this summer, the cutting. I was resolved to request that she not ask questions yet. I was only going to say that I was coming home. I curled up in the dark corner of my bedroom and dialed her number.

Ringing.

"Hello?" I hear her voice on the other end.

"Hi, Mom." I hesitate. "Do you have some time to talk?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm just walking in from the grocery store." I could hear her adjusting some bags, and then her voice came through clearer. "What's up?"

"Uh . . . Well, I—I'm not sure how to say this . . . I need to come home."

"Okay," she said, sounding suddenly concerned. "Like to spend the night?"

"Yeah. Yeah . . . My therapist advised me not to talk to you about this yet so that you don't overreact or underreact and make it worse for me. I just had some really, really bad things happen to me last night at my apartment, and I can't stay here anymore," I said, my voice starting to crack.

"Are you okay?" she said quickly.

And I immediately broke down sobbing for the first time since the police had arrived the night before. I could barely speak through the tears, but I told her how I had started cutting myself that summer, and I told her what had happened the night before.

"Do you need me to come get you?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

"No. I can get back home. I'll just pack up a few things. I'll be there in about an hour."

We said goodbyes, and I hung up.

Sitting there on the floor, the tears came to my eyes again and blurred my vision, and I lifted my head and cried, “This was my home. This was *my* home. This was my *home*.” I could barely get the words out. “And they took it from me, they took it from me,” I repeated over and over, tears wetting my face, remembering, picturing those heavy boots charging through there, going through all of my things, every drawer, every cabinet, every room, every space. Soon my words gave way to chest sobs, and I could not speak.

When the crying had mostly subsided, I took some deep breaths and called Derek. I didn’t expect him to pick up, and he didn’t. I don’t think I even wanted him to. I just needed him to hear something, what I knew I needed to say, and I wanted him to hear it in my voice now, to hear the tears, something very few had heard, another attempt at closeness and connection with a friend. When the voicemail beeped and I started to speak, I did break into tears again—I have never been able to will them—and I spoke something along these lines:

“Hey Derek. Now is not the time to tell you about what happened last night, but just believe me that it was really, really bad. I’ve never felt more ashamed. My therapist today told me that she would never have expected the police to do what they did, so I know it’s not your fault . . . I’m calling because I just wanted to say that I think the best thing I can do for you is for us to take a break. You’re my best friend, and there are very few people I care about as much as I care about you, but I think the best way for me to support you right now is for me to give you space so that you can focus on Jenna and so that I can focus on getting to a healthier place. I don’t know for how long. Maybe a few weeks or a month. I don’t know. I’m so sorry. I hope you’re okay.” And then I hung up, and that was it.

What I didn’t know then was that was the last I would ever contact him. I wasn’t ready to accept that this needed to be the end. I didn’t fully accept it, I don’t think, until his wedding

date came and went late that December without him reaching out to me to say I should come. I wrote him a letter that night in December, a letter I never sent. But back on that day, on the phone in the corner of my bedroom in that apartment—that was indeed the of our friendship. It needed to be. Too much bad had happened, and I was too unsafe with myself, these episodes too severe and their social triggers too easily encountered. Maybe one day I'll get to tell him what I know now. Maybe one day I'll get to hear what it was really like for him. But part of me wonders if the best gift I can give him is for him never to hear from me again.

I don't know. I really don't know.

WHITE WALLS

The following weekend, I was back at my apartment for the first time, there to pack up more of my things. My therapist had advised against going back alone, and it made me anxious to be there, but there was no one I wanted to share the experience with. The first few days of class had been lonely but successful given the circumstances. Things were as all right as they could be. But it was time to begin moving my things out of my apartment.

Empty boxes in one hand, I opened the door to my apartment and nervously glanced behind me before stepping in and shutting the door. The A/C clicked on loudly and startled me. I looked around. Everything was as I had left it. Books everywhere. My medicine sitting out on the kitchen table. A book of Beethoven piano sonatas propped up on the piano. Dirty dishes in the sink. In the gray light coming in through the blinds, a few faint words and letters were still visible on the white walls from months before, like shadows, hiding beneath the coats of paint. I walked into my bedroom and raised the blinds on the floor length window, letting in the afternoon sunlight. I closed my eyes and breathed in the warmth.

After a few hours of packing as much as I could, I placed the last bag I could fit into the back of my car. There was still light in the air, but the sun had set. Before I left, I wanted to put one more coat of paint on the walls, so I headed back up and got out the brush and the small can of paint from the under the sink. *How many more times am I going to have to paint this wall?* I wondered. I should have started with a primer.

Standing back up, holding the paint and brush, I looked around at the emptied kitchen and the cleared, bare table—the table where I ate, worked, and escaped with those television shows and movies, the apartment then often lit by nothing but a lamp and the overhead stove light—and I began to feel a chest-deep pang of loneliness, familiar but renewed in this

moment. I wished there was someone with me in that moment, but there was no one. I had lived there alone, and I needed to say goodbye alone. I wished someone could see this, could see me. *We die alone, I thought, but we live alone, too, and no one can step into this with me. No one being here with me would feel right. Still. I don't want to be alone . . .*

“This is really sad,” I stated matter-of-factly, speaking over the hum of the air conditioner. “Really, really sad.” I set the paint down and held myself. “God—” I started, but stopped myself. It didn't feel right.

“God . . .” I breathed the word, but my voice trailed off with my thoughts again. My eyes began to well up, so I took a deep breath to steady myself and began again:

“God, I know this isn't fair to you. I haven't spoken to you for so long, and there is so much to say, and so much to cover. I don't trust you, and I have a hard time believing you care about me. How could you have let all these things happen? Yes, where was I when you created all things, but where were you when your people were abusing me and hurting me and mistreating one of your own, sometimes even in your name? I've been through so much, and it seems like it has all come from you . . . But I want to set that aside right now, because I just don't want to be alone. You know what has happened here and everywhere else in my life, and you're supposed to know me better than I know myself. Please, God, Father, be with me. I don't want to be alone. Be with me.”

I turned my eyes to floor. *All right. Okay.*

I opened the can of white semi-gloss paint and walked over to the wall in the twilight of the day, and I dipped the end of the brush in it and applied the paint in gentle strokes. I did this again and again, putting on as thick a coat as I could, hoping I wouldn't have to do it again. The shade of white I picked didn't exactly match the wall, but it was close enough that I couldn't tell

exactly where the old paint ended and the fresh paint began. I felt shame in that moment, and I felt false, painting over the shadow of my words. I didn't want to look at what was still visible. I didn't want to see it—the embarrassment of it. And yet those were my words, and they were the truth. I had endured years of trauma, mental illness, a fierce and troubled spirituality, friends made and friends lost, and people I thought were friends who really weren't at all. Could it be made right? Covering the writing was necessary, but it also felt like erasing an important memory, like trying to whitewash the brokenness of this world.

I continued. And with each swipe of the soaked brush, the writing slowly disappeared.

WHEN LANGUAGE FAILS US

January 2016

The staff back on the unit went through Robin's room. There was no note. He had taken nothing out of the ordinary with him on the outing. They issue us all cellphones when we check in with only the ability to make and receive phone calls, and we're not allowed to take them off the unit. Robin had left his phone in his room. There was no indication that what had happened was premeditated, though you can never know what exactly is going on in a person's head. Hell, I don't even know what's going on in my head a lot of the time.

A group of patients and the supervising staff had gone on the weekly Friday dinner outing. That Friday was my last full day—I had been there for about two months, the usual length of stay—so I had chosen not to go. In our process group that Thursday, I remember that Robin was quietly emotional and hurting when he shared, but it didn't feel out of the ordinary. No one who ends up a patient in these places is doing particularly well. And on the whole, I thought he seemed to be doing at least a little better than when he had first arrived. I know, too, that none of the staff on his team—the psychologist, individual therapist, psychiatrist, social worker, nurses, and mental health associates—suspected he was an immediate risk to himself, because if they had, they wouldn't have let him leave the unit for the outing.

I remember them coming back that evening without him. I was sitting by a window trying to write my goodbye notes but had only finished writing to maybe two or three out of the twenty-something patients on the unit. I hadn't yet gotten to Robin. I remember my face felt hot that evening and a fuzziness in my mind was making it difficult to write meaningfully. I had already accepted that I was only going to be able to write a few of these notes, but Robin's was going to

be one of those few. He was my friend. We had a lot in common and had easily connected. He was one of the few there I was sure I'd stay in touch with.

As the group shuffled back in, they were quieter than usual. My friend Helen, coming in with the rest of them, saw me and walked over. She told me what had happened. That Robin had gotten up to go the bathroom at the restaurant and didn't come back.

After a few minutes, the charge nurse that evening called us all together into the common room. There were tears in her eyes but her voice was steady. She told us what Helen had already told me, that Robin had said he needed to use the restroom at dinner and got up and didn't come back. She told us that a waiter thought he saw Robin exit through a side door, that they didn't know where he was, that the police had been contacted and that they were contacting his parents. She said that the staff were available for anyone to talk to if we needed it, that they were doing everything they could and to try to stay hopeful. But we all knew what was possible, what was likely even, though I chose not to think about any outcome in specifics. Not until it happened. Not until we knew.

Helen and I talked more. "You better write something in my journal," she said, the journals where we write these goodbye notes. And we talked more about the outing, what it had been like, what Robin had been like that night. He had seemed pretty happy, according to her. I remember seeing him from across the common room before they left in what would be the last time I'd ever see him. I remember him smiling that evening. Helen said that at dinner he had been joking about what he was like in middle school and about the frizzy hair he had growing up. Things like that. Normal things. And then he had gotten up and was gone.

As planned, I was discharged the following morning. Still no news of Robin. I went back home for a night, to unpack and repack for a step-down I was heading to the following day, a residential treatment program in Chicago. On Sunday I woke up early and got on a plane. And it was that evening that the hospital contacted the staff at my new program who then told me. Robin had died. Police had found him late Saturday night. They didn't tell me where or how he had done it. I still don't know. But he was dead. He had killed himself. Helen, still on the unit and having trouble sleeping Saturday night, said that at around one or two in the morning the nursing station got a phone call, and they had asked Helen to go to her room. They told everyone on the unit the following morning.

It was horrible, the feeling of losing a friend like that and not being around anyone who knew him or me. It was like someone in your family dying but not being able to see any member of your family. I had left the hospital unsure of how or whether I'd stay in touch with anyone there, but Robin's death drew me back to them, to Helen especially. I'm thankful for her and for them.

They say that suicides are more likely after a suicide, but when Robin died in November I first felt a greater resolve to live. Now, however, six weeks later, I feel a pull like magnetism or gravity to suicide. Like a star-traveler motionless relative to his solar system, but who knows that he and it are falling fast or slow into the void of some nearby black hole, the immediate surroundings unmoving but a deeper, darker gravitational riptide pulling all things in.

I'm home again preparing to check myself back in to the hospital to "re-plan my discharge." The place in Chicago was not a good fit, nor was the weather, the wind and ice and clouds and darkness, and my depression has come back with considerable force. They say you're

at a greater risk of suicide after a suicide, and I understand that threat now, viscerally, though I can't completely explain what it feels like because it exists in something deeper than my observable consciousness, as if my brain were a computer and someone has hacked into it and inserted a subtle piece of code. Or maybe a comparison to an unexpected cancer diagnosis works better—going in for a routine checkup, getting blood work done, an anomaly popping up in the results, more blood work, more tests, some scans, a biopsy or two, and before long they've diagnosed a cancer Stage IV and terminal, so even though you don't quite feel unwell, you know you're never again going to feel better than you do and that death is coming soon, no matter what. The dread you would feel then. The sense that your body is failing your mind and dragging you down into nothingness before you get the chance to really even process what's happening.

I feel deeply traumatized by my experience at the program in Chicago, more than the facts of the situation readily account for, which I'm not sure how to explain. It was like re-experiencing every bad thing that's happened to me since Jesse, including the fallout at the church. Speaking of Jesse, I'm sitting alone on the couch upstairs in the spot, the very cushion, I think, where Jesse first showed himself to me. (What was the excuse? A testicular issue he had when he was younger? I don't remember exactly.) A thirty-something grown-ass man sitting next to a high school kid, unzipping his jeans and pulling down his underwear, on this couch, on this very spot, and slapping his penis upward so that it faced towards his chest, and fondling his own testicles with his warm, full hand and hitchhiker's thumb, sitting next to me with his muscular arms and a muscular chest and a deceptively untuned torso where you could hear his insides moving and dripping when you rested your head there, with his oversized teeth and mostly-pupil eyes that I always thought were blue until I said so one day and he insisted they were hazel. And all in the name of his M.Div.-acquired knowledge of scripture and, he reasoned,

God-pleasing and God-accepting affection and connection. Not inherently wrong, he'd say. Freedom in Christ, he'd say. And maybe let's not talk about it to other people, he'd say. And how dare you tell Nathan that one time what we talked about, he said, as if I had intentionally escalated the masturbation discussion by including his best friend in it, naively unaware that this man, his best friend, wouldn't know what I knew about his masturbatory history and practice and beliefs.

All would come to light, and what followed in that church were profoundly hurtful assumptions and a fight on my part to be understood, the sort of fight that backfires in such situations, because if I'm trying so hard then I must be fighting the truth, or so they'd say, first indirectly and then directly, accusing me of lying even after that abuser who said he loved me had confirmed my story. Rooms full of men making decisions about me and covering their asses at my expense, taking everything personally and responding defensively when I needed them to respond with empathy, compassion, and humility. I felt trapped physically, emotionally, mentally, even spiritually, and that's how I started to feel in Chicago. People talking around me and about me. Feeling mocked in my vulnerability. Feeling stuck, getting progressively worse and with no escape. I didn't even have access to a piano to play, which has been a constant outlet for me for almost all of my life; my six weeks in Chicago were the longest I've gone without playing since I started in early elementary school.

It was an effort just to make myself write at all tonight, because I'm afraid of where my thoughts will take me. If I let myself think about how suicide feels so present to me, does that put me at a greater risk of committing it?

“Commit” is an odd verb. It puts suicide in the same phraseology as murder, or adultery. A legal word, like suicide is a crime. “He committed suicide.” So distant and unfeeling. Maybe

people use it because the alternatives feel too harsh. “He killed himself.” “He took his own life.” Well, that last one feels a little better. That last one sounds like someone absconded with their life, almost like saying he’s not with us anymore, but he’s still got his life, because he *took* it. Admittedly, the phrase is somewhat idiomatic. A literal translation would be something like “He ended his life.” But then “ended” doesn’t feel active enough. You haven’t “ended” someone’s life when you’re standing over them with a bloodied knife, or rather, you have, but there’s more to it than that. You took their life, but then it wasn’t yours, so “taking” here becomes “stealing.” Alternatively, to say something has ended usually carries with it the noun form of the same word, “end.” In that double-meaning you end a relationship. You end a trip. You end a story. There’s a finality to it but a more gentle one, because it was afforded the grace of ending at the end, the noun/verb combination hand in hand. By ending something you bring about the end. But to be killed, or to slit your wrists in the bathtub, or to take a bottle of sleeping pills and close your eyes with some music playing in your headphones and drift away—that’s more like someone taking a book you’re halfway through and ripping out the rest of the pages and throwing them into the fire. The person who burned the pages has ended the story for you, but where you stopped reading wasn’t really the end. The story wasn’t over. But it is gone, ended before the end in smoke and ashes.

Language fails us who feel these things. Language fails us left behind.

Suicide—ending my life, taking it, whatever you want to call it—is that what I want? As under-the-surface as the pull to death there also exists a pull to life. Why would I be afraid to allow myself to think these thoughts about suicide for fear of the thoughts bringing me closer to it if there weren’t also some part of me that wanted to live? There’s something in me that fears death, or at least has an instinctual aversion to it. Consider a magnet: bring a positive pole near a

negative one and the two will shudder and fling themselves at each other. But bring a negative pole near another negative and it jumps away, or spins around until the opposite pole is again nearest, and then they'll click together. Suicide is like the attraction between the positive and negative poles, and survival is like the repulsion between two of the same. With suicide you are heading towards a certain end—the two points coming together. But not to die, to live, is less certain, less definable; the ends of the magnets are repulsed, but to what? With two magnets, all other forces assumed negligible and the magnets infinitely thin, there is a definite end point for two opposite poles coming together, a point at which the system is stable and unchanging; but to bring two of the same-oriented poles together, there's nothing exact about it. It creates a field you can feel, with more repulsion closer to a meeting point and less as distance increases; and there's no point at which the system becomes stable and unchanging, because it can't. Of course, the comparison collapses if nearing death you suddenly find within yourself a greater resolve to live, as if two magnets attracting and heading towards each other suddenly began to decelerate. But whether you would encounter that sudden resolve to live is hard to know until you're there yourself. I imagine that for someone who not just wants to die or thinks of dying but has set out to die, and especially for someone depressed, the repulsive force disappears.

It's hard to bring the survival side of life into enough focus that life looks desirable. Not that suicide is just because life seems unbearable. It's deeper than that, and less rational maybe, less consciously observable. Plenty of people don't know where to find hope but suicide still never crosses their minds. So there's something about it, there's something in it, and in me, and in those who feel drawn to it. In my experience, when I feel this way, and I have felt this way many times before, it always goes beyond merely wanting to die. You can want to die with all of your heart and still not want to make it happen yourself. To feel suicidal, and not just acutely in a

time of heightened emotions but chronically, is harder to put your finger on. Someone who hasn't felt it who's trying to imagine and understand it runs the risk of being reductionist, which I suppose is itself people's tendency to try to make inexplicable things fit into an explicable pattern according some understandable determinism, all of which is rarely true to life. "He felt hopeless, so he took his life." "He didn't see a way out, so he committed suicide." Etc., etc.

Language fails us, but maybe it helps to try to put words to this. Putting words to it maybe takes away some of its power, like if its undercurrent were dark navy underneath waves and waters white and electric blue: there's more than just the undercurrent, trying to sweep me out to sea.

It's almost midnight. I'm home and in some ways worse off than when I first checked in to the hospital, four months and many tens of thousands of dollars ago. I'm a little more depressed and just as suicidal than when I was first admitted. More, even. But on top of the depression and suicidality, I feel I'm truly in a worse place because now my experience of treatment itself, the way out of this, has been stained by how things went in Chicago. I'll be returning to the hospital on Monday or Tuesday, and this time I'm coming in feeling traumatized by treatment itself. So I don't know if I can get better. I know that when the place in Chicago seemed like my only option, when I was there, in my bedroom, where I wasn't supposed to eat and the Wi-Fi cut in and out as I tried to watch shows on my computer, I was ready to kill myself. I am that depressed. And if I'm just going to keep returning to this depressed place, I don't know if I'll be able to go on living much longer. This level of depression is heavy and empty at the same time. Like if you were in a one-person deep-diving submersible exploring the seabed of a trench and the computers malfunctioned and the power went out. You'd quietly fall

to the ocean floor with a soft thump. No light. No sounds. The known but unfelt weight of a black ocean pressing down. And then nothing.

Yet life all around me proceeds as always. I'm breathing cool air, and lamps cast hourglass glows on the walls, and every channel on the TV plays its shows and commercials, and people in their cars drive down the street and go to their homes and families and friends and eat and read and talk and sleep. Everything continues on as it always has, but I'm dying in it, drowning while breathing slowly in and out, shrinking into darkness while the sun beams around me, clawing at a weight as intangible as fog, sitting still staring at the wall, or staring back at myself in the black of my computer screen late at night when even it has gone to sleep and I can't get myself up to either plug it in or go to sleep myself. Then I'm faced with silence and a mirror in one instant, breathing in, breathing out, alone again with my thoughts and feelings after spending hours avoiding myself.

Everybody dies alone; every day we go to sleep alone. Death and sleep. Sleep and death. Even in Greek mythology, Night and Darkness had twins, and those twins were Death and Sleep. The similarities are so ingrained in us they are cliché. If only I could get to sleep without having to think about it. Death might not be as bad if we could just get to it without having to spend that time lying there like we have to do to fall asleep, lying there, unable to distract ourselves or get out of our heads, because to do so would focus our conscious attention when we need to become unconscious.

I'm going to get up and take my medication. Then I'm going to take a shower, and I'm going to turn on my fan, put in my ear plugs, get under the covers, and look at my phone until the medicine kicks in enough that I have a hard time keeping my eyes open. Then I'll turn out the

light and soon be in my drug-assisted sleep. And then I'll wake up to another day, another day,
another day.

I DON'T HEAR GOD ANYMORE

August 2016

Tonight, after a month of this panicked intellectual and emotional upheaval, I may have lost God entirely, and tonight I feel closer to death than ever before, closer than ever before to writing a note with my wishes and thoughts and hopes and passwords and then going through with it. It's after 2 a.m., and I have not taken my medicine. I want to be clearheaded. I don't want to sleep. I am afraid of death, and I am afraid of life. The current battle in me is over which fear is greater. Is a godless death in a godless, uncaring universe so frightening that I want to remain in life, or is life in a godless, uncaring universe so frightening that I want to end mine? As it is, I cannot imagine living any life. I cannot imagine making it through the next week, much less going through with decades of this. I've managed to go from a sort of Calvinist, Reformed depravity in Christ, to an innate sense of worth in my life and recovery, to the realization of my worthlessness in existential truth. That brief window in the middle opened up to me in the past year. I am convinced it is the best I'll ever feel.

If I didn't feel slightly numbed today—probably depressed, not eating much, barely drinking—I think I'd be weeping. Tears have been close. I've stepped quietly through this dark house, pacing, and the tears are always right there. Only the little things can begin to still my heart. The ringing of crickets on a warm midsummer evening. The quiet hum of the air conditioner. The dove outside the window. The cicada. The storm. The lamp in the night. The soft tapping, scraping, crackles, and simmers coming from the kitchen downstairs, the smell of onion in a pan, a bubbling tomato sauce. What those things make me feel is that no matter what is to come, in this moment, this moment only, I am alive, and I am safe. I may be on my way to the gallows, or to the happiest and warmest of houses, or to a black abyss where I shed my body

like a coat and drift into a forever unknowing sleep. But right now, I am safe from it all. The earth is my rock, and on it I stand alone.

I have been saying that the only thing keeping me from suicide this past month is the complete terror I've felt about death. But hours of reading page after page about the history and psychology of religion have put maybe both my feet now in the coldest of atheist camps. My prior religious experiences are explainable in psychological and evolutionary terms. I'd already accepted that in the past month. When I believed, it was as real and as personal to me as a friend sitting across from me, and I had profound experiences in religious settings. It matters in my story. But was it real in the sense that I was connecting to some unseen being that exists outside space and time and yet still exerts influence over us in this material world and our electric bodies? No. Not real. Not to me anymore. Can't be.

I was unaware just how late Judaism as it pertains to Christianity came into the picture. And the Israelites were initially polytheistic. And the earliest scraps of text ever found of the Hebrew Bible are at most from around 1000-900 BCE, with most appearing only centuries later. Many, many religions predate it and fed into it. And, of course, from an evolutionary perspective, religion probably emerged with the development of the human brain, and even at that over many tens of thousands of years. Most anthropologists mark the time when humans started burying their dead as the time when religion began.

I had no idea religion could so easily be undermined in its entirety by analyzing it as a human creation. Religion has no doubt been advantageous evolutionarily. Great beauty has emerged from it, too. At its best, religion can stand proud next to the wonders of biology and chemistry and physics and our art as one the ever-reaching pinnacles of human achievement and expression. We are a remarkable species. I am of a remarkable species—never less, but nothing

more. And cast into this void by my unwilled birth, I can find no meaning or worth. Nothing at all matters. There is no God. There is nothing that transcends the present moment. We maybe don't even have free will or at least much less than is comfortable to think, as most neuroscientist's suspect. Life is likely all deterministic. To the Great Physicist there would be no surprises, unless there's something fundamental to our consciousness and illusion of existence in the probabilities of quantum mechanics. Which is still predictive in most senses. I don't know this science well. I know enough.

I have Robin's obituary open behind this document on my computer. He's smiling in the picture. He's not wearing the glasses he always wore at the hospital except when he was going to the on-site gym. The smile feels real. I want to smile back. It's a good picture. I don't know where he was in his depression when the picture was taken.

"Died unexpectedly," it says.

That's one way of putting it.

"He was 25."

Before the last Wednesday of July, four-and-a-half weeks ago, how did I feel such excitement and hope? It sprang from the rubble first at the hospital last fall and then again at the treatment program in California, where I was from April through to the end of July. By the time I was preparing to leave California, before the panics, those harbingers of my end and all our ends, I had felt connected and eager to connect more. I was looking forward to coming home, looking forward to exploring dating for the first time, dating men. I was looking forward to having a job and having my own apartment. And I was especially looking forward to starting school again, feeling completely unshackled from my broken mind for the first time since it began breaking all

those years ago. For the first time in my adult life, I felt the freedom to prioritize things like a job or school over appointments and treatment, which is not to say that I was planning to forgo all treatment entirely, but just that I felt like I was finally in a place where my treatment did not take precedent over everything else. I could consider an existence apart from it, and old ways of thinking, energized and confident and ambitious thoughts, started springing up, too, like tulips emerging from bulbs I forgot I'd planted. It was exhilarating. It took my breath away, especially in the California sun, with the mountains and ocean and people everywhere. Unthinkingly I had kept all of the assurances of a deathless life, an eternal soul, carried over from my relative youth and previously held beliefs and religious upbringing, but had shed all of the psychologically damaging, trauma-laden and unacceptable realities of a life lived in that Reformed Protestant theology from which the assurances sprang. I should have seen it coming.

That all changed in one full-blown panic attack that Wednesday night at the end of July. It took me completely by surprise. I'd had a good day, and I had not had a panic attack in months. I had volunteered at the farmer's market in Santa Monica for the last time and spent the rest of the afternoon at the beach, and we'd had the usual Wednesday community dinner outside at the apartments when I got back. Things were good. Then, standing in the shower getting ready for bed, some thought on my existence entered my head, and my heart rate picked up, and the thoughts increased exponentially, and within ten or fifteen minutes I was having a panic attack. A month later and the panicked feelings have yet to stop, though they do vary slightly in intensity. That brief conscious moment between sleep and waking in the morning is my only respite.

It took me a couple of weeks to figure out that what was probably happening was a delayed withdrawal to benzodiazepines (Ativan, Xanax), a class of drug I had been taking for

about nine months, as prescribed. Not needing it anymore, I had stopped it about two weeks prior to that panic attack. A delayed, nasty, and extended withdrawal, months long, can happen in some cases, and it appears to be happening to me. The thoughts I am now wrestling with and overcome by are real, and I would have had to address them eventually, but now is the not the time I would have chosen, and, under different circumstances, the utter terror attached to them might have been avoided entirely.

On that night, unaware of what was happening or why, I had to take 2 milligrams of Xanax and 2 milligrams of Ativan before I could sleep. Or maybe it was 2.5 of Xanax and 1 of Ativan. Or 2.5 of Xanax and 2 of Ativan. Regardless, it was more than I should have taken, especially if my body was beginning to react to having stopped them, and even with that dose, I still fell asleep that night with my heart racing and my chest so tight it was hard to breathe. I felt then an existential terror I had never known. Lying there in the dark, I thought of those pictures of faraway galaxies and supernovas with the false-color explosions of gas and dust and began to comprehend how utterly meaningless it all was. It was unbearable to be in my head, imprisoned in my head, knowing that all of this would one day cease to be. Trying to imagine an unconscious eternity only made the anxiety worse. I know now that it's not helpful to try to imagine death, because if you can imagine it, you're not imagining death. In death there are no observers.

We live because we have to and die because we live. Our situation in this universe is so precarious and so small. The veil was lifted that night at the end of July, and I saw our situation for what it was, and it was scarier than I had ever imagined. That night, I was cut down and wrecked unlike anything I had ever experienced and to such an unrelenting extreme that my

mind was being forced into a new kind of dissociation. My tears have soaked not just my face but my shirts, and I clean my glasses only to have more tears wet and dry on them. I have been using the word terror over and over, and that's because it's the only word I know that begins to do justice to what this feels like. Terror. Terror like I've never known. Terror like I never thought possible. And without relief. Without hope. I had faced death before, but it felt different now. In one instant that Wednesday night, death had moved fully out of the abstract and into my reality. Everything I was excited about, looking forward to, aspiring to do, everything I cared about, everything I ever enjoyed, everything I had fought through and survived and overcome, everything I had been as a kid, with hope and earnestness, vibrating with new life—one day it would all end. I am consumed by my mortality and my inability to believe that there is anything but complete annihilation of the self. And the fact that we are all headed to that blackness together is no consolation. I can only think of all of the life I won't live and all the world I'll never know. What "I" uniquely means when it comes from my mouth will never mean the same thing again in all the history of the universe.

In these last weeks, I have been left with all of the lingering of the worst of my Christian theology. This newly realized reality wasn't just about losing a belief in a continued consciousness beyond death, with the distant possibility of being surprised on that last day to find myself in some way intact apart from my body. No. The question was not just whether we are eternal or finite. Because of what I was taught and once believed, you see, that consciousness might be continued in hell. So instead of this being a matter of afterlife or death, it is death, or afterlife, or an afterdeath: hell, forever and ever. And the host would shout Hallelujah! as I am tossed into the burning lake of fire with Satan and his angels on that Final Judgment Day. That's

the Revelation of John. My mom would have to say hallelujah and bow to her God as I am tossed into the lake of fire for all eternity. How then can heaven ever be heaven for her? And as long as there is a hell, love does not win. God's love does not win out over his wrath. Not even the death of his son as sacrifice was enough to appease him, or perhaps that just made him more vindictive, a sacrifice that saves some and adds to the punishment of the many. When all along all that's needed is for God just to forgive and let go like a normal, well, being. Even children can do it. But God can't? Not even a God the scriptures say is Love? To me, that either reveals what incredible temper he must have or, conversely, how cheap his love is. The former is no better than the gods of old, which people are quick now to write off as myth. The latter makes the universe a truly scary and worthless place, if such a lame love is holding it together. In both instances, humanity seems to have out-transcended God in its pursuit of goodness and grace and a life well-lived.

Robin, according to his obituary, was an active member of a Unitarian Universalist church in Vermont where he lived and grew up. I didn't know that about him until a few months ago when I found his obituary online. I always got the sense that he was an atheist, too, or at least that he was at one point in his life. I think he was still an atheist when I knew him at what came to be his last few weeks alive. Belief in God isn't necessary for being a part of that Church. He was Jewish as well. I've thought about trying one of those churches myself, but in this state I'd be going motivated by fear, not by anything I value.

I wonder if Robin felt as I do now. If he was struck by the cruelty of existence, felt himself rendered incapable of living a productive life at all, and certainly incapable of living the life he once dreamed he might have, if it all seemed like pain and impossible expectations ending in a death that rendered all things meaningless anyways. Of course, absolutely, I'd say that his

life mattered to me. He was one of the few people from the hospital with whom I had intended to stay in touch. I felt close to him. He and I had a lot in common. We had shared the connection of friendship. I'd have said to him that it matters to me that he live, but that's selfish. That's just asking someone to stick around in this bodily prison to make my meaningless life a little more bearable in its unfolding.

In light of all things, I wish I'd never been born. I wish none of us were ever born. I wish none of us ever existed and so none of us were ever going to hell. I wish this were all a dream, that I would wake up in a universe where death is gone and life can be however it manages to make a way for itself. That would be a universe of God. There, in that place, would truly exist a God of love and grace.

If there is a God, and if he knows me, and if he knew Robin, he would understand. He would not be angry. He would tell me not to be afraid. He would tell me that there is always and only love, and that even in the face of an annihilationist death, the byproduct of his rules of creation, there is still only love, and empathy for the hardness of life and the coldness of its end. There would be understanding for beliefs of all kinds, and no judgment, just understanding, with love and admiration and even wonder at a creation that surprises even him, like the best and most humble of parents. And if he could make a way for us to shed the pain of this life and be with him forever, he would. And if he couldn't, just knowing that he is there, and that he will always remember us, and that we are each a part of his everlasting story, and that we are made of love and exist in love and leave this world still draped in that love—that would be enough. That would be as close to heaven as I'd ever need, just knowing that I mattered and that I was loved. If that were the human condition, I could live grateful for each day, each breath, each beat of my heart making me feel alive, and, when the time came, leave with dignity and grace and maybe

even a smile, knowing that the same God-love that carried me through my own life would be there for every life forever until that day when life is no more.

As I write, I continue to glance back and forth between my own writing and Robin's picture. I wasn't intending this, but it has helped to see the face of my friend smiling at me, even if it's from the page of his obituary. He's still with me, in my mind, in my being, and he will be till I find my end, too. This moment feels like a sacred communion.

Christianity deserves no part in this moment, but its evil must be expressed as it is experienced. The standard evangelical Christian stance, which so haunts my psychology and existential panic, says that this face smiling out at me is still fully conscious today, burning in that black fire eternally as punishment for not being perfect in every breath first to last or otherwise believing in the right God who might forgive him. This kind, gentle, thoughtful man, who got through as much life as he could, as best he could, looks now exactly as he does in this picture, except now he is screaming an endless scream enrobed in flames that will forever burn and never consume. Eternal torment, because this sadistic, petulant, little God couldn't figure out how to love him enough to save him from Himself. If indeed, as they say, no one is beyond redemption or the reach of divine grace (so long as by some accident of history, birth, disposition, and upbringing they are lucky enough to hear the exact right gospel about the exact right God and believe in it in the exact right way) then we know the grace is not the issue. Unless you're in the limited atonement/double-predestination camp, there is grace enough for all. Why wouldn't it be for all? If all are called to salvation, he must have made a way. That's logical and only fair. And then, because there is grace enough for God to be capable of universal salvation, it must be his choice and will that keeps it from being so. Because for some reason unseeing faith

and baseless belief from us wretched and broken creatures in this wretched and broken creation are the magic words that make it all better. Does God really understand what he's expecting of his image-bearers? Is his ego really so wounded by our evolutionarily-rooted behaviors and tendencies that he can't see the reality of what he's wrought? The pain and suffering and death inflicted upon his world in his name? Because despite what the Christian God seems to think, none of us are asking for his wrath and judgment.

You got that? We are not asking for it. There was death long before humans evolved to comprehend it, and there was competition and desire and survival-at-whatever-cost in all living things, plant and animal and microbe, not just before humanity but in our very becoming, the driving forces underpinning the evolutionary possibility of our emergence in creation. If that is our original sin, so be it. But you cannot blame us for it, and you certainly cannot blame us for bringing it into the world. If you knew what was coming, and all along had intended for such wondrous beings to arise on this pale blue dot, then you would know under what circumstances you were requiring us to come into our own, and if love mattered to you at all, and if you intended to make these people your own, for your glory and our joy, as Christians say, you would be able to see past the glitter of your absolute and timeless perfection and understand our condition enough to make a way for us all and not hold us accountable for behavior that is at times less than transcendent. Even the very worst crimes of our history are explainable in psychological and evolutionary terms, and by that I mean that any other species on this planet, if given the time and level of cognition us *homo sapiens* have been afforded, could have done the same thing. Any shortcomings we have, and we do have them, are no more than the consequence of your natural order. And if you really cared for us, us who have come to really care for you despite ourselves, why would you not have done away with such creational complexity and made

real the poetic and spoke all into existence exactly as you wanted it to be? If such a thing is possible, if you one day plan to do such a thing in the redemption of all creation when you make a New Heaven and a New Earth, minus the nonbelievers, when death and crying will be no more, why didn't you do it from the beginning?

And let's talk about divine revelation, because the stakes for us humans are at their peak with this issue. Clearly *pre-homo sapiens*, proto-human species were beginning to exhibit some religious behavior in their ritualistic burial of the dead. And they probably started having some idea of you by the time they were painting on the walls of caves, symbolic representations of reality revealing the first evidences of abstract thought, though even then you had not yet revealed yourself to them. Then, eventually, with the advent of writing and agriculture giving way to broader communities, where inclusive religious beliefs were conducive to survival—the more people you can get along with, the better your chances—and perhaps helped people to be productive members of the group, a more organized religion began to coalesce. And as writing became more advanced, it became possible to pass along and pass down more complex ideas with less connection to a reality directly observed, and those ideas could be accepted, or rejected, or modified. And as humans spread and populations grew and civilizations developed, so too did those ideas. If you are as Christians believe you to be, one God alone (or, rather, one God with three distinct presentations in our natural reality), people didn't begin to get the right idea about you until maybe the Egyptians, maybe Zoroastrianism, maybe the Second Temple Judaism-Israelites, and in that only for being essentially monotheistic. We're talking no more than three, maybe three-and-a-half or four thousand years ago that an ethical monotheism took hold. And until the Christ, you kept yourself hidden from your beloved and left them to toil and die in this expanse, never knowing even a semblance of him for whom they were created. Are all pre-Christ

condemned? Or are pre-Christ Israelites lucky that they got their lives in before Christ suddenly raised the stakes for the world to faith or hell, lucky to have lived in the good old days when a covenant was enough? Of course, as the story goes, all but one family at one point pissed you off so much that you figured the only way forward was total destruction of all people, the actions of a true toddler-God. So in that sense, people alive pre-Noah weren't so lucky. And you somehow communicated that the rainbow, around from as soon as in the birth of the universe there was light and matter sufficiently penetrable to allow scattering of that light, was now being coopted as a sign of your covenant that you'd never again let your anger get the best of you—setting aside, of course, eternal damnation.

I never had an unexamined faith. I thought deeply. I wondered. I read. I engaged with the theology. I struggled with it. I spoke to God and listened. But not everyone lives that way. The people who don't feel compelled to think too hard about faith have it easy because they get the faith, the saving faith, if there is such a thing, without most of the doubts or distress. Sure, there will be the daily convictions of "Oh, I'm not reading the Bible enough," or "Oh, I could be praying more," or "Oh, I really should be more bold in sharing my faith with my friends and coworkers." The usual pious sin. And there may also be the occasional doubts about God's goodness towards them, or doubts about his existence, wondering where he is in the silence. All of which is not wrong or little. It's just not that complicated.

Why is spirituality negatively correlated with education? And with depression, too. There are brilliant religious minds, but it also seems that the more you know, the harder to maintain faith, especially a rigid one. And the more depression steals from you, the harder to maintain faith. Education elevates—yet it so often takes away the comfort of an easy faith. Depression

kicks you down into the dirt—yet there is when faith abandons you, too. Cruel world. None of this is as straightforward as some faith traditions make it out to be.

I struggle to understand why the writers of the New Testament were so concerned about an unwavering faith, unless it was to assuage their own cognitive dissonances. Conversely, Jesus is recorded as saying that faith the size of a mustard seed, hardly more than a grain of fine sand, is enough. Don't we all have that much faith at least? Unless life has beaten you and me down so much that we lose even that, and then how can justice possibly hold us accountable for that? That would be like charging someone with attempted murder for trying and failing to kill themselves.

I have to hold out that if there is a God who does care about love and mercy, then we, created in that God, could not possibly be more merciful or loving. And yet the God of the Bible to me seems certainly less merciful than we are. And the Calvinists and Traditionalists cling to the idea that he is actually more merciful because we are so depraved and thus anything better than hell is mercy. But that's bullshit to me. There are so many people alive who are already in hell, if hell is where God is not. I get the theology. I get that divine justice is complicated and that compassionate believers are troubled by it, and also that when preached in a certain way the salvation narrative can actually be quite beautiful and compelling. If only it didn't also condemn.

Consider this. Your friend is being tried for murder. Some new evidence is uncovered which exonerates him. You feel relief. You feel joy. You feel like celebrating, even. Of course you do. We all would. But someone is still dead. That's what the evangelical narrative feels like to me. It's great for the saved. But you shouldn't forget that if you believe you are saved, then you were truly going to hell before, because that's more or less what you were saved from. Calvinists remove even that pain from the saved by claiming predestination. To them, if you're saved, then you were never going to hell. But then how are you saved? How is that really

salvation? Even if you were totally depraved, theologically speaking, and deserving of hell, if you were predestined, you were never going to be held accountable for your sins in the way the Christian tradition says the unsaved are held accountable. You don't ever have to come to terms with you being born into the hands of an angry God who was going to cast you into the lake of fire for eternity, until—well, until that same God chose to have mercy on you through means that they say came at the greatest possible cost to him.

And yet, how can God be both so self-righteous as to gladly cast members of creation into the fires forever and at the same time die for other members of creation so that they might not suffer the same? You'd expect that kind of contradiction from a human, but not God. The Christian would say that God is saving us from our sins, but if our sins mean that all of us get thrown into the lake of fire, then it's not just the sin, it's ourselves, we ourselves are sin and to be hated. That seems logical to me. Not palatable, but logical. Because if we were not our sin, then God could just burn the sin away, as he will supposedly do with the believers among us. But our whole selves are condemned, not just our sin. For God it is not possible to "hate the sin, love the sinner," that phrase many of his followers use to justify bigotry, because not even God can separate the sinner from his sin if the sinner doesn't accept the grace being offered.

The same condemnation narrative can be interpreted as God saving us from himself, because no one else is an active agent in this story of condemnation. No person throws themselves into hell. Some commentators say Adam was really the first sinner, because he was passively standing by while Eve committed a sin. But by that logic, God is just as culpable as Adam, and if God is just as culpable, then Adam cannot be condemned ("He who is without sin cast the first stone . . .") and Eve cannot be blamed. Because where was God? I myself think

that's reading too much into that narrative. It's a story, not a history. But the words are there, and the people who believe in their divine source take them this seriously. So it matters.

A few months later.

I'm still here. The terror is gone most days, but it is easily roused. I've heard it said that certainty rarely accompanies wisdom, and that seems right to me. I'm learning to live with uncertainty. I have found that my mind is quietest when I assume that there is no God and that this life is all there is, and I give myself permission not to believe and to live as best I know how. And for when the old religious fires flare—and they do, they always do—I worked out this bit of theology for myself:

First, sins are always sins against God, and if Christians are right about sin, then there is not a sin in the world any of us would choose if we knew the truth of it in our bones, a kind of knowing that would root sin out of us forever, because sin, if Christians are right, gets in the way of our greatest joy and satisfaction: we were made for union with God, so being united with God is our greatest possible joy and satisfaction, and sin breaks that union. Second, if there is a God and there is more to this world than logic and empiricism can ever reveal, I trust in what Christians believe happened on the cross. On that day, it was not just the person holding the nail and hammer that put Jesus on the cross; in a metaphorical sense, it was all of us, because all have sinned, and it was all of our sins that held him there. That's scripture. And on the cross, Jesus asks the Father to forgive those who put him there, not because they were repentant, but because they didn't know what they were doing—and Jesus's death, a penal substitution for mankind, gave God a just means by which he could forgive. I think, then, that his plea logically extends to

all humanity. “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” If we sin, we don’t know what we do, because we wouldn’t do it if we knew, if we really knew; and the heart of God as expressed through Jesus is forgiveness. If there is a God, that has to be it. I know a scriptural literalist would refute this because it is contradicted by other parts of scripture. That’s not important to me. To me, that moment—“Forgive them, Father”—is not just part of the story but the whole story, right then and there.

So.

Life is hard.

And I go on.

AND THEN

November 2017

The first interstellar object observed in our own solar system raced by recently. It had travelled for hundreds of millions of years unattached to any star system before our paths crossed with it, and we'll never see it again. How many more millions, billions of years will it travel before being alighted by another star? Will it ever perchance collide with an object stuck in orbit and join the dance around that object's star, some distant, unknown spheroid of fusing atomic nuclei?

When I consider the interstellar rock without a sun, and see the artist rendering, I imagine the point of view of the rock—how cold, how dark, stuck in a perpetual night with no heat and no light but for a sky full of stars. I feel the weight of the near vacuum of space it occupies like three-thousand meters of black ocean water pressing down on my chest. As if the rock has a point of view. We humans even gave it a name. *'Oumuamua*. Of course, the rock knows nothing. Sees nothing. Feels nothing. But I can't help but put myself in its place, become the rock, or at least stand on it, as I imagine its lonely trajectory through space and time.

How many rocks are out there? How much of the universe's mass and energy lacks the life we take for granted on this planet? The scope of that amount, the powers of ten adding unceasingly—it's crushing, devastating. We are surrounded by lifeless matter that might as well be empty space but for the beauty of its light. There's hardly a difference between something and nothing when there's no one to observe it.

It feels unlikely to me that our planet in this our solar system is the only place that harbors life in all the universe in all the time since the universe and time began. Are we an anomaly in this world? Or are we the norm? There is life in degrees, too. We must consider that.

Regardless, there's no way to know what's really out there. I suspect we'll never know. The rules of physics make this place our beautiful prison, its walls built of the speed of light, and with windows seeing only what was as it burned millions and billions of lifetimes ago. We can search the electromagnetic spectrum and its massless particles emanating all around us. Probe and study them. And the more we know, the smaller we'll get, till we might as well be nothing at all. And we are nothing, in a way. We observe the world around us, but shift your perspective to the quantum level, and we're no different from all other mass and energy, that something and nothing, buzzing, bumping, and whizzing around in every cubic centimeter of this place. Perhaps there is mental stuff inherent in all things, a naturalist panpsychist sort of proposition. And what is lurking in the multidimensional algebras and geometries of our minds, building and collapsing and creating our existence? What are the numbers beneath all things? *That* we may one day know. One day.

We are stuck, and we may be doomed, our fate tied to our star's. But we have never been and will never be short on wonder, as long as we grasp in our hands the time that is ours and look and taste and touch and smell and listen, as long as we think and feel and choose to be alive to the energy inside us, and the energy all around us that's really no different than what's inside us, just perhaps a little less organized.

Our planet is special. There's not a place like it because we're here. And for better and for worse, and without given a choice in the matter, we've made it our home. Under the circumstances, we've done better than I'd expect. And this our home made us and shaped us. It is perfectly home, just for us, because from it and by it we were born. We belong here like we will never belong anywhere else. There might not be a God, some transcendent divine force. That's no matter. This planet, and the laws of nature and physics aroused in its becoming, created us

either way. The ground we stand on, the sky we gaze up at—all the universe might as well be God, every bit of it eternal and consistent, both the creator of all things and itself all things. Stand with hands outstretched and feel the power of that! Cast your eyes to the heavens and see the beauty! Savor it, and marvel, at what is yours and what is not, both of which are really the same thing, when you are, as we are, just one piece of all. Because if to each of us all is ours, that set of equations algebraically simplifies down to $1 = 1$: all belongs to all. So the world is yours, and it is not. You are yours, and you are not. We are ours, and we are not. Though we all *are*. That intransitive verb that contains the present and our being and becoming in each moment as it passes. Always here, impossible to put a finger on, “I am”—or, maybe, “all is.”

Though I don't mean to forsake the individual: the “I” that every person speaks in their own way yet meaning something different in each iteration, every person that has been and is and ever will be, and changing even for each individual across time as each moment comes and goes. “I.” There is power and beauty and wonder in that. It's what makes exist anything at all to my mind—for the entire universe may be out there, but in another way, the entire universe is contained in each of our heads, the universe as we each uniquely see and feel and know it to be. When we learn more, objectively true or not, the frames of our mind's picture expand, or more colors are added, or the image is adjusted—knowledge here conceptualized as two-dimensional—so that we see more of what was already there. Not that we already knew it. I'm not suggesting some Platonic all-knowing that we gradually remember as we live lives as embodied spirits. But when I open a book, or travel to a place I've never been, the universe inside my head grows to accommodate it. All the knowledge, all the cultures in the world are there. And when our minds grow to accommodate what we learn, we're just seeing more,

however imperfectly, of what's been true all along, the truth as each of us sees it, reality as each of us knows and believes and thinks and feels it to be.

And so each death is the death of an entire universe, lost unless we've dared to try to tell our stories, to say what it was like to be us, our art and notes becoming the archeological record of each of our minds that we leave behind when all of a life has been lived. And then we go back to All.

ON WRITING A LIFE

Treatise

In her essay “On Keeping a Notebook,” Joan Didion writes, “The impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, useful only accidentally, only secondarily, in the way that any compulsion tries to justify itself. . . . Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss” (132-3). Growing up, I kept notes, sporadic and infrequent, of significant events, usually trips—what was done, where I was, what I saw. But it wasn’t until the summer of 2009, the summer before my junior year of high school, the summer of my conversion, that I really started to write my life, compulsively and at length. My journaling, typed, for those three months totals more than 100 pages and 60,000 words. It was the obsessive record of hours-long conversations I was having with a religious acquaintance-become-mentor and friend named Dan, and my thoughts, and feelings, and responses to him, some spoken, some not. He was talkative; I was not. And that worked, because I had questions, and he had lots to say. I’d come home after talking with him and spend just as long as we had spoken writing about what was spoken and what I was now thinking. My writing was a record of a relationship, too. Not a romantic one, though even then, before I had admitted to anyone my sexual attraction to men, and many years before I would use the word “gay,” I noted, from page one, my multifaceted (though physically nonspecific) attraction to him. I’m not sure what was motivating me to write more: the significance to me of this male friendship, something I lacked for most of my adolescence; the conversations we were having; or the weight of the mass of feelings and especially thoughts turning over in my head. What I do know is that underneath it all was a feeling that what was happening was significant

and that I needed to remember it, that I needed to write it to remember it—because, as it goes, if I don't write it, I won't remember it, and if I don't remember it, then it is lost. And that's where this all began for me.

After that summer, once Dan had left for school, my writing slowed down once more. I don't have much written record of that fall. I have lots of general memories and some specific ones, but much of that time is indeed lost—a part of me, a part of my becoming, but unknown to me. It wasn't until the spring semester of that school year that the winds picked up again and blew open the pages of a new journal for a new time. A mentoring relationship began with a pastor at my church: I was intelligent and Biblically literate but still a new convert, and based on a rocky but up until then non-abusive experience in churches growing up, I was hesitant to get involved in a church; but I did, slowly, and I asked for that pastor, Nathan, to mentor me. As I began to meet with him, I wrote about him and what we talked about like I had written about the conversations I had had with Dan the summer prior. This time, I took an even more systematized approach to recording our conversations: detailed outlines usually followed them. I forced myself to remember in exact detail as much as I could and wrote it down as quickly as I could so as not to miss something. I wrote about my thoughts and feelings towards Nathan as well. Also making their first written and indirect appearances are what I and professionals would years later identify as insecure attachment patterns, much compounded and reinforced by traumas soon to come in this timeline and, as some diagnosed, components of borderline personality disorder. I have theories, as have past therapists, about why then, why with these men and not before, but that's for another essay.

It was this pastor who would soon connect me with his friend. I wrote on May 3, 2010: “He told me that his very good friend—a friendship he's very thankful for—has similar desires

and circumstances as I. That gives me hope, because he is living his life for God and lives for the Lord, and even ministers to people in similar situations as he. There is hope. I'm not doomed to have homosexual tendencies forever." I didn't know this friend's name then, but I would soon know his name and a hell of a lot more. Both of these men were in their mid-thirties. They had met in seminary. And this friend, Jesse, had recently moved to Austin, where I was and had grown up.

When Jesse entered my life, I wrote extensively. Over the course of that year-and-a-half-long relationship, there are periods in which I did little to no writing for sometimes as long as a few months. That was partly because some of the compulsion to write was mitigated by the knowledge that there was already a detailed written record of our interactions saved in the texts we were sending to each other. By mistake, those texts were eventually deleted, and I didn't write elsewhere as much as I thought I had, which I found out looking back on this written record for evidence in the fall of 2012 and later. But most significant moments and relational shifts were recorded, and even when they weren't, I do remember a lot about my time with him.

My relationship with Jesse ended in 2012, during my freshman year of college, and what followed as a result were years of increasingly severe mental illness, some of which I have written about in this thesis. There is an extensive written record of those years in my journals, of the worst times, the hardest days and darkest nights and the most painful conversations and abuses, of what ground was covered with my therapists and doctors, and also of the especially good times, when I happened upon them. The good times—a day at the lake with a friend, or an afternoon with that friend and his friends, or an easy, happy dinner, or just a conversation that felt nice, that made me feel loved and connected—almost exclusively centered around

relationships. Most of the bad times did, too. These relationships were always non-romantic, by circumstance and religious choice, but they were significant.

I wrote about those good days to remember them, recording as much detail as I could recall, often staying up hours later than I otherwise would so as not to sleep on it and forget. But most of the writing I did, particularly about the hard times, was due to the overwhelming weight of what was happening in my head and the need to try to get some of it out. When I wasn't in such a heightened emotional state that writing was insufficient, my relationship to my journals was often like that of an external hard drive for a computer: if I could write what I needed to say adequately enough for my mind to quieten about it, then I could close that journal, set it on my nightstand, turn out the light, and sleep, knowing that if I needed to return to the events of the day and my thoughts and feelings, it was there. I could let it go from my mind because it was now stored elsewhere.

In the fall of 2016, in the midst of an excruciating and terrifying loss of faith—a process many years in the making, a long, gradual decline, but made real in an instant one night due, I think, to a medication I had recently stopped—I read and wrote at great length, going where my mind was forcing me to go. I was paralyzed by this new reality, what had always been there but that my one-time faith and optimism had kept from seeing, a reality of death without an afterlife, and a world devoid of non-artificial meaning, as well as—this part was probably the medication—a fear of hell as real as if I were standing in front a firing squad, but lacking the faith I had once believed would save me from it. Enough faith for hell but not enough for heaven. I had just left my second step-down treatment program, this one in California—this was August of that year—and I wasn't starting back to school again until January. I had planned on finding a job, but finding a job that fall never happened. Instead, after a week or two of being paralyzed by

a panic that would not release its grip on me, this was what my rhythm became most days: I would stay up very late, preferring the quiet and stillness of night; I would sleep until the early afternoon; if I was going for a run, usually a long one, I'd do it when I woke up, which just happened to be usually at the hottest part of the day; then I'd come back, shower, and maybe work on a puzzle, something I'd often done at the mental hospital in my downtime; and then I'd read and write, writing until it was once again very late, not by choice but because I had to. This culminated in one long night of writing in which I made my first—and quite an extended—attempt to more comprehensively make sense of what had been a sudden cataclysmic shift in my worldview. (“I Don’t Hear God Anymore” is an edited and adapted version of what I wrote that night. This adapted version is actually more than 1,300 words shorter than what I wrote that night, despite any additions I made to it for inclusion here. Besides its brief epilogue, I don’t remember having to add much content. It was a dark night, and I had a lot work out and a lot to say.) Of course, that night wasn’t the end of those panicked feelings. It was a significant moment but far from the end. I was still forming these new ideas and trying to find firm footing in that hostile environment of my mind. I was still easily destabilized to the point of near-panic attack by a simple thought or word unprompted or encountered in life months into 2017, and then I would have to read about it and write until I could intellectually put any supernatural proposition once more into the realm of faith, that faith I no longer had and did not again want.

After the night that I turned into a piece here—and I say night, but I wrote through the night, into the following morning, and nearly to the afternoon the following day—I took to typing all of my handwritten journals. That was what I spent much of the rest of the fall doing. I would get up and start typing, every day, sometimes for five, six, seven hours. I started with the journals I had kept over the prior year, those of my time in treatment, and then went back to the

beginning of my handwritten journals, the bulk of which I had started that junior year of high school. I was eventually copy typing as much as 20,000 words per day, every day—for a while I remember 20,000 words being my daily goal—and I recorded every word in those journals, including the ones I crossed out, getting through as many of the journals as I could. If I felt the need to clarify or add something, I would either insert it in square brackets or put it in a footnote.

This work I had made for myself served many purposes. It was a way to remind myself of what I had gone through and learned on my journey to wellness. Then, when I went further back to the relationship that had put so much of this in motion, armed with the clarity I now had, I was able to revisit the trauma and all of the many things I felt for Jesse and about him. It also allowed me to engage with it five and six years later and to add commentary whenever it felt necessary. But this copy typing was also, I think, a reaction to death no longer being in the abstract: these words were the record of who I was, of what I had thought and felt and all I had been through. If I were never able to turn this life into a story, or a collection of moments remembered, or at least some autobiographical essays, something I could share, this was what would be left. My writing is what made it feel like what I had been through just might have been worth something. That it had meaning. That what I went through was about more than just me. That it had been more than just something for me to survive. These journals and their typed copies had been compulsively filled with the truth. Those words I added in square brackets or footnotes did sometimes include justifications, or explanations, or context, or they'd fill in some gaps, and there were instances where I felt the need to comment, still in square brackets or footnotes, "I shouldn't have said that." But there was no censoring of my original words.

Leonard Woolf, husband of Virginia Woolf, in his introduction to a posthumously published collection of extracts from her diaries, writes about the life that gets recorded in a diary:

At the best and even unexpurgated, diaries give a distorted or one-sided portrait of the writer, because, as Virginia Woolf herself remarks somewhere in these diaries, one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood — irritation or misery, say — and of not writing one's diary when one is feeling the opposite. The portrait is therefore from the start unbalanced, and, if someone then deliberately removes another characteristic, it may well become a mere caricature. (vii-viii)

While he goes on to say that he did have to choose what to include and not to include, I think what he said here is necessarily true. I have tended to write far more when things are not going well than when they are. I tend to write more when I'm around people more, and the more connected to those people I feel the more I tend to write. But the issue of what the daily or weekly or infrequent diarist tends to write about also gives way to the same issues that go into crafting a story—the question of what was significant enough about the day or event to write about and what can be left out and probably forgotten. And what dictates what goes into a diary, journal, or notebook is often not an abstract, creative, editorial choice, but simply one of necessity: *this is on my mind, this is what happened, this is what I am thinking, this is what I am feeling, and I must speak it*. These are the things that are significant not because we've decided they are but because our minds have not given us any other way. And that means that the diary, journal, or notebook is at times incomplete—though I want to be careful to say not dishonest or untrue. The truthfulness is up to the writer.

I would add, though, that if, like Joan Didion says, the impulse to write things down is a compulsion, and I think it must be for those who write regularly in any mode, it makes sense that what we're getting at is more the truth than it isn't, even when the writing is only indirectly connected to the life of the writer. In that same essay, Didion writes about her first entry in her

first journal: an account of a woman who thinks she is freezing to death in the Arctic only to realize at daybreak that she is in the Sahara and will die of heat before lunch. Of that, she says:

I have no idea what turn of a five-year-old's mind could have prompted so insistently 'ironic' and exotic a story, but it does reveal a certain predilection for the extreme which has dogged me into adult life; perhaps if I were analytically inclined I would find it a truer story than any I might have told about Donald Johnson's birthday party or the day my cousin Brenda put Kitty Litter in the aquarium. (133)

Sometimes the truer truth could lie less in what happened and more in the story the writer wants to tell instead.

My own impulse has most often been to get as close to reality as my ability to use language can get it—to represent reality as I experienced it, and, often, in such a way that it can be understood, either by a future self or someone else entirely. (Sometimes, too, particularly at times when I was more unwell, my journal entries were essentially conversations with someone, often someone who had hurt me in the past or was hurting me in the present. Sometimes they were imagined conversations, often with a religious person who was willfully lacking empathy, choosing to condescend and misinterpret and not do the hard work of understanding.) This stance differs from Didion, who said that “the point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess” (133). That “different impulse” is most often my own. Not to record my days like the diarist who makes notes every evening in brief, coded bursts. I don't write in a journal every day or even every week. But when I do write, especially when I write more than a note or thought or quote, it is to transmit some present reality from images and feelings and fragments of scenes in my head into language, into words on a page. Of course, sometimes a mass of details doesn't convey as much as a few well-chosen facts in a few well-organized, purposeful sentences. Sometimes

writing only about what mattered the most in a conversation, about what it made me feel, about one meaningful sentiment shared, says more than a full outline of the same conversation. To communicate complex ideas, sometimes a more indirect approach is more effective, and I think that the more narrative a writer's approach, the more true this becomes. A small, compelling story about a significant moment can say just as much about who I was and what I wanted and needed at the time than a more detailed but less nuanced record of ten other moments. And as I've gotten older and better at knowing which details will matter to me, I like to think that I am able to cover more ground in fewer words. But that's more an issue of craft. I'll get to that in a bit.

Doing any amount of research and reading in the area of life-writing, one will quickly be confronted by papers, essays, and books in which academics and writers of all kinds attack or are otherwise severely critical not just of this mode of writing but of the character and psychology of those choosing to write in it. First, there are the usual accusations of excessive pride, narcissism, and an unearned self-importance. Some seem to imply that if the life-writer's life wouldn't leave any lasting impression on the world without their writing about it, then the living didn't matter. That somehow all that matters is what we did and not also what we said, and that if we did nothing of historical importance, then who, they wonder, cares? As if there isn't value in talking about the small things. Value in a little life.

There are also those who unfairly back the life-writer into a corner by saying that to revise a piece of writing is to fabricate. They make it so that if a writer has edited his story, then to them that story has been made into something untrue, or at least less true, when in any other context to revise would be seen as an attempt to get closer to the truth and not further from it. As

if the life-writer's truest words are only those that come first. Such an attitude is akin to attacking someone and then belittling them for being prepared for the attack.

Then there are the class of accusations that revolve around the inability of a person writing about his or her life to tell the truth for one reason or another. Disregarding instances in which a person doesn't want to admit even to himself some aspect of his character or past or present life, these accusations tend to revolve around the issue of audience: that the moment a writer gets the sense that someone other than himself might read what is being written, he will be incapable of telling the truth unadorned and incapable of avoiding shaping the narrative so as to distort the facts and perform a preferred but false version of himself, good and clean instead of complicated and messy and sometimes unlikeable. This view of an unavoidably artificial, constructed self is asserted in degrees, but the sense remains: life-writing cannot truly present a life as it was, as it is, as it was lived, and usually not because the tools of language make it impossible but because of the one writing. Some seem to think that we are all incapable of revealing ourselves as we truly are. Some will cite certain supposedly inescapable ulterior motives in telling true stories that the writer will allow to corrupt his work, like getting revenge, or seeking absolution through confession or justification. I can certainly concede that writers will encounter conflicting feelings when it comes to telling stories from their lives, which can result in anything from innocuous hesitations, to an outright desire to exclude something necessary and not incidental to the story being told, to a desire to emphasize more admirable or redeeming actions, thoughts, and feelings. If you sit with it and consider what feelings might come up if you were to stand in front of people you know and people you don't and tell a true story about a hard time in your life, I'm sure you could add much more to that list. Even Virginia Woolf admits to such things in her diary, in an entry on October 25, 1920: "Melancholy diminishes as I write.

Why then don't I write it down oftener? Well, one's vanity forbids. I want to appear a success even to myself. Yet I don't get to the bottom of it" (28). What our accusers don't allow for, however, is our ability to be aware of these things and, when they conflict with the truth, to choose to tell the truth despite any inclinations we might find in ourselves not to. So on the whole, I think it is false that a writer imagining an audience for his words, or simply writing as if there were an audience, will be unable to write without dishonesty.

This is an important rebuttal because in some respects a writer cannot avoid the concept of an audience in his or her craft: craft is closely tied to the wants and needs of an audience, and like an interplanetary probe moving through space at a constant velocity after its propulsion system is turned off, that audience impression sticks even in the absence of an intended audience. Lynn Z. Bloom discusses the effect of audience on life-writing in her essay "I Write for Myself and Strangers': Private Diaries as Public Documents": "[O]nce a writer, like an actor, is audience-oriented, such considerations as telling a good story, getting the sounds and the rhythm right, supplying sufficient detail for another's understanding, can never be excluded. All writers know this; they attend to such matters through design and habit" (24-5). In this sense, Bloom asserts that "for a professional writer there are no private writings" (24). Her primary examples exist at two poles: what she calls "truly private diaries," "bare-bones works" that are "[w]ritten with neither art nor artifice" that "no reader outside the author's immediate society or household could understand . . . without extra-textual information" (25); and "public private diaries" that are "essentially freestanding public documents, artfully shaped to accommodate an audience" (28). She argues that "the presence of an audience, whether near or remote, requires accommodation through the same textual features that in all cases transform private diaries into public documents" (24).

First, an aside, relevant to the creative pieces I have written here: under the heading “Textual transformations,” one feature of these “public private diaries” that Bloom identifies is “[e]xtensive revision of diary manuscripts . . . in an attempt to make sense of one’s life for an external audience” (32-3). (Though Virginia Woolf’s diaries do not make an appearance under this heading, Bloom elsewhere cites Woolf’s diaries as an example of these “public private diaries. Bloom acknowledges in the opening paragraph of her essay that only “some of the most engaging diaries undergo” this “revision and editing” (23), but I want to note that Woolf’s diaries did not undergo such revisions. I will argue that Woolf’s diaries are actually a counterexample to Bloom’s argument and are instead support for my own assertions about the relationship between audience and craft in life-writing.) Bloom analyzes Mary Chesnut’s Civil War diary as one her examples of a text that has undergone such “textual transformations.” Quoting the title of the introduction to *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War* by its editor C. Vann Woodward, Bloom says that Chesnut transformed the text of her diary from “a diary in fact to a diary in form.” Bloom adds: “a blurred genre indeed” (34). I am spending time on this specific textual feature to make the point that three of the creative pieces I have written here, “Beginning,” “When Language Fails Us,” and “I Don’t Hear God Anymore,” are close to what might be called “a diary in form.” Not exactly, but certainly close. And that is because they were adapted from my own journal writing. (In these three cases, the writing I adapted had been written from the start in documents on my computer, not in a physical journal. This is particularly relevant to the setting of “I Don’t Hear God Anymore” because in it I refer to Robin’s obituary being “open behind this document on my computer.” That was true of that night in August of 2016. I did have his obituary open. He was very much a part of that night, with me as much as one can be under such circumstances. That next morning, still writing, still awake—it must have been that morning—I remember passing

my computer to my mom and asking her to read his obituary. I wanted her to know more about my friend and to see his face. There was no other reason. I just wanted her, someone, anyone to know.) I drew heavily from those private writings—I consider them private; I was not writing for others—for these three pieces, and I generally preserved the form and perspective of those writings in what I have produced here. This was true even when the private writing had been written over more than one night but was reworked here to make it as if it had only written over only one, as I did in “When Language Fails Us.” While I readily acknowledged they were journal-like in form, before reading Bloom’s essay I had not thought they might still be considered journal entries. (“Journal entry” is what I’ve always called such writing of my own, but in this setting it is of course just “diary entry” by another name.) I have never revised a journal entry and still called it a journal entry. But I suppose in some ways they are still journal entries of a kind, just in a revised, adapted, and amended form.

What Bloom’s analysis of all the features which she says turn private diaries into public documents does not account for is that just as such private diaries are largely insufficient for an outside reader to understand them, so too are they often insufficient for the writer revisiting them to remember exactly what happened on a particular day beyond the most spare data points. And what good is that to the writer who intends one day to look back on his journals and diaries to remember, or who otherwise relies on them to be more than a “bare-bones” record of events? A brief note about who I saw and where and an adjective or two describe the exchange is hardly better than not writing about it at all. That sort of entry says enough to let me know that something happened but not enough to truly remind me of it. So writing more, and more artfully, is not just about writing in a compelling way for an audience—that sort of writing can also be just for me. It is a way to get at more of the truth of what happened regardless of who reads it.

This alternative possibility not allowed for in Bloom's argument is exemplified by looking at part of Bloom's analysis of Virginia Woolf's diaries. Under the heading "Contextualization," Bloom asserts that these "public private diaries" "are sufficiently developed to be self-contained" (30). As an example, Bloom uses an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's diaries, "half a paragraph selected at random. . . . [Woolf] begins: 'On Easter Monday we went up to visit the Murrays & see Hampstead Heath.' A private diarist would have stopped there, but Woolf continues, exploring the dramatic possibilities of a brief scene . . ." (30). But especially in light of Virginia Woolf's remarks in a separate diary entry in which she refers to her diary writing as "the habit of writing thus for my eye only" (*A Writer's Diary* 13), the fact that "Woolf continues" is not perforce because she had a public readership in mind. As I have often done by choice and perhaps habit, Woolf could have been writing so as better to remember, should she later look back on that diary entry. She could have been practicing her writing, too, seeing what she could make of the events of the day; the complete idea expressed in the above quoted remark is that "the habit of writing thus for my eye only is good practice" (13). Or she could have been saying simply what she wanted to say, enjoying the sounds of it, or the challenge. She employs elements of craft in her diary writing, but her diary writing also informed her craft. I conclude as much later in this treatise. Awareness of the requirements of writing for an audience influences writings done in private where an audience is not intended, and the writing one does in private can influence the kind of writing one does for an audience. This dialogue between public and private work is true of all artists, who are all communicating something in some form or another. A musician will still play with feeling and technique when alone, and he will play when alone not just to prepare for public performance but also because he himself enjoys the music and finds meaning in it; and he knows what it is to play with feeling not just because of the effect his

music has on an audience but also because of the effect his music has on himself, though he may also enjoy getting to play for other people; and that practice he does alone will inform his public performances, and his public performances will inform his practice. So while Bloom uses Woolf as a supporting example of the “public private diary,” I would argue that Woolf is a counterexample to Bloom’s assertion that the sort of writing that accommodates an audience is “in all cases” transformed into a public document, with its authors “trusting themselves to speak beyond their diary’s pages to an audience of strangers, present and to come” (35). According to Bloom’s descriptions, Woolf’s diary may be something like a “public document” in form, but that says nothing about Woolf’s intention, and if Woolf didn’t intend it, then she was not writing for an audience, and if she was not writing for an audience, then I would assert that the presence in her own diary of elements of craft that other writers employ when they are writing for an audience does not change the private nature of her own diary.

What are we to make of this seemingly ever-present audience in the work of a writer, private and public? Perhaps it is due more to something inherent to all the ways in which we communicate in any medium, from music to painting to, yes, writing. A writer’s fundamental materials are words, and words are developed and gain meaning communally. Language, built from those words, is guided in its formation by those same forces. A writer learns how to write by how other people write, how others speak, how we speak, how our own writing sounds to us, and how other people respond to our own writing, as well as by the experimentation we do at the intersection of those things. We write because language is a tool by which we can represent the world symbolically. It helps us to grasp reality, to work our way to truth, to organize our thoughts and feelings and find an outlet for their expression, to discover what we think and feel altogether, and to tell our stories. And then we write because it communicates these things, either

to another person or to our present or future selves. In all language there is a permanent impression of an “other” like a fossilized footprint. It is intrinsic to language and unavoidable. So these “considerations” of what Bloom calls the “audience-oriented” writer become, in a phrase I’ve been using here, elements of craft, which can be practiced and utilized in public and in private. These elements of craft can exist and be developed apart from an audience and be motivated by forces beyond that of writing for an audience, and regardless of where or why these elements are learned, once they are learned and practiced and worked out by a writer, they inevitably become a part of his or her voice, whether or not an audience is there or intended. These elements expand what of this life and world the writer is able to communicate, which means that they make the writer capable of expressing more with more vividness, precision, nuance, feeling, and complexity, to others or for just himself. That presumably means a life-writer is more able to hide or disguise himself or to construct altogether a life that he wants people to see, but that’s a choice. Words have power, but that power is a neutral force. Greater ability to wield language for a writer’s individual purposes can mean just as much that the writer has a causally-linked greater ability to get closer to the truth.

Of the “considerations” Bloom lists, “supplying sufficient detail for another’s understanding” rings most true to my own work. Writing with understanding in mind is a significant part of my work because it is a significant part of my past and of the forces that have shaped my mental life. I have spent much of my adult life in situations where I wanted desperately to be understood and was not, and much of the writing I did in my journals was done within that context. Understanding and remembering are two ends closely tied, because if I haven’t accounted for a future self who might not remember anything beyond the words I write, then the writing will be insufficient for remembering. So these two ends are nearly inextricable

from what I write. It influences the way I journal, which in turn influences the way I write everything else. And such aiming for understanding cannot be a shortcoming. Despite what others might say, wanting a reader to understand something a certain way does not mean the writer is modifying the truth or putting on a mask any more than wanting to be understood in a conversation means one is hiding the truth. Trying to write towards something does not imply dishonesty, posturing, deception (including self-deception), or confabulation.

Many who are critical of life-writing seem proudly to claim not to write about themselves at all, as if what they write doesn't come from an imagination and mind uniquely their own, informed by research perhaps but also personal experience. As if their own literary fiction just appeared out of a void, uninformed and uninhabited by their lives and selves. Perhaps this is because of the present gender disparity in academia, but these accusations often seem to come from men, and it often feels at least a bit sexist, talking about women who could only escape their hollow lives through hollow fictions and hollow diaries. It's exhausting. And never mind the fact that many writers have found keeping a personal journal (or notebook, or diary) useful to their craft.¹ In an entry on April 20, 1919, Virginia Woolf writes about the benefits of keeping a diary, a portion of which I have quoted previously:

I confess that the rough and random style of [this diary], often so ungrammatical, and crying for a word altered, afflicted me somewhat. I am trying to tell whichever self it is that reads this hereafter that I can write very much better; and take no time over this; and forbid her to let the eye of man behold it. . . . But what is more to the point is my belief that the habit of writing thus for my own eye only is good practice. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and the stumbles. Going at such a pace as I do I must make the most direct and instant shots at my object, and thus have to lay hands on words,

¹ Tangentially, for some, expressive writing about stressful events (and sometimes other topics) has been shown to substantially improve both physical and mental health and achievements, including decreased numbers of doctor's visits, positive effects on blood markers of immune function, fewer depressive symptoms, better grades, and greater stability of romantic relationships. See Slatcher and Pennebaker, "Social Effects of Expressive Writing"; Pennebaker and Seagal, "Health Benefits of Narrative."

choose them and shoot them with no more pause than is needed to put my pen in the ink.
(13)

Choose them and shoot them. She acknowledges the competing desire of wanting to “tell whichever self it is that reads this hereafter that I can write very much better,” but settles on the fact that the writing is “good practice.” A radical honesty can exist in writing meant for our eyes only. I don’t think I would care to be a writer if I did not journal, nor would I know what I want to say or what I can say.

Galen Strawson, a writer and philosopher who lives and defends a non-narrative life, would come at least in part to our defense: “It’s an ancient view that people always remember their own pasts in a way that puts them in a good light, but it’s just not true. The Dutch psychologist Willem Wagenaar makes the point in his paper ‘Is Memory Self-Serving?’ (1994), as does Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich on his deathbed.” This is from Strawson’s essay, “The Unstoried Life”—and to Strawson I am inclined to concede much. His point is not that it is wrong to consider one’s life narratively, but that it is “false that everyone stories themselves, and false that it’s always a good thing.” He offers this definition of capital-“N” “Narrative types”: “to be naturally disposed to experience or conceive of one’s life, one’s existence in time, oneself, in a narrative way, as having the form of a story, or perhaps a collection of stories, and—in some manner—to live in and through this conception.”

Strawson describes his anti-Narrative experience as going beyond the fact that his memory is “piecemeal and disordered,” even when “trying to remember a temporally extended sequence of events.” He says that in “the large-scale structure of human existence,” his life “simply never assumes a story-like shape.” This is in direct contrast to what he states is a “remarkably robust consensus . . . not only in the humanities but also in psychotherapy” that “we

story ourselves and we are our stories.” That claim may explain some people’s experiences, maybe even many or most, but it is not universal, nor do I think a life is, at its foundation, a story.² That’s what Strawson is saying, and I agree.

Susan Sontag, in a journal entry dated December 31, 1957, with the heading “On Keeping a Journal,” writes:

Superficial to understand the journal as just a receptacle for one’s private, secret thoughts—like a confidante who is deaf, dumb, and illiterate. In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood. It represents me as emotionally and spiritually independent. Therefore (alas) it does not simply record my actual, daily life but rather — in many cases — offers an alternative to it. (164-5)

This sense of self-creating is not one I share. I reflect myself in my writing. I work things out in my writing. I discover things about myself and the world I didn’t know or feel or think before. And while to readers this other self is being created in their minds when any words are read, I don’t think I find that same thing happening when the words are my own, at least in the writing of the words, or at least to that degree.

I was rather brutal in the expectations I placed on my memory in the past. When it mattered, I did not allow for error or forgetfulness. I trained and forced myself to remember, not just what happened but when it happened and in what order, at least until it could be written down. I can visualize my memories as existing in space, ordered chronologically in the same way I spatially know where I am when I’m driving through my hometown. I don’t know if I made myself that way or if that is just how I am. I suppose the distinction doesn’t matter. I also do not know if, devoid of this impulse to write things down, my relationship to the past would be

² Nor do I think having this self-storying impulse is necessary to undertake some degree of life-writing. Strawson’s example of Montaigne would suggest as much.

the same. How much would I remember or care to remember if I did not write? And then, the question—if I lived through it and didn't write about it, did it matter? To me, the answer to that question has most often felt like “no.” But it's no virtue what I've put myself through. Others unlike me are probably on the whole happier and more content. But I am as I am, and I don't mind it. I don't dwell on memories of the past, not more than I feel I must. But as Didion suggests, it is, I think, a feeling of loss that underscores and motivates me in this rather involuntary endeavor.

On the relationship between memory and truth, Strawson spends some time on Montaigne, who said in 1580, “I can find hardly a trace of [memory] in myself. I doubt if there is any other memory in the world as grotesquely faulty as mine is.” Montaigne wrote that “nothing is so foreign to my mode of writing than extended narration. I have to break off so often from shortness of wind that neither the structure of my works nor their development is worth anything at all.” But to Strawson, this “unstoried life” that Montaigne wrote is:

the only life that matters, I'm inclined to think. He has no 'side,' in the colloquial English sense of this term. His honesty, although extreme, is devoid of exhibitionism or sentimentality. . . . He seeks self-knowledge in radically unpremeditated life-writing, addressing his writing-paper 'exactly as I do the first person I meet.' He knows his memory is hopelessly untrustworthy, and he concludes that the fundamental lesson of self-knowledge is knowledge of self-ignorance.

Is it memory, this sense of an autobiographical self, that he would say gets in the way of unencumbered honesty, free of “sides”? Has my own relationship to memory made me try to take too much control over how my life is understood?

That word “control” is worth pausing at. In trying to turn pieces of my life into more than a journal entry, I have found that I have to give up some of my “instinct for reality.” In fact, the more of a narrative I'm trying to write, the more helpful it is for me to approach it as if it were fiction—only making sure I am always telling the truth with what I'm saying, with what I'm not,

and with what I knowingly imply or juxtapose. (This is not to say certain liberties aren't taken in life-writing. They are, by necessity and by the nature of the endeavor. I address some of what makes them necessary in this section.) What I mean by this is best explained by looking to my journals. When I most want my experience or reality to be represented clearly, with no aspect unaddressed to avoid all possible misunderstanding, such a journal entry will be full of commentary and conditions and explanations that might not belong or be necessary in a work of fiction. In fiction, it is enough to represent a situation well and leave the rest up to the reader, and in fiction, it is not always vital that a reader sees a character exactly as the author does or understands a character in the same way the author understands a character. Of course, representing reality through words on a page, no matter how precise and evocative the description or representation, is going to be inexact and not entirely predictable in the novel environment of each reader's mind. Every reader will experience any same set of words differently. Even the very same reader will experience an identical set of words differently over a lifetime. And sometimes letting the reader do some of the work makes for a better telling. Sometimes a few well-chosen details are all that's needed. In some ways, I think the act of writing fiction becomes less about control than it is about trust: not controlling a reader's experience but instead trusting that they'll have one and that that is enough. So I seek to present the truth as fully and vividly as I can and give up some of my desire to control, when the writing requires it.

Of course, in many instances, the memory I have of the thing I'm seeking to put into words falls short—there isn't a detailed, external record of everything I'd wish to tell, and when it comes to memory, I remember a lot, but not nearly enough. This means that, for example, how I got from Point A to Point B on a particular day or week might have to be informed by other

memories from other times. I might not remember everything I saw and felt walking one day from an impactful group therapy session to lunch when I was inpatient at the hospital—it may be more just flashes of images that I remember—but I do remember how that walk went on other days, so I can supplement my memory of that day with memories others. In doing so, I would still say that I am reflecting reality. Annie Dillard says much the same in her essay, “To Fashion a Text”:

Don't hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. You can't put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them. . . . After you've written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing. However true you make that writing, you've created a monster. This has happened to me many, many times, because I'm willing to turn events into pieces of paper. After I've written about any experience, my memories—those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling—are gone; they've been replaced by the work. (171)

I wouldn't necessarily go so far as to say one my memories is replaced by writing it down. But when I set out to tell a true story about which the details in my mind are inevitably inexact and insufficient—to Dillard, “those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling”—and then spend more time “laying out a scene or describing an event . . . than you did living it” (171), I have to fill in those gaps, and I think the more narrative we try to be, the more filling in must be done. I will concede, however, that weak memories might be overwritten by an imaginative, true-feeling, carefully rendered retelling.

Dillard further elaborates on memory and memoir in a way that adds helpful nuance to her position:

Memory is insubstantial. Things keep replacing it. . . . The painting you did of the light on the water will forever alter the way you see the light on the water; so will looking at Flemish paintings. If you describe a dream you'll notice that at the end of the verbal description you've lost the dream but gained a verbal description. (172)

Though I do think that at least some memories are too stubborn to be “replaced” through the act of “turn[ing] events into pieces of paper”—and certainly more stubborn than dreams—I will also concede that they are more readily altered.

I do have mixed feelings about the work that must be done to create a story where before there was none. It’s easy enough in outline: these events happened, which led to these events happening, which were informed by this as well, etc. But to set it to paper, to say that this is *the* story and nothing else, to write not just essays or a collection of stories or a focused memoir but an autobiography—I doubt I could do that. That may be too narrative for me. I value that sort of work, but I think a traditional autobiography of myself may feel too far from my experience of my life for me to cosign. Accounts of an entire childhood come to mind, such as that of Maya Angelou’s wonderful *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I appreciate it, and I believe it. But to be able to write about my life like that as if that were the whole story, as if that were all there was to tell—I won’t rule it out, I’ve not done enough of this writing to know for sure, but I’m not convinced I can do it. I am, perhaps, a bit too unstoried, somewhere between Strawson’s experience of the world and that of those who speak about all of life being a story. “What is certain is that there are rehearsers and composers among us, people who not only naturally story their recollections, but also their lives as they are happening,” as Strawson puts it. I am not one of those. To make my life a story is not entirely natural to me. The one major exception from my past is when I was in the midst of that years-long decline into increasingly severe mental illness, because it was, in my experience, punctuated by many instances of profound hurt, abuse, and loss. It was a sequence of events that led with considerable clarity each one into the next—they were not hard to piece together. Maybe it’s because there were enough events and in sequence—and maybe, too, because I had to recount those events many times to many therapists and doctors

and those who would question me—that it did come to be something like a story. But disregarding that specific experience in which a story partially emerged from circumstance, I think, for example, I’d do much better writing about my life according to topic: male friendship; music; depression; abuse; cutting; isolation; the suicide of a friend; my own relationship with death; my own will to life; treatment; writing. And maybe, in a personal project somewhere in the future, I could write enough of those to feel I have told my life from every relevant angle, turned the jewel around in the light enough times to record every glint, and then, maybe then, I could try to synthesize them all into a single piece. Then again, I’m not sure that synthesizing would be necessary. If I’ve captured every glint, as they are and as I see them, then perhaps I could call that story, in a word, told.

Didion feels unencumbered by an “instinct for reality,” which for her means that often the notes she makes in her notebook are not meant to be a record, nor are they even, on the surface, always about her. Writing about what she makes notes of in her notebook, she quips, “instead I tell what some would call lies” (134). She reflects further on memory:

[N]ot only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters. That cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the day’s pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The day’s events did not turn on a cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again, a home movie run all too often, the father bearing gifts, the child weeping, an exercise in family love and guilt. Or that is what it was to me. Similarly, perhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont; perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind, and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we pretended to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow. (134)

She ends that paragraph with a shift that I think Dillard would identify with: a memory being replaced, transforming from “it might as well have” to “it did.” And would you call that untrue? Is it a fiction? As a story, would it be too much of a fiction to belong in an autobiography?

Autobiography, in the traditional, non-experimental sense, as a single, cohesive narrative applied to an entire life, with access to the internal as well as the external, is in many senses a self-history. But history is not a story either, not alone, not without us intervening in the telling of it. Things have happened or they haven't, and that's data, and data is not a story. Of course, as I've said previously, sometimes the most effective way to convey some truth about an experience or event is through a story. But a story is something we make, and in making it, we must necessarily give up certain degrees of control over the truth of it as we understand it. I like to use the example of historians of science, that exciting bridge between the sciences and the humanities. If they were only reporting the science of the matter, that would be closer to a science textbook than to a history. To create a history requires taking that science, that knowledge, and the people involved and the prevailing understanding of the day that they were operating under or against, and crafting it into a story. That story might not be heavy on narrative; that depends on whether the emphasis is being placed more on the people or the ideas. But to understand the flow of ideas, the gradual accumulation of human knowledge, requires more than the science alone. And in sorting through this data, decisions must be made about what matters and what does not. “The writer of any work, and particularly any nonfiction work,” Annie Dillard says, “must decide two crucial points: what to put in and what to leave out” (164).

In autobiography, that primary data is most often written records, perhaps some photographs or videos, and then memory. So to add a few comments on the neuroscience of memory: memory itself is impressionable. False memories can be provoked in people, and of

those memories that do recall a more objective reality, our interpretation of those memories and the emotions attached are always subject to change. Two eyewitnesses standing next to each other may have widely different accounts of any event. And that says nothing of the emotions of memory. Growing up in Austin, I have spent a great deal of time around Town Lake. It's nice to be by the water, underneath the trees. I still feel that. But that trail, at the south end of the pedestrian bridge beneath MoPac, is where I said goodbye to Jesse, and even before that, during one of the tense times in our relationship, he essentially claimed that trail as his own, as his space and not mine, that that was where he was going to go that day, that that was where he went, not me, and that I could not go, too. I do not pass that spot beneath MoPac without thinking of him, and it is a layer beneath any other memories I have of that place. That said, maybe that's more of an emotion attached to a place than to a memory, so let me try again: I enjoyed the week Jesse and I spent together in Aspen, Colorado. We watched a performance of *The Planets* under the white tent at the Aspen Music Festival; we went biking along the river; we went hiking in the mountains, taking a gondola or two; we walked through the town, stopped to listen to a string quartet playing in the street early one evening, the sun low in the sky and casting its early evening golden glow; and we shared a room together, just us. When I was writing about it in the moment, it felt exciting and important. But I don't remember it fondly anymore, because of what I know now he was doing with me and would do to me and the lasting affect his actions had on me. Thinking about him smiling at me, or his holding my hand, or the way he'd hold me when we would hug goodbye, used to make me feel warm. Now it makes me shiver.

A literary example of such curating occurs in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, that fictional autobiography, during the Lowood portion of the narrative, when, following the death of Helen Burns, Jane addresses the reader by way of explanation and skips over eight years: "Hitherto I

have recorded in detail the events of my insignificant existence³: to the first ten years of my life I have given almost as many chapters. But this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest” (99). Then follows a few pages of exposition until the narrative picks up again with the next scene. Expository writing is particularly subject to curation, because in a non-essayistic narrative, it is used to get from one interesting or necessary scene to the next. It can speed up time, or slow it down, or bring it to a full stop. Exposition used in this way is also, I think, not true to life: we don’t tend to get from one memory to another in our heads by exposition; our mental reality is usually more impressionistic than that. So I would say that exposition is mostly unique to communicating such things to another. Further, choosing what matters to a narrative and what doesn’t is entirely up to the author, and where one author might make much of a certain period of time another might choose to race through it in a paragraph or less. (We might also want to consider tense. Most narrative writing is done in the past tense, but I don’t think we should restrict ourselves to it. Writing in the past tense makes movement through time easier, and it makes room for more exposition, but present tense invites immediacy and directness, especially in less narrative writing. We recount our lives in the past tense, but we live them in the present. There’s a tension there worth pondering.)

Dialogue is another component of most true stories that isn’t an exact record of reality. Dialogue is, of course, a staple of many scenes. It can pick up the pace of a story. It allows more directly for voices beyond that of the narrator. And it is also largely a fabrication. We don’t

³ Nine chapters given to an “insignificant existence.” I point this out not to be smart but to use it as an example of how our own significance to our communities and society has no bearing on whether we can or should feel free to write about our lives, nor does it have any bearing on what beauty, meaning, and worth can be found in them.

remember conversations word for word, much less sound for sound. We may remember some specific turns of phrase. Something that stood out. Something that hurt. In some instances we might remember a lot, but even then, I think that what we remember more readily is what ideas were conveyed and what ground was covered more than how that happened. Setting aside the imperfections of memory, the point I'm trying to get to is that our brains filter reality. We don't hear casual speech according to every sound being made. Transcribe a conversation happening between two people, including all the verbal fillers, the pauses and "um's" and "like's," and then read it back to yourself. Does it sound natural to you? Does it sound like how it sounded when you were listening to it? Would you believe it if it were written like that in a book, or would it read more like the words of a student doing an exercise on writing realistic dialogue? In my experience, that truly true record of speech usually does not sound natural, even though it is actually what was said. And that holds up to what we know about the senses. Secondary structures in the brain involved in processing each of our senses are actually getting the first say. We see first what we expect to see, which is then incorporated into the raw data coming in through our eyes and only then sent to tertiary structures to be interpreted in a more abstract sense. That's why we don't see the blind spots in the middle of the range of vision of each of our eyes. Our brains literally fill in the blank. The same thing happens with taste, touch, hearing, and smell. So even in a true story, dialogue that is more likely to pass a test of verisimilitude—and perhaps, too, those things based on non-aural sensory perception—is actually going to be slightly distanced from the true reality.

It's a slippery slope we live on. Our brains get us close enough to reality that we can be out in the world every day and not end up dead. But our experience and what we can observe is not exact. Modern scientific instruments can sense the world far more accurately than we can.

And then add in the fact that we are *feeling* beings, and the range of possible experiences of a single event explodes into glittering, subjective shards of ever-shifting perspectives. So how do we write that? Virginia Woolf, in her essay “Modern Fiction,” writes of the fiction of her day when she says:

The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done in turn. . . . Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being “like this.” (160)

She then goes on to describe that life she sees when she looks within, and it feels true to me:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (160)

If the components of narrative—exposition, montage, and scene—are on such shaky ground, then perhaps, to the degree to which narrative is inherently artificial, we are, in a sense, creating ourselves when we tell our stories or consider them implicitly or explicitly, not by choice or desire but because of the limitations of language and the ways in which we can tell stories. Maybe we mustn’t conclude that a self constructed using these unwieldy components is false or untrue by definition, or that a shaped narrative is an untrue narrative beyond the degree

to which narrative is artificial to begin with. And perhaps this also means that Strawson's "Narrative types" are at times further from the truth, not closer. As Strawson writes:

But when the English dramatist Sir Henry Taylor observed in 1863 that "an imaginative man is apt to see, in his life, the story of his life; and is thereby led to conduct himself in such a manner as to make a good story of it rather than a good life," he's identifying a fault, a moral danger. This is a recipe for inauthenticity.

Inauthenticity would seem in opposition to the conceit of memoir and life-writing. Strawson goes on: "Fortunately . . . there are people who are wonderfully and movingly plodding and factual in their grasp of their pasts"—another description with which I resonate. Being "plodding and factual" while still striving to tell the story—there is a tension there, but I think both can still exist together, to a point.

Movingly, Strawson ends his essay with a concession, prompted by Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* in which Nietzsche writes about a human shedding his skin repeatedly and still never being able to say, "this is no longer an outer shell." The words of Nietzsche:

It is an agonizing, dangerous undertaking to dig down into yourself in this way, to force your way by the shortest route down the shaft of your own being. How easy it is to do damage to yourself that no doctor can heal. And moreover, why should it be necessary, since everything—our friendships and hatreds, the way we look, our handshakes, the things we remember and forget, our books, our handwriting—bears witness to our being. But there is a means by which this absolutely crucial enquiry can be carried out. Let the young soul look back upon its life and ask itself: what until now have you truly loved, what has drawn out your soul, and what has commanded it and at the same time made it happy? Line up these objects of reverence before you, and perhaps by what they are and by their sequence, they will yield you a law, the fundamental law of your true self.

Strawson then concludes, "Here it seems I must either disagree with Nietzsche or concede something to the narrativists: the possible importance of grasping the sequence in progressing towards self-understanding. I concede it." But he qualifies that concession:

Consideration of the sequence—the "narrative," if you like—might be important for some people in some cases. For most of us, however, I think self-knowledge comes best in bits and pieces. Nor does this concession yield anything to the sweeping view with

which I began, the view—in Sacks’s words—that all human life is life-writing, that “each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative,’” and that “this narrative *is* us.”

Might there be a middle ground between autobiography and fiction, between narrative and non-narrative? I think both exist on a spectrum. I previously mentioned some of the conflicting feelings writers will encounter in turning their lives into words on a page, and it is true that the life-writer must constantly wrestle with that which seeks to impact the direction of his or her writing⁴: shame, embarrassment, preference, memory, the self we know versus the self we might rather portray, wanting to appear sympathetic, the anticipation of a reader’s judgment, even the degree to which we can share the stories of others as those stories intersect with our own—to name a few. The motivation could be as significant as wanting to leave out a major event or as simple as wondering whether a name should be changed.

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes about these issues. She tells of the time, in college and in the United States for the first time, when she first began to think of herself as black, “in a gathering of friends, in an apartment, sitting around a wooden table, listening to a joke-filled conversation about race.” She then describes putting that scene into her fiction and having an early reader say it was unbelievable. “If I had written that scene in a memoir,” she writes, “would that first reader have said it was unbelievable? I think not. But I would not have written it in a memoir because some of the people are friends and I would want to protect them, and I would also have to ask whether I have the moral right to tell their story, especially to portray them saying what they said in a closed room, words they did not intend to have the world hear.” Another source of tension between telling stories from our lives and the implications of

⁴ Might there be a story, too, in such things, those feelings and thoughts and considerations that come up in the process of telling a story?

doing so on us and those around us. She then talks about how nonfiction and the literary memoir “is often as much about character and story and emotion as fiction is,” and that without the cover on the book or context, someone might read a memoir and think it was a novel. She deduces the difference:

[It is] not how books are written but how we read them. We read memoir and fiction with different eyes. The appeal of the memoir is in the authority it has, not from its contents but from its label. To label something a memoir is, in effect, to tell a reader that they cannot doubt it. You cannot question. It comes with a prepaid label of truth.

She herself finds fiction more honest, and she says she trusts fiction more than memoir. For her, this comes down to self-censorship. “Of course,” she writes, “not all fiction is honest, but fiction, by its very nature, creates the possibility of a certain kind of radical honesty that memoir does not.” She concludes by stating her longing for “a new form, a cross between fiction and memoir, or a new way of reading, where we read fiction with the eyes of memoir and read memoir with the eyes of fiction.”

As previously discussed, in writing my life, I find that I often do my best work when I approach it as if it were fiction, or something like fiction. That is often the trick that gives me the necessary distance to write compellingly and with an open enough hand. Of course, I am bound by the facts. My conscience, which can be obsessive-compulsive like the rest of me, wouldn't allow for me knowingly to tell a lie, telling something not just that could have happened a certain way but that decidedly did not. And the more I write, the more I figure out how I think and what works for me and the more I also gain the experiential knowledge that there is more than one way to tell a true story and still have it be the truth. If I want to insert a short meditation on some celestial object, well, I think it belongs as much as any story I could tell, because that's a part of me, too.

One middle ground that we see all the time are those movies and television shows “based on a true story.” Why shouldn’t writers more readily claim that for their own medium? One such story that exists at the intersection of memory and narrative is Lydia Davis’s *The End of the Story: A Novel*. And of course, any first-person narrative, fictional or not, semi-fictional or not, is life-writing of a sort. And how many first novels by authors are imbued with autobiographical elements? Our lives are the first we tell as we come into language, and our lives are often the first we try to write, including in some writing done under the guise of fiction. And even when those are not the first stories we write, we know our own lives better than we know any others. Although, maybe we can come to know someone else’s life, or the life of someone we’ve created in a work of fiction, better than we know or own. But I think it is true that we must always come back to personal experience. We imagine and understand things because of and against what we know and feel.

Later in that diary entry from April 20, 1919, Virginia Woolf seems to be hinting at this alternate form as well:

Moreover there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art. The main requisite, I think on re-reading my old volumes, is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, and found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time. But looseness quickly becomes slovenly. A little effort is needed to face a character or an incident which needs to be recorded. Nor can one let the pen write without guidance; for fear of becoming slack and untidy. . . . (13-4)

And this alternate form is one in which she would soon write. As H. Porter Abbott writes his essay “Old Virginia and the Night Writer: The Origins of Woolf’s Narrative Meander”:

One thing still overlooked in this reevaluation is how, early on, the development of Woolf’s modernist oeuvre was deeply inflected by her personal writing—in particular, by her practice of keeping a diary. The symbiosis between her diary writing and her fiction—perhaps unique among English novelists—impressed a distinct mark on her modernist enterprise. It shows up clearly in the transformation of her narrative line. (236)

In that “loose, drifting material of life,” she wrote her way to a new form.⁵

All that we write, about ourselves or about others, about a life lived or a life imagined, a fictional world or our own, ultimately comes back to “I.” Even the lie spoken as truth says something about the liar. Every defense, every confession, every declaration of truth and intention, every story, always speaks to that “I,” the “I” that is ever-changing and always still “me,” or “you,” or “she,” or “he,” or “they.” Didion says as much when she writes:

How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook. I sometimes delude myself about why I keep a notebook, imagine that some thrifty virtue derives from preserving everything observed. . . . I imagine, in other words, that the notebook is about other people. But of course it is not. . . . My stake is always, of course, in the unmentioned girl in the plaid silk dress [she is speaking of herself]. *Remember what it was to be me:* that is always the point. (“On Keeping a Notebook” 134-6)

⁵ From Virginia Woolf’s diary, January 26, 1920: “[H]appier today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in an unwritten novel—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn’t that give the looseness and lightness I want; doesn’t that get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything? . . . I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist. Then I’ll find room for so much—a gaiety—an inconsequence—a light spirited stepping at my sweet will. . . . [T]he theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance two weeks ago. . . . I must still grope and experiment but this afternoon I had a gleam of light. Indeed, I think from the ease with which I’m developing the unwritten novel there must be a path for me there” (22).

In another essay, “Why I Write,” Joan Didion says that she stole the title for it from George Orwell:

One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I
I
I

In many ways, writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It’s an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there’s no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space. (17-8)

And later, she says, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking,⁶ what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear” (20).

I’ve spent a great deal of time here on the challenges and implications of life-writing, of what it requires and what it does to a life to turn it into words on a page. But that doesn’t impact what I see as the worthiness of the endeavor. Artistically, individually, and societally, our words matter. There is great value in writing in our own voices, in the first person especially but not necessarily and in all forms and modes of writing. This value is to the writer and also to all who might read his or her words. Now, a story told once might not change much. It can! But it might not. But if we continue to give voice to that which matters to us, about, as Cheryl Strayed puts it, not just what has happened but also what it was about (313-4), and then do it again, and again, and again, in new ways and old ways, and bring what we have to say into conversation with other voices alike and different while making sure to listen to those voices, too—then people will

⁶ May Sarton, writing in her journal on September 15, 1975, echoes this sentiment exactly: “I have written every poem, every novel, for the same purpose—to find out what I think, to know where I stand” (12).

hear, and those that didn't understand or even know there was something to understand will begin to, and you will hear and understand, and you will be heard and understood. It's one way towards a better world. Of course, I don't think that our own lives are represented only by stories and events and ideas in which we are featured. Joan Didion's notebooks are full of observations about other people and the world outside of herself—and yet she still writes, “I imagine, in other words, that the notebook is about other people. But of course it is not” (135).

What we write always reflects on us, no matter how hard we try to remove and denounce our “I.” To me, that realization is freeing in my pursuit. It gives me permission to write as I will, to tell my stories as I want and am able to tell them far beyond the scope of this project. A collection of essays and poetry and fragments of thought, of narrative true stories and narrative fictions, of fantasies and of the stories of others entirely, can all exist and be bound together under the label “A Life,” as disjointed or harmonious as feels true. Perhaps I'm being a bit too liberal in that application, but I tend to think that if we call it life-writing, whatever we've written and are calling it so, then we are giving a reader permission to interpret whatever they see as a reflection of ourselves, however clear or opaque, direct or indirect, or close-up or peripheral that reflection may be. And so it is. We need only claim it, then let the reader make of it what they will. So in whatever way feels true, write your life! Say what you must say, and show the world a new way to see.

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BIOGRAPHY

Garrison Land was born in Houston, Texas, on January 22, 1993, and grew up in Austin, Texas. He enrolled in the Plan II Honors program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2011 where for two years he was also a biomedical engineering student. Though nonacademic circumstances eventually required him to forego his engineering degree, he has retained his interest in and excitement about science and math in addition to the liberal arts, and those interdisciplinary interests have guided him throughout his time as an undergraduate. Also a French horn player and pianist, he was a member of one the University of Texas concert bands and a non-music major member of the French horn studio his freshman year.

Referring to himself by name in the third person is the weirdest life-writing he has yet done.